

Birding Ecotours



MINNESOTA: WINTER OWLS AND SAX-ZIM BOG

11 - 16 JANUARY 2020

By Jacob Roalef



*The warm glow of an **Evening Grosbeak** is always a highlight of the tour.*

Overview

Minnesota in January is the picture-perfect winter wonderland with snow piled high, ice covering every lake (including some of Lake Superior), and evergreen trees surrounding you. On this tour four amazing clients (Judy, Michael, Karen, and Diane) and I spent time birding at Duluth, Grand Marais, the Gunflint Trail, Lake Superior, and of course the amazing Sax-Zim Bog. The weather was pleasant with rather mild temperatures (for Minnesota winter standards) and no major snowstorms. Unfortunately the seed crop further north had had a fantastic year, so finches were difficult to come by, but we managed to find a few!

This area does not produce an amazing number of bird species; however, almost everything we saw was a real highlight. The specialty birds, mammals, and scenic views of the boreal forest are unmatched. Bird highlights for the group included **Great Grey Owl, Northern Hawk-Owl, Snowy Owl, Barred Owl, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Black-backed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Northern Shrike, Red Crossbill, Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbill, Canada Jay, Northern Goshawk, and Evening Grosbeak.**

A total of 44 species of birds were seen during the trip as well as a few mammals and amazing scenes, including the boreal forest in the snow and the vastness of Lake Superior. Species lists can be found at the end of the report.



*The mystical **Great Grey Owl** was the top highlight of the trip.*

Detailed Report

Day 1, 11 January 2020. Pickup and Sax-Zim Bog

The tour began around 11 a.m. with a pickup from the Duluth airport. It didn't take long for us to score the first nice bird of the trip, a pair of **Ruffed Grouse** two minutes from the airport! We left Duluth behind and went straight for the amazing Sax-Zim Bog. Upon arrival we spotted a beautiful adult **Bald Eagle** soaring by and a herd of **White-tailed Deer**. We continued cruising the roads and were treated to a major highlight, a juvenile **Northern Goshawk**! This individual started chasing a group of **Rock Doves** right along the road for an amazing aerial display for the group. From here we saw an incredibly tame **Northern Hawk-Owl** perched at the top of a spruce a mere foot from the road. What an incredible bird. The evening was approaching as we began searching for owls to come out. We scored an incredibly distant **Great Grey Owl**, which left us all happy but hungry for more. The sun set over the beautiful bog and we headed back to Duluth for the evening.

Day 2, 12 January 2020. Sax-Zim Bog birding

We started the day with the 45-minute drive to the bog. Our hope was to find an early-morning owl still hunting. A bit of luck was on our side this morning, with another amazing **Great Grey Owl** sitting only a few rows of trees back from the road! We had much better (but brief) views than last night as we watched it fly across the road into the depths of the forest to sleep. The morning continued with some pitiful looks at a **American Barn Owl** that was causing quite a stir, as it is very rare for the state. Unfortunately this individual was in rather poor shape, and attempts to save it were unsuccessful. Next stop was Mary Lou's feeding station, where we enjoyed a beautiful flock of **Evening Grosbeaks** as well as **Black-capped Chickadees**, **Hairy Woodpeckers**, **Wild Turkey**, and **Blue Jays**. A visit to Winterberry Bog in the afternoon resulted in some fun hiking through the snow, until we eventually found both **American Three-toed** and **Black-backed Woodpeckers** plus **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, **Brown Creeper**, and an adult **Northern Goshawk** bursting through the trees. Evening came, and we managed to catch up with another tame owl, this time **Barred Owl**, which sat in the open over a road. A great cap on a beautiful day!

Day 3, 13 January 2020. Sax-Zim Bog and Duluth area

The first stop of the day was the southern section of the Sax-Zim Bog. We cruised the roads again and stumbled upon a large group of **American Crows**, nothing unusual; however, there were a few **Black-billed Magpies** mixed in. A great start to the day! Next we waited by a feeder near a known grouse lek to see if we would get lucky. After 30 minutes and a few **White-breasted Nuthatches** the chicken-like **Sharp-tailed Grouse** appeared, walking around the snow and feeding on seeds. We swung by Mary Lou's feeding station again to enjoy the flock of **Evening Grosbeaks** one more time before heading back to Duluth for some Lake Superior birding in the early evening. The temperature had dropped significantly overnight, and the open water vanished, as did our hopes for finding several gulls. Instead we made our way into Wisconsin near the old airport area to scan the hundreds of perches until we finally landed on a beautiful female **Snowy**

Owl. The power and beauty of these birds never cease to amaze. Another amazing owl to cap another amazing day!



This Northern Hawk-Owl loved to perch on this dead tree snag.

Day 4, 14 January 2020. More Sax-Zim Bog and north to Grand Marais

A quick morning stop at the Sax-Zim Bog visitor center was our final time spent in this amazing region. **Canada Jays** were plentiful as were **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **Downy** and **Hairy Woodpeckers**, and **Black-capped Chickadees**. From here we headed north, deeper into the boreal forest region. Snow began to fall for the first time as we cruised roads just south of a small town called Cook. It took a few small flocks in some freezing cold temperatures and wind before we finally laid eyes on the target **Boreal Chickadee!** Immediately after this a faint tapping could be heard, and we spotted a gorgeous male **Black-backed Woodpecker**. We finished the day with some last-minute birding along U.S. Highway 2 before it got dark. Right before dusk and before our spot to turn around Mike got very excited and couldn't even spit the words out. Another (our 3rd) **Great Grey Owl** flew in and perched on top of a tree! This definitely was the best and longest view we managed all trip, and it will certainly be a top memory. We couldn't have asked for a better moment.

Day 5, 15 January 2020. U.S. Highway 2 and Grand Marais

Today we started early on a quest for finches and the last remaining grouse species. We arrived at U.S. Highway 2 and were immediately treated to a nice flock of **Pine Siskins** and **American Goldfinches**. We drove along slowly, carefully scanning the roadside with no luck. Luckily Diane was looking up while we were looking down as she spotted a terrific **Northern Hawk-Owl** only

a few hundred yards from the location of the owl we had seen last night. The grouse search wasn't looking too hot until we received a tip from fellow birders of where one had flown into the tree line a few minutes prior, and off we went. A bit of a cold hike into almost thigh-deep snow resulted in a cute female **Spruce Grouse** napping on a branch. On our way back we caught up with a spectacular male **Spruce Grouse** in the middle of the road that we managed to flush away before the oncoming traffic could get there. We stumbled across several more flocks before finally arriving back in Grand Marais to search the city for waxwings. We spent a few hours before dusk searching the residential area and berry trees but only managed to turn up a large flock of **American Robins** and **Cedar Waxwings**, no bohemians in the group. Lake Superior held some open water this far north and hosted a few nice species like **Long-tailed Duck**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Goldeneye**, and **American Herring Gull**. The sun set and we headed for dinner and warmth.



*An adorable **Canada Jay** pausing for a moment to investigate*

Day 6, 16 January 2020. Gunflint Trail and airport transfer

Today was our final day in Minnesota, but we had all morning and most of the afternoon to bird before we needed to be back at the airport. We spent several hours searching diligently for the Bohemian Waxbill again to no avail. Finally we called it quits and decided to head to the Gunflint Trail, which proved to be an excellent decision (good call, Karen!). It wasn't long before we came across another group of **Pine Siskins**, only this time they had their **Purple Finch** buddies mixed in. Continuing we scored even more finches with the real stars, both **Red Crossbill** and **Two-barred** (White-winged) **Crossbills**! Some of them were even singing on this sunny January morning. But then it was time to make the drive back to Duluth and board our flights home. A

great conclusion to a fantastic trip in the winter wonderland of Minnesota. Thanks to our four wonderful clients for making this tour so great and memorable!

Bird List - Following IOC (10.1)

All species were seen. Additionally, common names following Clements/eBird are listed in parentheses after the IOC name where applicable.

The following notation after the common names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: VU = Vulnerable.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Pheasants & Allies (Phasianidae)	
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>
Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
Long-tailed Duck - VU	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove (Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>
Gulls, Terns, Skimmers (Laridae)	
American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard (Hawk)	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Barn Owls (Tytonidae)	
American Barn Owl	<i>Tyto furcata</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Snowy Owl - VU	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>
Northern Hawk-Owl (Hawk Owl)	<i>Surnia ulula</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>
Great Grey (Great Gray) Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>
Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Northern (Common) Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Waxwings (Bombycillidae)	
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
Tits, Chickadees (Paridae)	
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>
Nuthatches (Sittidae)	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
Treecreepers (Certhiidae)	
Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>
Starlings, Rhabdornis (Sturnidae)	
Common (European) Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Thrushes (Turdidae)	
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Old World Sparrows (Passeridae)	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Finches, Euphonias (Fringillidae)	
Evening Grosbeak - VU	<i>Hesperiphonia vespertinus</i>
Purple Finch	<i>Haemorhous purpureus</i>
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
New World Sparrows (Passerellidae)	
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
Total seen	44

Mammal List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Sciuridae (Squirrels and Allies)	
Eastern Gray Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
Erethizontidae (New World Porcupines)	
North American Porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>
Cervidae (Deer)	
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
Total seen	4