

Rudyard Is Snowy Owl Destination

By Alexis Rankin

Rudyard Township is now the official Snowy Owl Capital of Michigan, as House Resolution 346, introduced by Representatives John Dumoose, Kelly Broca, and Jim Hasdorn, received support in the Michigan House of Representatives. Initiated by Barry Davis, Rudyard Township supervisor, the distinction honors the winter guests that perch above the township on telephone poles, fence posts, hay bales, and even the Rudyard water tower looking for prey in the vast expanses of open fields. Native to the arctic tundra, the birds descend south to the Upper Peninsula as early as November and stay

through April. The man-made open spaces mimic their native habitat, and the owls spend their days hunting small rodents, feeding on seven to 12 mammals per day.

Their presence in Rudyard Township isn't a new phenomenon, but rather one that hasn't been documented until recent years. The Christmas Bird Count, an annual citizen science project through the National Audubon Society, brings together volunteers across the nation to count and identify birds in a 15-mile radius from dawn to dusk. When the count began in Rudyard, sightings of snowy owls were significant, and the trend has contin-

Turn to page 5: Owls

Rudyard Named Snowy Owl Capital of Michigan, Highlighting Birding Tradition

Owls: from page 1

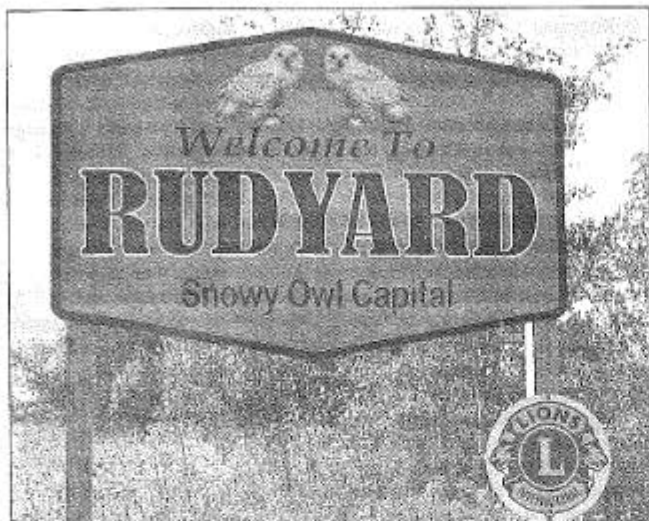
ued each year. In 2017, 17 snowy owl sightings were reported, followed by 29 in 2018, 13 in 2019, 3 in 2020, and 23 in 2021.

"For years, we've had snowy owls show up regularly. When I was a kid, we always had snowy owls," Mr. Davis said. "More people, Steve Baker in particular, started coming out and photographing them, bringing more attention to them."

Steve Baker is an experienced bird watcher and photographer. He has been searching for snowy owls in the Rudyard area for 40 years and has become adept at finding them. The hay fields in Rudyard are the perfect substitute for their native tundra, he said, and he often finds them overlooking the fields, viewable from Centerline and Hantz Roads, and north of Rudyard in the Rudyard flats area.

Snowy owls are solitary, diurnal hunters, meaning they look for food during the day and night. Because they are active during the day, they are more easily spotted than other species of owls that are only active at night. They are one of the largest owl species in the world, and their size and white color makes them easy to identify. The birds typically stay in their own territory, but as the spring breeding season approaches, they can sometimes be found in groups.

Rudyard Township passed a resolution naming Rudyard the Snowy Owl Capital January 15, 2019. Inspired by the title, students at Rudyard Area Schools created designs



To recognize Rudyard as the Snowy Owl Capital of Michigan, students at Rudyard Area Schools designed new welcome signs for the township. The public voted on the signs, which were created in Michelle Benson's secondary art class, and the top five were placed at the five main roads leading into Rudyard. Through the exercise, the students learned how to work with a client and create a visually pleasing design using a digital illustration program. Trinity Wilson, Vic Berlin, Isabell Goforth, Jackson Little, and Logan Jordan created the winning designs featuring the Snowy Owl. (Photograph provided by Barry Davis)

for new Rudyard welcome signs featuring the owls. The township voted on the designs for a period of three weeks, and the top five designs were placed at the five main roads entering Rudyard.

After the new signs were created, the township pursued the idea further, inspired by their neighbors in Newberry, the Moose Capital of Michigan. Their effort to secure the distinction at the state level was, ul-

timately, successful and was adopted by the Michigan House of Representatives in September 2022. Mr. Davis hopes the honor brings awareness to the special population of seasonal visitors.

"There seems to be a lot of enthusiasm from people coming to see the owls," Mr. Davis said. "It's a unique experience for a lot of people, and we sometimes take it for granted what we have around us."



The Snowy Owl migrates south from its arctic tundra habitat to the Upper Peninsula between the months of November and April. The wide, open fields provide a perfect hunting ground for these birds of prey, as they feast on between seven and 12 small rodents per day. (Photograph by Steve Baker)

The township office receives occasional calls from visitors asking where the best spots are to catch a sighting of one of the birds. Township employees are always happy to advise people, as some locations are better than others. Mr. Davis said a potential, upcoming project is to create a map that people could pick up while in town and use as a guide to some of the better viewing locations. Mr. Davis has found that even people who don't consider themselves bird watchers, himself included, enjoy spotting the owls.

While the birds are active day and night, Mr. Baker said the best

courages people to stay in their vehicles when possible, or at least stand behind their vehicles if they do get out. It is important to practice good birding etiquette to ensure the owls are comfortable and can be enjoyed by everyone.

"Don't be a threat. Some people just go right into the field and up to their perch to take their picture and eventually they fly away," Mr. Baker said. "I recommend stopping a little way away before you get to where they are. Just look at them or take their picture from a respectable distance."

Recognizing the snowy owls as a special part of the ecosystem is the first step to conserving and protecting their species and habitat. The birds' southern winter migrations are motivated by the availability of food. Climate models from the National Audubon Society suggest that southward excursions may become less extensive and less regular as climate change indirectly impacts their prey. With the title of Michigan's Snowy Owl Capital, Rudyard Township is acknowledging these seasonal visitors as a privilege to share with the rest of the state.

time to find them is at dawn or dusk. It is important, though, not to pose a threat to the owls while out looking for them. Mr. Baker en-