

Finding Snowy in the Duluth / Superior Area!

By Rich Hoeg (365DaysOfBirds.Com)

Thanksgiving starts my owling season. Both Minnesota's native owls and visitors from the Arctic, Snowy Owls start to set up winter hunting territories. The open spaces in the Duluth / Superior area remind Snowys of the tundra. These owls are not forest hunters, and the large open spaces in the Port Cities are often the first tundra like habitat that Snowys discover after migrating south through Canada's Boreal Forest. For Snowy Owls a winter vacation on Duluth's Arctic Riviera is often required! The region when compared to the Arctic is a nice southern locale that is both warm and has good hunting.



Snowy Owls start their evening hunt a bit before sunset. Thus, I like to arrive at my "owling grounds" 60 to 75 minutes before sundown. On December 1st in Duluth, the sun sets at 4:22 pm. Shortly after 3:00 pm I arrive in Superior, Wisconsin; this assumes the weather is neither stormy nor excessively windy. My favorite area for finding Snowy Owls is near the Superior airport. The airport's open spaces are "tundra like" and have lots of small animals for successful hunts. Unlike some owls, Snowy Owls hunt using their eyesight. They like higher vantage points which allow for a good line of sight. (see maps accompanying this article).

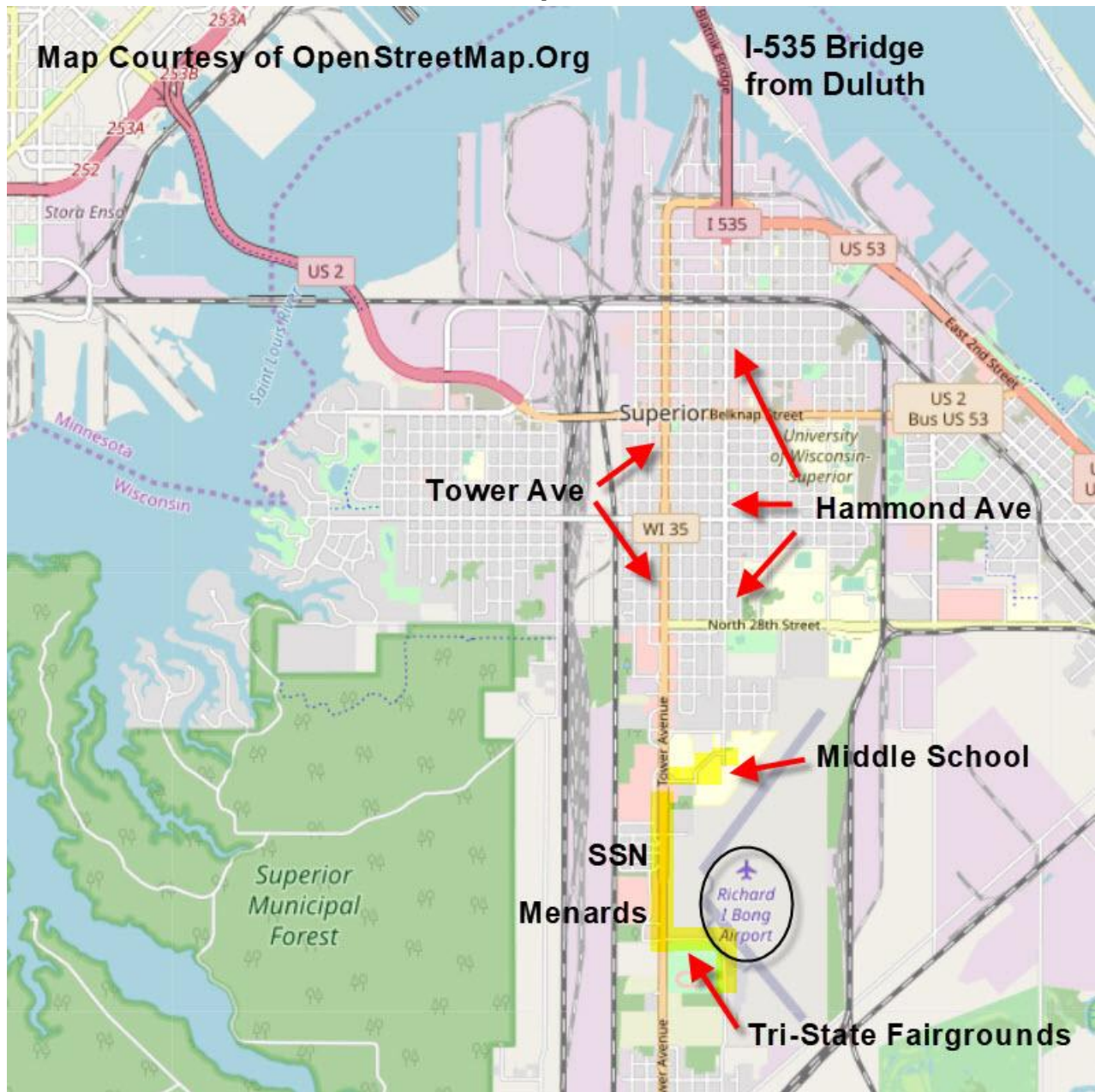
Snowy Owl territory is only ten minutes from the Duluth I-535 Bridge (Blatnik Bridge). Cross the bridge from Minnesota and then exit directly straight onto Hammond

Avenue. In 2.5 miles at the end of Hammond Avenue you reach the Superior Middle School (watch out for children). Drive slowly through both front school parking lots. Stop and scan the top of each light post, the ball field fence and scoreboards. If a Snowy Owl is not present move on to the Airport / Tri-State Fairground area (five minutes away ... see map). Once again drive slowly through the region, stopping frequently to scan the tops of signs, light posts, and buildings. You will often find owls on the roof of the Social Security Administration Building, the Menards and Tower Avenue light posts. As Tower Avenue is a busy road, use the side streets and parking lots to stop, scan and view any owls. Finally visit the Bong Airport (Upper Deck Bar and the TriState Fairgrounds). Once again use the maps, but the airport and fairgrounds are almost opposite Menards. All of these locations, including the Middle School, back up or are very near the airport. Unlike in major cities, as long as you do not drive onto the airport proper, viewing at the airport is easy and welcome. When you find a Snowy Owl, slowly inch your car forward until you are within 30 yards of the bird. Stop and remain in your car; the owls will normally ignore you and keep hunting. After 5 to 10 minutes, it is safe to move your car closer to get a better view. The key is to always move slowly and make no noise. Bringing a pair of binoculars is a good idea.

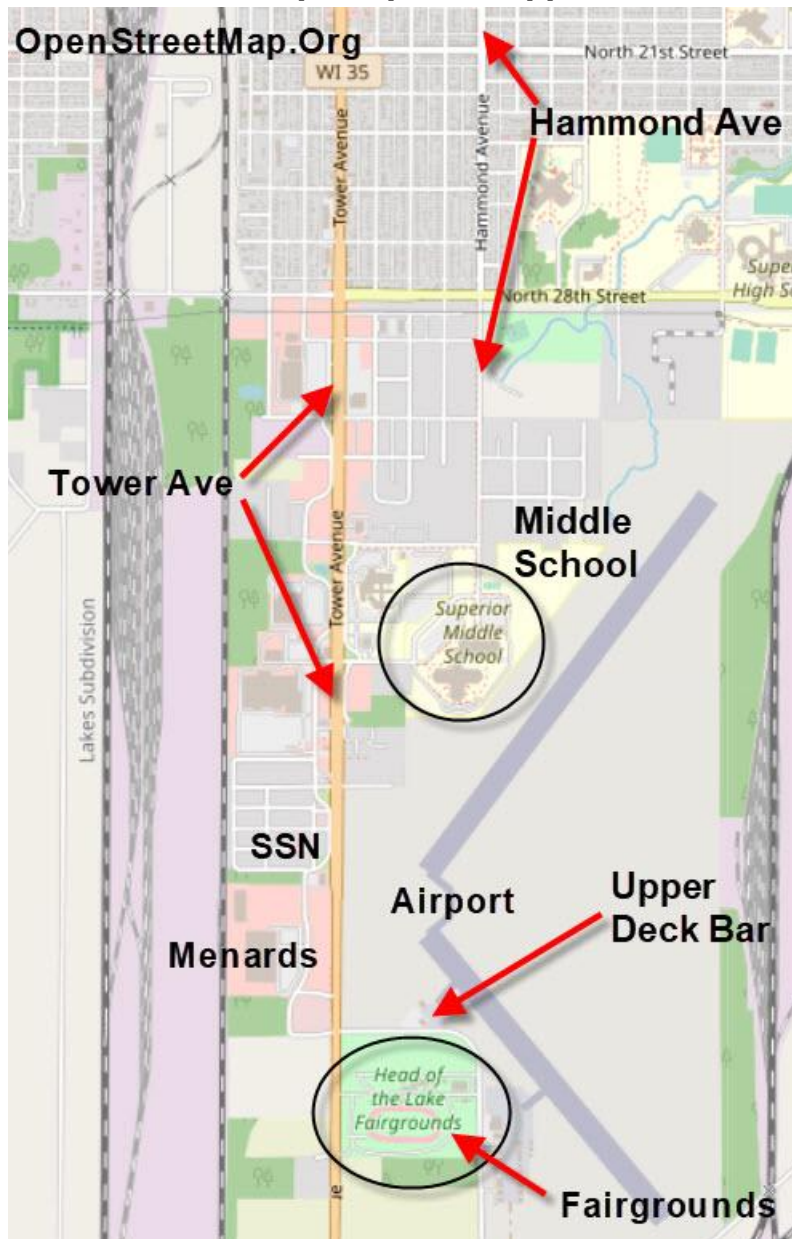
Normally the first Snowy Owls arrive in the region about December 1st. By the 15th of the month owls are always present. Do not be surprised if you see Snowy Owls with wing tags, or black markings on their head. For over 25 years wintering Snowy Owls have been the subject of federal research. If you see a Snowy Owl which is almost pure white, it is a young male bird. Owls with black streaking are either young females, or first year males. Most Snowys which visit our region are birds younger than four years of age. The more mature Snowy Owls remain in the Arctic all winter. Younger owls are still learning to be expert hunters. They prefer our southern environment which is a bit more hunter friendly. Happy Owling!

See next two pages for Maps

Map #1



Map #2 (close-up)



About the author: Rich, a native Duluthian, is also a Sax-Zim Bog's volunteer naturalist. Over the past few years, he has hand-rescued two Snowy Owls north of the Duluth. One of the owls rode "shotgun" in his car for the 45 mile trip back to Duluth wrapped up in a blanket. Rich often comments that having an owl stare at you while trying to wiggle out of a blanket on a car's front passenger seat was one of the more unique experiences in his life. Upon reaching Wildwoods (rehab center), Rich was even pressed into service assisting the director in Snowy Owl surgery. All the staff had gone home for the night.

Rich has also written two children's birding books, and collaborated upon another two books. Anyone may download free PDF versions of Rich's books.

Visit his web site: 365DaysOfBirds.Com

