



# Snowy Owls on Fetlar

May 1986

The Snowy Owl *Nyctea scandiaca* was first recorded breeding in Britain in 1967, on Fetlar, Shetland (Tulloch 1968), although it may have nested in the past on other remote Shetland islands (Saxby 1874). The RSPB set up a reserve around the nesting area, and, with the co-operation of the landowner and crofters, kept an around-the-clock watch next to the owls' nest. This paper summarises events during the breeding seasons 1967-75, since when no breeding has been recorded. Methods Each year, an Observation hide was erected about 100 m from the nest such that one could approach it unseen by the birds on the nest. At the hide, wardens recorded and timed owl movements and behaviour, and, where possible, the identity of prey brought to the nest. Observations were noted in a Standard way by 30 main recorders and many other short-term helpers. In 1975, within the owls' 4-km<sup>2</sup> hunting range, waders were counted and their available chicks thereby estimated. Results It is believed, from plumage details, that the same pair of owls nested from 1967 to 1974. In 1973 and 1974, the male was bigamous: two females laid eggs and began to incubate; the male supplied his original mate with food, but did not provide for the second female, a younger individual ringed and raised on Fetlar and probably related to the main pair. In 1975, this second female mated with the male at the main nest and reared four chicks. During winter 1975/76, the male disappeared, and breeding came to



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