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Base must be wise to danger of snowy owls on runways



A visiting Snowy Owl at CFB Comox

Charles Brandt photo

Snowy Owls have been landing at CFB Comox over the past three weeks, and although they're a welcome addition to any birders repertoire, they can be a source of worry for pilots.

Alex McLennan, wildlife patrol officer at the airport, has spotted as many as seven Snowy Owls perched on buildings and telephone poles in the area. Occasionally the northern visitors choose to rest on the tarmac, which brings on a quick visit from McLennan.

"This is the most I've seen for three or four years. I wouldn't say they're more of a problem than other birds, but any bird on the runway can cause difficulties," said McLennan, who patrols the airport chasing away wildlife.

The owls breed and live year-round on the arctic tundra, where their meal of choice tends to be small rodents like voles and mice. However, early freeze-ups can sometimes make for a lean food supply, sending the birds on southern sojourns in search of a meal.

Their wanderings frequently take them to B.C.'s mainland coast and occasionally to Vancouver Island. Studies have shown the owls' diet on the Pacific coasts consists mostly of other birds.