

The AVC gives a hoot

Atlantic Veterinary College is currently nursing a snowy owl, which includes physiotherapy and feeding mice

By Jarrod Yeo
Panther Post

The ghostly white plumage of the snowy owl resonates its Arctic origins. Native to the northern reaches of the Canadian tundra, it is a rare visitor to Prince Edward Island.

So it came as both a surprise and a unique learning opportunity for the students and staff at the Atlantic Veterinary College when an injured snowy owl was turned into their care with a broken wing last November.

Now the owl, which the students have named Hedwig, after the snowy owl from the Harry Potter series, is a celebrity of sorts, said clinician Hans Gelens.

"It's a beautiful bird and it's

a wild one, which is a bit different than seeing cats and dogs everyday."

While the cause of her injury is unknown, what is known is that Hedwig is very lucky.

When discovered in the brush by a Souris West resident, she was being sized-up by a red fox looking for an easy meal. Acting quickly, the resident trapped Hedwig under a jacket and brought her into the AVC for treatment.

Since then, she has undergone a successful surgery to repair her broken carpus, which is roughly the equivalent to a human wrist bone. Now, she undergoes daily rehabilitation.

That's where Amanda Fisher comes in. The fourth-year student is Hedwig's chief

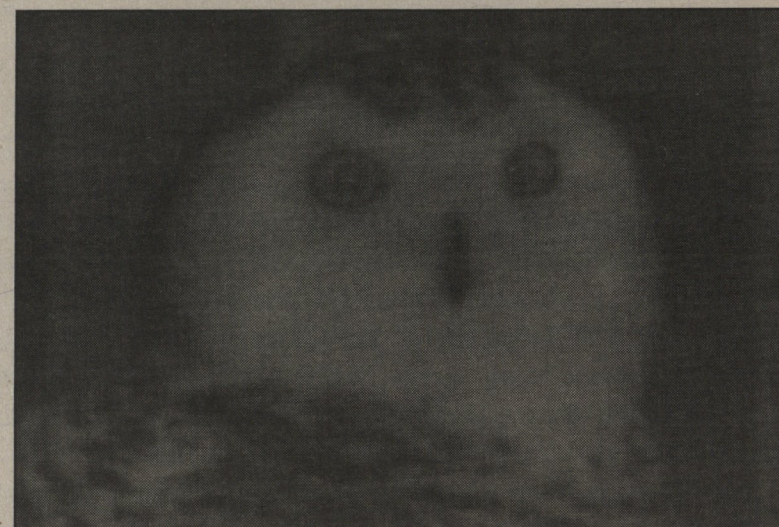
caretaker and performs tasks she never envisioned herself doing when she decided to become a vet.

"I come in early before most other people to defrost her mice."

Convincing an owl to eat euthanized lab mice isn't as simple as it sounds, she said. Initially, it included dismembering and dangling mice parts in front of the nervous bird's beak until it finally realizes it is food.

"After that, I hide a few of the mice around the fly pen so that she has to go looking for them. Yesterday she ate six of them."

Later on in the day, Fisher must capture Hedwig while wearing thick leather gloves to stretch out the healing wing, a form of avian physiotherapy. The gloves are



Hedwig, the snowy owl, has been given refuge at the AVC. Yeo photo

needed to protect her hands from the bird's powerful talons.

All this is done in the hope Hedwig will soon be strong enough to be re-released back into the wild.

So why did she turn up here in the first place? Islanders have reported seeing 10 times as many snowy owls across the province this winter. Their spread throughout the Maritimes might be the result a crash of the lemming population, Gelens said.

"It appears to be food driven, the owls are here looking for smaller species like mice and other rodents."

The increased sightings raised alarms for some users on the CBC forum which ran the story on Jan. 13, citing climate change as the reason for the increase. At this time, Fisher says it's only speculation.

"It's not unusual for the owls to travel far south sometimes. Sometimes there's many. Sometime there's none."

Breast Cancer Study is Seeking Participants

A research team is looking for participants for a study that will examine the rehabilitation of young women under the age of 50 after breast cancer treatment.

Are you under the age of 50 and currently 12-24 months past your breast cancer diagnosis?

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For more information please contact:

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