

# Snowy Owls: Age, Sex and Plumage

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# Conventional wisdom:

- Males whiter than females
- Both sexes get lighter with age

Some birds almost pure white: “Adult Males”



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Some: lots of dark barring: “Young females”



TDWilson.org

Some: intermediate: “Young male/adult female”



Norman Smith

## Sibley guide:

Nearly-white bird identified as “Adult Male”

Dark bird identified as “First Year Female”

## National Geographic guide:

“Dark bars and spots are heavier on females, heaviest on immatures; old males may be pure white.”

## Birds of North America:

The darkest males and the palest females are virtually alike in color, but the whitest birds, sometimes practically pure white, are always males, and the most heavily barred ones are always females (Bent 1938).



Peter Pyle, author of “Identification Guide to North American Birds”:

To his knowledge, and in the opinion of the Canadian owl banders and others he has consulted, these criteria are valid

“It would not surprise me if [other factors] had some effect...

“but not enough to affect the criteria.”

Recent discussion on PABirds of Snowy Owls irrupting into our area

Scott Weidensaul was trapping owls with Snowy Owl expert Norman Smith (30 years research, >420 owls)

Cautioned birders not to try to age and sex Snowy Owls by the degree of barring

Cited numerous cases...



Snowy Owl  
researcher Kay  
McKeever: had  
an “all white”  
bird like this:

Male?

Would not  
accept any  
females

Female!

Smith has  
observed others  
like this



Captive owl  
Female (eggs)  
Second-year?  
13 years old!  
Has not gotten  
lighter with age



R. Blood

## Conclusions from 30 years and >420 owls:

- Males usually lighter
- Not always!
- Ageing is difficult in the field
- Sometimes get lighter with age
- Sometimes get darker with age
- Sometimes no change
- Canadian workers: similar observations



## Denver Holt (Alaska) and Irina Менюшина (Russia):

- Some females very white
- Lay eggs
- 25 years research on breeding grounds
- (much still unpublished)

## Wrangle Island (Irina Менюшина):

- Males usually whiter than females
- Birth order has an effect
- First-hatched of each sex always lighter than last
- First-hatched female can be lighter than last-hatched male
- 25 years unpublished field research



# What do we conclude?

- “Conventional wisdom” usually true
- Lighter birds are usually males
- But: Exceptions!
- Don’t assume! Field identification not certain!
- Ageing is very difficult in the field
- We need to know more!

# References cited

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