A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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SNOWY OWLS COME SOUTH

Invasions of arctic or sub-arctic birds in autumn are often taken as a sign of an extremely cold winter, their arrival being interpreted as an indication of weather in the north that makes living too hard even for these birds. Early in the winter of 1917 to 1918 the late John Burroughs observed such birds in the northeastern states and based a prediction of a severe winter on their appearance. The coldness of the following two months was so extreme as to justify fully his expectations.

But when the invasions of warmer climes are virtually confined to birds of prey that gain their sustenance largely from the rabbit life of the north, another interpretation than a coming cold winter is more sensible. Birds of prey must migrate when their usual sources of food are inadequate. Such appears to be the case during recent weeks when great numbers of snowy and barred owls and goshawks have come southward to the latitude of New York. The invasion has been ascribed to a shortage of rabbits, which, of course, could not have resulted simply from the weather of the past two months.

Not long ago there was published an interesting statement, about the 11-year cycle of life in arctic and sub-arctic regions, which the investigator connected with the 11-year sunspot cycle, possibly through the nutritional effect of the changing quality of sunlight in the source of this cycle. The animal life comes to a maximum, he found, at about the time of minimum sunspots, and reaches its lowest ebb at times of maximum sunspots. We are now nearly at the time of maximum sunspots, with attendant minimum animal life and consequent emigration of birds of prey from colder latitudes.

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