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Snowy Owls

Vancouver is cradled between forested mountains in south-east Canada. Mist hangs over the city for much of the winter. On some days it breaks, giving residents a view of snowy mountains around town, a gift for enduring the head-down, drizzling rain. Canadians living away from Vancouver call it 'the Tropics' because it hovers around 0°C through winter, warm compared to the rest of Canada. It is not an environment for Snowy Owls, but quite a few lived south of town in 1996–1997.

A few days before New Year's Eve in 1996, Vancouver was ice-covered and paralysed, knee-deep in snow dumped by a series of cold fronts. The city council had spent its snow-clearing budget and winter was only half over. But cold did not force Snowy Owls south into Vancouver that winter, lack of food did.

The Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*, *Bubo* meaning a hooting or horned owl and *scandiacus* a Latinisation of Scandinavian, was previously known as *Nyctea scandiaca*, *Nyctea* from the Greek *nycteus*, 'nocturnal' but Michael Wink showed they were genetically close to the *Bubo* eagle owls.

Their breeding distribution looks like chocolate poured over the roof of the world, along the north coast of Alaska, Canada and its Arctic islands, northern Norway and Sweden and northern Russia, with some dribbling a little way south. This treeless tundra has 24-hour daylight in midsummer and nearly 24-hour dark in midwinter. Many Snowy Owls stay north in midwinter, but in 1996–1997 many irrupted southwards.

With dense plumage, Snowy Owls are designed to survive winter ice storms. Even their hollow feather cells trap air. Snowy Owls are the heaviest owls in North