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Snowy owl released at Prudhoe Bay

Prudhoe Bay, Alaska - After a six month stay in Sitka and 1,500 miles of jet travel in a dog kennel, staff from the Alaska Raptor Center (ARC) released "Ivory," a two-year old Snowy owl at Prudhoe Bay on Saturday while dozens of well-wishers cheered on the bird.

"The clear arctic evening was a perfect setting for this bird to return to its summer habitat," said ARC executive director Rollo Pool, who traveled to Prudhoe Bay with ARC veterinarian Dr. Vicky Vosburg.

After 6 months of residence in a large aerobic training tube, Ivory flew strongly out of the dog kennel on the banks of a river, first climbing rapidly away from assembled crowd of onlookers and then circling downwind to settle on a tundra knoll. With the benefit of 24-hour day light, the big white owl could be seen well into the night perching on high ground overlooking a freshwater lagoon, preening and starting to hunt, Pool said. Reports of Ivory sightings continued into the following day.

Last December the owl, which is normally found in tundra regions of the state in summer months, was spotted near the Sitka airport, weak and apparently unable to continue its winter migration. Dr. Vosburg and a team of handlers with the Alaska Raptor Center, which is located in Sitka, captured the owl and took it to the rehabilitation facility.

After determining that the owl was starving but uninjured, it was decided to keep it captive for the winter and release the owl in back into the Arctic, but not until spring, Dr. Vosburg said. It was fed a constant supply of rats. The timing of the release time near summer solstice was chosen to give Ivory a time when prey food, usually lemmings, is abundant. Prior to her jet trip to the North Slope, the bird was given a clinic check up and its talons and beak sharpened, she noted.

Ivory is the first Snowy owl captured and released by the raptor center whose main focus is treating injured Bald eagles and other birds of prey. It was also the first time an owl has been released at Prudhoe Bay. Hunting and firearms are banned in the oilfield, creating a safe haven for wildlife and undisputed "new home territory" for the owl.

A crowd of industry workers and visiting tourists gathered to watch Mark Helmericks, President of Colville, as he was honored to be the one who opened the cage door to let the wild owl free from atop a pingo overlooking the Saganavirtok River. Sponsored by ConocoPhillips Inc., Alaska Airlines, Ice Services, Brooks Range Supply, Colville and the Prudhoe Bay General Store (PBGS), the owl release was an uplifting moment for the crowd of some 75 people which included locals and even some tourists from England and Japan who just happened on the event.

Adding to the festivities, Deb and Joe Bernard of PBGS donated beverages, ice cream and White Owl cigars to commemorate the event. Three cakes decorated with owl motifs were made for the occasion by master baker Raven Mosher of Colville, including one that said "Free Ivory." Capping off the event was a live acoustic guitar serenade by "Tony D" Martin of Brooks Range Supply, playing and singing "Free Bird," the classic Lynard Skynrd tune.