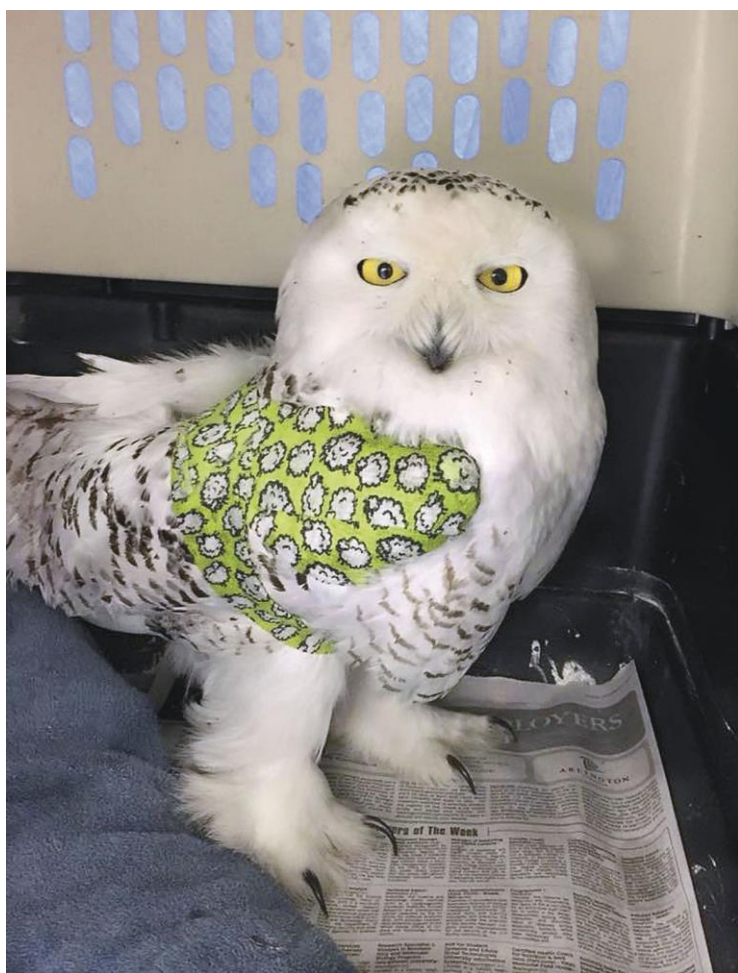




The Winchester Star

Injured snowy owl on the mend after surgery at local vet clinic

- By REBECCA LAYNE | The Winchester Star
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Employees at Rubbermaid spotted this injured snowy owl on Wednesday. The owl is recovering after a two-hour surgery at the Roseville Veterinary Clinic in Boyce to fix its broken right wing.

Wildlife Veterinary Clinic photo

WINCHESTER — When employees at Rubbermaid saw a large, white owl on the ground outside their building on Wednesday, they were in awe.

“Oh my god, it was just gorgeous,” said Gail Mills, supervisor at Rubbermaid. “The reaction of everyone was amazement to see a beautiful animal like this, and we wanted to make sure it was well taken care of.”

Glen Witt, an associate at Rubbermaid, couldn’t believe his eyes.

“I thought owls were little, bitty creatures, but this thing looked like it had a 7-foot wingspan,” he said.

The owl was dubbed Snowy.

Staff soon noticed that Snowy had one wing tucked underneath him, so they called the Frederick County Sheriff’s Office, which sent out a deputy to capture the bird and put him in a pet carrier to take to Plaza Pet Clinic on Senseny Road.

The owl, identified as a snowy owl, was diagnosed with a broken right wing. He also was very thin, had lice and was infected with a parasite. Staff stabilized, tube fed and treated him for shock and dehydration.

On Thursday, Belinda Burwell, wildlife veterinarian and director of Wildlife Veterinary Care in Millwood, performed a two-hour surgery at Roseville Veterinary Clinic in Boyce to fix the fracture.

The wing bone, according to Burwell, was broken in eight places. She is hopeful the bird will be able to fly again, but she will have to wait and see how the fracture heals in the next couple of months. For a bird to take flight, the wings must be perfectly balanced.

“When a wing doesn’t heal right, they just can’t fly,” she said.

The plan is to keep pins in the wing for three to four weeks and then start exercising the owl. If Snowy can’t fly, Burwell said she or others could keep him in captivity and/or use him in educational programs. He will not be kept as a pet.

Although Burwell has worked on just about every species of owl, this is the first time she has treated a snowy owl.

“It’s just so spectacularly beautiful,” she said.

Snowy owls are rare in Virginia and other southern locations. Usually, they find a home in the arctic conditions of Alaska, Northern Canada and Eurasia.

But the owl's appearance here could be due to an irruption, which is a large, often cyclical, influx of a species into a place where they don't normally live. This can be due to over-breeding, lack of food, or more. There is supposed to be a southward irruption of snowy owls this winter, according to scientists.

Burwell said she doesn't know how the owl's wing was broken, but he could have been hit by a vehicle or have flown into the Rubbermaid building.

The owl came into the clinic calm, probably depressed and in shock and pain, according to Burwell, but after being fed, he showed signs of regaining his strength.

"He was a lot stronger this morning," Burwell said on Thursday. "He was stronger and trying to fight us."

The owl is currently at Wildlife Veterinary Care in Millwood.

Burwell encourages anyone who finds an injured wild animal to call animal control or her clinic at 540-664-9494. It should never be kept as a pet.

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