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Snowy Owl showing tiny dark ear tufts. Photo by Jean Iron.

Do Snowy Owls Have Ear Tufts?

By Ron Pittaway

At the February TOC meeting, Margaret Kelch asked me if Snowy Owls (*Bubo scandiacus*) have ear tufts. She had seen a Snowy with tiny ear tufts at Colonel Samuel Smith Park in Toronto. Margaret's question intrigued me so I checked the literature, photos, and specimens in the Royal Ontario Museum. Most references make no mention of ear tufts. However, *The Birds of North America* (1992) online account from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology states that the Snowy Owl's ear tufts are "indistinct or rudimentary". *Hinterland Who's Who* (2006) online by the Canadian Wildlife Service says the ear-like feather tufts found on many species of owls are greatly reduced in Snowy Owls and are rarely visible.

Snowy Owls can raise their tiny ear tufts (erectile feathers) like other eared owls because these feathers are under muscular control. Photo 2 and the cover page photo show Snowy Owls with raised ear tufts.

Jean Iron and I examined specimens of Snowy Owls in the Royal Ontario Museum on February 16, 2010. We found vestigial ear tuft feathers that were slightly longer than adjacent feathers and barely discernible as shown in photo 1.



Photo 1: Concealed ear tuft lifted with a pen on specimen in the ROM.
Photo by Jean Iron.



Photo 2: Adult male Snowy Owl showing tiny white ear tufts.
Photo by Jean-Pierre Tousignant.

The Snowy Owl, formerly the only species in the genus *Nyctea*, was recently placed in the genus *Bubo* based on new genetic evidence accepted by the American Ornithologists' Union. This taxonomic change was published in the *Auk* 120(3):927, 2003. Except for the Snowy Owl, other owls in the traditional genus *Bubo* have prominent ear tufts like the Great Horned Owl (*B. virginianus*). The Great Horned Owl is the Snowy Owl's closest living relative. The ancestral form of the Snowy Owl originated in the Americas. It likely had larger and longer ear tufts that became reduced as it evolved and adapted to open and windier habitats.

Look for ear tufts on Snowy Owls and let me know about your observations. Email me at <jeaniron AT sympatico DOT ca>.

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