



the tundra. Finally, the nest was ready. The owl laid one egg, sat on it for about a day, and then laid another. Over the next few days, she laid more eggs, until there were six.

The mother owl sat on the eggs, day and night, for a little over a month. Her mate brought

her food, so she didn't have to leave her eggs unguarded.

Then the first little chick hatched, followed every other day by another (**left**). After a week or so, the nest was full of fluffy chicks. Each chick was covered with a coat of soft, white feathers called *down*.

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What's it take to survive in the cold and windy Arctic? A snowy knows!

# Growing Up Snowy

BY GERRY BISHOP

Welcome to the wild and treeless land called the Arctic tundra (see photo **above right**). It's springtime, but the weather can still be wintry. Look closely and you'll see something that will make you glad you're here, though—a snowy owl and her nest of white eggs.

## A FAMILY BEGINS

A couple of months ago, the mother owl was busy scratching a shallow, bowl-shaped nest into the ground. A cold wind blew, and snow still covered much of



Snowy owls lie low on the windy Arctic tundra.

## WHERE SNOWY OWLS LIVE

- Nesting Areas
- Usual Wintering Areas



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## FEEDING THE FUZZIES

Soon after hatching, all six chicks demanded to be fed. So now, with many hungry mouths to feed, the male owl is busier than ever, catching prey.

Any small- or medium-sized creature makes a fine meal for

a snowy owl. But at the top of the menu are little hamster-like rodents called lemmings.

To catch his prey, the male owl perches on a small hill or large rock, looking and listening for the slightest movement or sound. Suddenly something stirs. The owl takes off and swoops low over the ground. Then he drops like a rock and grabs a lemming with his powerful, clawed feet. (These claws are called talons.)

After a catch, the father owl delivers his prey to the nest and goes looking for more. Meanwhile, the mother owl tears the

Usually, Dad brings home small rodents for his family to eat. But this time, he's caught a small bird (above).

At right, Mom tears an animal into small pieces and pops them into her begging chicks' mouths.

lemming into bite-sized pieces for her chicks. (Later, when they're big enough, the chicks will swallow their prey whole!)

## TOUGH TO SURVIVE

Weeks pass, and the chicks grow larger. They've shed their coats of white down and grown gray ones. And by now the older ones are scampering away from the nest, trying out their legs and wings. For the busy parents, it's hard to keep an eye on all of the babies at once. And, of course, the growing chicks are demanding more and more food.

If there are plenty of lemmings and other small animals around, all the chicks get enough food to survive. But if food is scarce, the oldest and strongest owl chicks might get all the food, while the little ones go without. This may seem cruel, but at least some of the chicks survive.

Even when food is plentiful, the young owls face danger almost every day. If they get too wet and cold, they can die. And then there are the foxes, falcons, and other hungry hunters prowling around! Life is tough on the wide, open tundra.



## COOL FACTS

- When food is scarce in winter, snowy owls often migrate far south—and even hang out where people live. The “migrator” **below** has found a telephone pole to perch on.
- Snowy owls are the biggest owls in North America. Their outstretched wings can reach up to five feet, from tip to tip.
- A dense coat of feathers helps snowy owls survive temperatures as low as 40° F below zero!
- Male snowy owls are often pure white, while females are speckled with dark spots. Males are also smaller than their mates.
- A full-grown snowy owl may catch and eat 1,600 lemmings each year. But it may also go for voles, hares, fish, ducks, and other birds.
- Snowy owls can hear the sounds of prey beneath 10 inches of snow.



## FIERCE DEFENDERS

A nest on the ground, right out in the open, can be a dangerous place to be. But snowy owls are big, fierce fighters. If a predator dares to come close, the parent owls go on the attack. They swoop and dive, jabbing with their long, sharp talons.

And if that doesn't do the trick? One of the parents may flop along the ground, dragging one of its wings. The predator may chase after that owl, fooled into thinking it's found an easy target. Then, when the predator

has been led far enough from the nest, the owl will fly back to its young. If the owls are lucky, the predator will not return.

## GROWING UP FAST

It has been almost two months since the first of the little owls hatched. The oldest ones have replaced most of their gray down with feathers. They hop around more than ever, building up their leg muscles. They flap their wings and fly around in short bursts.

But even after they can fly, the

**By late summer, the tundra is in bloom, and the young owls are almost ready for life on their own. The one at right is shedding the last of its fuzzy down.**

young owls stay with their parents for another two or three months. They have a lot to learn about living on their own. And learn they must. Only the strongest, toughest, and best prepared will survive the cold, dark Arctic winter that lies ahead. 🦉



**As the chicks get older, they begin to leave the nest. They run and hop and flap their wings, building their muscles and having a good time.**



DANIEL J. COX/NATUREEXPOSURES.COM (10L, 11T); MARKUS VARESVUO/NATUREPL.COM (10-11B)