

About photographing the Snowy Owl, by Markus Varesvuo

I took my first Snowy Owl pictures in 1992 in northern Norway on the shore of the Varanger Fjord. This old slide was used in our recent Snowy Owl book!

Over the years, I photographed Snowy Owls several times in both Finland and Canada. Common to each encounter is that they have been great experiences. I consider the Snowy Owl to be one of the world's most magnificent bird species. A few spontaneous situations in particular are unforgettable.

The idea for the Snowy Owl book emerged in 2007, when together with two other photographers I got a special licence to photograph nesting Snowy Owls in Finnish Lapland. We photographed using a photo tent hide. Watching the owls and following their family life was fascinating, but also dramatic. Most of the breeding attempts failed because the lemming populations in their breeding grounds collapsed just around the time the chicks hatched. Only one pair was able to switch their food source from lemmings to birds, and fledge two chicks. Witnessing the many failed broods, the loss of young owl lives was quite hard.

The second time was in 2011 when I was again photographing nesting Snowy Owls in Finnish Lapland, under licence. The lemming in particular and vole situation in general remained reasonable throughout the young owls' first weeks. Just under ten owls from five nests fledged fully. During our four-man, two-week photo project, we had 24-hour-shifts: one full day in the hide, a day off and then back into the hide. My shifts had rainstorms and darkness as well as the beautiful lights of the nightless midsummer nights. The most dramatic moment was watching the older and bigger siblings in the nest eat the smallest chick, already almost dead.

I have also photographed wintering Snowy Owls, several times in both southern and central Finland. I had the most wonderful spontaneous encounter during an annual trip to Northern Lapland to photograph Rock Ptarmigans. This was in April 2013. I came across a gorgeous, all-white Snowy Owl in the Finnish fell landscape, and was able to spend a while photographing it before it flew away. The moment was bittersweet – while it was exhilarating to spot it, it is a fact that the Snowy Owl has almost disappeared from Finland's breeding population, and that nowadays only a few owls are seen in Finland during the winter seasons. If even that.

I also wanted material for the book from outside of Finland, because the Snowy Owl is a circumpolar species that nests in many places in the arctic region. I have been to southern Canada three times to photograph Snowy Owls wintering on the corn fields.

In our book, the main focus is on material taken in Finland, supplemented by material shot in Canada.

Jorma Luhta, the book's other photographer, was looking for owls' nests and also photographing the owl families in 2011. The pictures taken in late summer and autumn are all by Jorma, as are, for a large part, the landscape photos. Jorma has written the main part of the text.

The English book can be ordered for 29 eur + shipping from markus.varesvuo@lintukuva.fi