



Federal Aviation Administration

National Part 139 CertAlert

AdvisoryCautionary**Non-Directive**Advisory**Cautionary**Non-Directive**Advisory**Cautionary**Non-Directive**

Date: February 26, 2014 **No. 14-01**

To: Airport Operators, FAA Airport Certification Safety Inspectors

Subject: Seasonal Mitigation of Hazardous Species at Airports:
Attention to Snowy Owls

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- 1. Purpose.** This CertAlert aims to heighten awareness of transient hazardous wildlife such as snowy owls (*Bubo scandiacus*). Although snowy owls at an airport may be a unique event, they should be prevented or discouraged from using airport environments because they pose a serious risk to aviation.
- 2. Background.** Seasonal changes in wildlife populations directly impact safety at airports. These changes can include seasonal migrations, brood rearing and fledging, fawning, calving, and other cyclical events. These variations in wildlife populations often require airports to look for and potentially alter how they mitigate hazardous species to reduce the risk of strikes.

Snowy owls periodically leave their northern breeding grounds en masse in movements called *irruptions* or *invasions*. These movements differ from seasonal migrations because they are unpredictable and not repeated annually. These irruptive migrations can greatly expand the winter distribution of the species. They represent a serious strike risk due to their size, flight characteristics, and behavior.

Snowy owls are rarely observed in the contiguous United States and attract exceptional attention when they arrive. They are large, slow-flying birds that hunt close to the ground. They prefer open, expansive habitats. Snowy owls easily tolerate human activities. Many of their daily movements occur in the same airspace as an aircraft's take-offs and landings.

- 3. Description.** The snowy owl stands almost 2 feet tall. Its wingspan exceeds 5 feet, and it weighs between 3 and 4 pounds. It is North America's heaviest owl and is commonly spotted during daylight hours. The plumage is largely white, with variable amounts of brown barring and spots.

Their diet is predominantly lemmings, when available. In the contiguous United States, their diet includes other small mammals and birds, including rodents, rabbits, squirrels, songbirds, waterfowl, and wading birds.

- 4. Actions.** The snowy owl is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and as such may be harassed or dispersed from airport environments using non-injurious methods. If federally permitted actions are necessary, such as capture and relocation, then airports must apply for a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Depredation Permit. If possible, the snowy owls should be released far from any airport.

Airports should not support the presence of snowy owls even though it may be an uncommon, short-lived event. Airports should not encourage snowy owls to remain on-site through purposeful inaction, or create attractive habitats or feeding opportunities. At no time should anyone feed snowy owls in an airport environment. Such actions can result in hazards to aviation.



Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*). Photo credit: Christopher Castillo.



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