

# The Snowy Owl Feather

A story by Tom Ilvento

## Part One: Setting the Stage

The session had ended for the day, I had done good work, and now I was off to visit the zoo. I had some sense of a mission with my visit - I was off to find something of value to share from the zoo. I knew I would take pictures, but I kept in my mind a sense that I would find something of value to share as a gift to one of my children. It was to be a special gift. It might be an item in the gift shop or something else. I just wanted to make an impression and it had to be special.

I thought about an old Bobby Goldsboro song about love at the zoo. Somehow through the years this stupid song remains in my head. Bobby sings to his lost love that:

*The lions forgot you,  
The tigers forgot you,  
and even the kangaroos  
But me and the elephants,  
we still remember you.*

Bobby Goldsboro song from the 1970s

Zoos can be romantic places!

I love zoos and always have. I don't much like that animals are trapped and caged, but I am fascinated with the variety of animals in this world. I enjoy visiting the animals and seeing them more closely. I am captivated with animals, their habits, and their play. My favorites are bears, monkeys, all things Australia (kangaroos, emus, wombats), reptiles, and otters. Otters are like monkeys to me in that they are very clever, well adapted to their environment, and they seem to enjoy themselves. Otters are very playful and excellent swimmers. I was sure I was going to take some otter pictures, but I was also going to keep an open mind on whatever else I could find.

First, I saw the Prairie Dog exhibit and I got lucky with a few good shots. Prairie Dogs are small, very cute, and always moving. The exhibit was well laid out with lots of holes for the animals, and they continually went in and out of the holes in the ground. I got lucky with one particular photograph. Good job Tom!



Next came the otters. The exhibit had a pond with a glass view below and an upper part that had land area. There were two otters in the exhibit and they were beautiful. It is near impossible to take a good picture of an otter because they are always moving, here, there and everywhere. The two otters swam effortlessly and seemed to be playing tag with one



another. I tried to get a photograph, but just couldn't seem to snap a picture at the right time. I even tried to get some children to help by talking to the otters, but I just couldn't get them to pose. After about 15 bad pictures I decided to come back later.

I moved on to see the collection of cats - a lynx, several mountain lions, a bobcat, some wolves, and a poor old coyote sitting in the corner of his caged area. The cats are interesting, but they weren't particularly active except for the mountain lions that were growling and circling around their pen. I got a nice shot of a mountain lion walking as I watched through a glass viewing area. After commiserating with the poor coyote, I saw the owls!



The owls are beautiful creatures. They are mysterious, curious looking, and powerful with their talons and beak. Owls represent many things to us, including wisdom, mystery, and even wizardry. The Dakota Zoo had two species - Snowy Owls and the Great Horned Owls. It is at the owl exhibit that I got my idea!

## **Part Two: The Mission**

As I was taking pictures of the of the Great Horned Owl that I noticed a small feather sticking out of the cage. The owl cages were about 10 feet tall, 8 to 10 feet across and circular in shape. Outside of the cage is a barrier that is about 4 feet high and keeps people a reasonable distance from the cage, but I could reach over the barrier and touch the cage. I noticed an owl feather at the front of the cage near the ground. I simply reached over and, with a little strain, picked up the owl feather. The feather was small, brown, and a few markings, but it was an owl feather and that was cool. I was impressed, how could someone not be impressed with that?

However, when I visited the Snowy Owl cage I noticed a number of feathers at the edge of the cage, each larger and more beautiful than the other feathers. The Snowy Owl is

beautiful with white feathers with unique markings. These feathers looked amazing to me, true treasures sure to impress anyone. I just had to get one!



I wasn't sure the zoo keepers would be too thrilled about me picking up a Snowy Owl feather. But, I figured that they already lost the feathers so what could be the problem? If I had actually pulled a feather from a bird that would be different, but picking one up from the ground shouldn't be all that much of a problem. However, there was one small problem - the feathers were on the other side of the cage and well out of reach.

I thought about this for some time. If I hopped over the barrier I could, within about 20 seconds, easily get one of those large, beautiful, sure to impress feathers. I figured this was not what the zoo keepers had in mind and I was sure to get into trouble if I got caught. This plan was risky. I decided to think about this.



So I walked around the zoo. I visited the cats again, the wallaby, the Chinese Deer, the monkeys, the moose, the otters (I got better pictures this time), the camels, the bison, the deer and antelope - I guess you could say I saw everything that the zoo had to offer.



### **Part Three: The Deed**

Eventually, I made my way back to the Snowy Owl. The feathers were still there, pressed against the wire of the cage. I was cool and calm. I looked around to survey the scene of the crime. The zoo was not that crowded that night. Only a few people were in this section of the zoo, and it looked as though they were ready to move on. A family group was looking at the llamas across the way. I was cool and calm as I watched them, trying not to show any signs of the plan that was forming inside me. As soon as they moved on I would hop over the barrier, reach in, and grab three, four, or even five Snowy Owl feathers. This would be easy.

Of course the family took forever. What could be so interesting about a llama? A llama looks like a fuzzy camel, only smaller. I losing patience and I'm ready to go over there and help them along. Finally, they started to move to the next exhibit. I am not poised and ready to move. I even practiced out the maneuver I would use to hop over the barrier. I was going to be smooth and fast - in and out in a flash. Just as I am ready

the little girl (around three years old) runs back from the family and the father has to chase her. I am foiled! I try to look nonchalant as I viewed the exhibits around me. The father retrieves the girl and they move on. Now no one is near this part of the zoo. I am now in the clear.

I hopped the barrier, I scurried to the back part of the cage and I began to reach in to retrieve the first feather. Everything is going according to plan, except one thing. I did not anticipate the reaction of the Snowy Owls! There are three owls in the cage and as soon as I made my move they reacted in a most alarmed manner. They shrieked and flapped their wings hard and retreated to the far end of the cage, banging into the wire mesh. They are angry and I am now alarmed! The owls are freaking out at my intrusion and I'm to blame. What if one of them dies because of my stupidity? How could I explain that all I wanted was a feather?

And speaking of feathers, there I am, still trying to retrieve the first feather. I reach in, but in the noise and confusion I am struggling. Seconds seem like minutes and minutes like hours. The owls do not stop flapping their wings and letting me know they are angry. I finally get one feather loose and make a hasty retreat. The owls calmed down as I retreated, but they were still looking at me and were not pleased. I never thought my presence would upset them so.

But I got the feather! It is mine! I nearly frightened the Snowy Owls to death, but I have the feather. I look around and no one notices what happened - I am in the clear. It is not a perfect feather, but given the ordeal, I am pleased. I am not going back near that cage to try to find a better one! If my children don't appreciate the feather then perhaps they will appreciate (or laugh at) the trouble I went through to get the feather. If nothing else, I will keep the treasured feather.

It is a large feather and I don't know what to do with it so I put it down my shirt. I know, that's a classy move, but I didn't know what else to do. Now my focus is getting out of there with the feather intact and some sense of my dignity. It is not till I get out of the zoo and am walking back to the hotel on the path that I pull out the feather to examine it. Not bad! I walked back to the hotel with a smile on my face.

## **Epilogue**

I no longer have the feather. I lost it in transport. It was all for naught! However, what was left was an interesting tale to tell, a lesson learned, and some somewhat traumatized snowy owls! Has anyone seen a snowy owl feather on the ground? If, yes could you send it to me?

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