




FIGHT *OR*
FLIGHT



Photos by John Mattera

Text by Dave Nelson

 nature, aggressive interactions can occur between different predator species. Such interactions are often about who rules the territory, and who controls the bounty it provides. Sometimes it's about nesting habitat; few things raise the level of behavioral responses above that of a mother protecting her young. When food is involved, animals' instincts are to fiercely defend their prey, for in so doing, they might live to see another day.

While these interactions are fairly common, they are infrequently witnessed by humans. Capturing such a moment with a camera is rarer still. Occasionally, however, everything comes together, and a photographer finds himself in close proximity to two predators entirely focused on each other.

In December 2008, off-duty Bureau of Environmental Criminal Investigations (BECI) Lieutenant John Mattera was photographing a snowy owl—a fairly uncommon visitor—at Jones Beach on Long Island when the unexpected happened. Unbeknownst to Mattera, a peregrine falcon was a few hundred yards

away on the beach, guarding the carcass of a ring-billed gull it had killed. To the falcon, the owl was an unwelcome competition for its hard-earned meal, and so when the unknowing owl flew from the dunes to the beach, the falcon had had enough, and attacked. These photos show the interaction that ensued.





A falcon will use a combination of speed, surprise and its sharp talons to deliver a serious blow to unsuspecting prey or a competitor. A snowy owl, however, has some pretty significant weaponry of its own. By rolling onto its back in flight, the owl met the business end of the falcon in a move ornithologists call “presenting talons.” This went on repeatedly, until the owl eventually tired of the continued harassment and left the area.

At that point, the falcon returned to the beach and feasted on the gull, leaving only feathers and bones (see page 6). The following day, Mattera saw the owl again, apparently none the worse for wear.

A Lieutenant in DEC’s BECI for many years, **John Mattera** retired this past July. He is an avid photographer, and used a Nikon D3 with a 600-mm lens and a 1.4X converter to film this encounter.

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Snowy Owl



Large owls with bright yellow eyes, snowy owls are common in the arctic tundra, but sometimes visit New York in winter. Their mottled white coloration is perfect camouflage for their arctic breeding grounds. Snowys feed primarily on lemmings and small rodents, and will

take larger prey up to the size of a Canada goose when necessary. Snowys are also known to kill young peregrines on their nesting grounds. In turn, adult peregrines will kill snowys.

Peregrine Falcon



Crow-sized peregrine falcons are fierce predators, and can attain air speeds of more than 200 mph when diving (or "stooping") on prey from above. Peregrines are also known as "duck hawks," and feed primarily on birds, which they capture in flight. Once extirpated from New York, a successful restoration program begun in the

mid 1970s has returned the peregrine as a breeder to many Hudson River bridges and buildings in major cities throughout the state. Check out DEC's website at www.dec.ny.gov/animals/56121.html for more information about peregrines, including webcams that document nesting peregrines from early spring to early summer.