

RED FOX PREDATED BY SNOWY OWL

by CHARLES C. DIXON*

On December 19, 1974, on River
at 417 in the Rural Municipality of
Morris, Manitoba, I observed a female
Snowy Owl that had apparently at-
tacked and killed a male Red Fox.
When first observed at about 10:00
a.m. the owl was sitting on the ground
roughly 5 feet from the fox. The fox
carcass was still warm and bleeding.

The fox, an adult male, in excellent
physical condition (10 lbs., 14 oz.)
died from massive hemorrhaging in
the lumbar (kidney) and cervical
(neck) regions. I recorded 63 talon
injuries in the dorsal and 21 in the
ventral areas of the fox carcass. There
was no evidence that the owl attempt-
ed to feed on the kill or was in any
way injured during the engagement.

The habitat was a lightly snowed
alfalfa field several hundred yards
from a hydro line commonly used as a
perch area by Snowy Owls. The closest
body cover is 3/4 mile east on the
banks of the Red River.

David Hatch in *Chickadee Notes*
(Dec. 21, 1974, Winnipeg Free Press)
documents the earliness and per-
sistence of Snowy Owl migrations
through Manitoba in the last several
years. He notes Eskimo references to
predation on the much smaller Arctic
fox by Snowy Owls. Predation on Red
fox, however, must be rare.

Editorial Note: The following received
from David R. M. Hatch provides
useful additional information and

speculation on this unusual obser-
vation.

“There is a great deal of variation in
the status of mouse populations within
the province. In some locations, par-
ticularly the boreal regions of
southeastern Manitoba, mice are abun-
dant. In the neighbouring Red River
valley just the opposite is true. Man-
made causes are the main reason for
this dearth of mice. The land in this
region is intensively farmed for the
production of cereal grains and special
crops. The fall of 1974 was drier and
milder than normal and, consequently,
the farmers were able to turn under all
their stubble. There are virtually no
fields that were not worked last fall.
This means that habitat for mice is at a
premium and about the only place they
can live is along the road allowances.
Definitely there is a shortage of
rodents on which Snowy Owls can prey
within the entire Red River flood
plains and this probably explains why
the owl attacked such large prey.

“I speculate that the actual cause of
death was the hemorrhaging of the kid-
neys. It is also important to note that
the fox was a fat specimen and showed
no signs of a previous injury, such as
broken bones from hitting a vehicle or
lead from being shot. If the fox had
sustained previous injury, then it
would have been more prone to attack
by an owl.

“Finally, I am not surprised that the
owl had not as yet fed on the fox. In all
likelihood there was a tremendous
struggle between owl and fox and I
suspect the owl was temporarily
resting before commencing to feed. I
have seen Snowy Owls sit on jack rab-
bits or even mice for several minutes
before starting to feed. I suspect this
owl was doing the same and was in-
terrupted before it had the opportunity
to commence its feast.”

Editorial Note: An observation of
another encounter between a Snowy
Owl and a Red Fox made only 17
miles west of Morris may provide the
basis for interpreting the successful
predation described by C. C. Dixon.

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