



USA – MINNESOTA: SET DEPARTURE TRIP REPORT

13 – 18 JANUARY 2022

By Jacob Roalef



The regal Great Grey Owl is always a top highlight and target of this trip.

Overview

This six-day set departure tour of Minnesota commenced in Duluth, Minnesota on the 13th of January 2022 and concluded back there on the 18th of January 2022. One tour participant arrived early enough on the 12th of January to squeeze in a little pre-trip birding around Lake Superior. The tour visited several fantastic birding locations including Sax-Zim Bog, Canal Park, Park Point, Superior National Forest, and the Grand Marais Harbor.

This tour connected with amazing target birds giving us a list of high-quality species for our six days in the region. Avian highlights included **Great Grey, Snowy, and Barred Owls, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Common Redpoll, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, Long-tailed Duck, Canada Jay, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Black-billed Magpie, Pileated Woodpecker, Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbill, Snow Bunting**, and a breathtaking experience with **Bohemian and Cedar Waxwings**. Gene and I were also lucky enough to score a mega rarity **Ivory Gull** during the day of pre-trip birding, but unfortunately it disappeared after that despite our extensive searching.

A total of 41 bird species were seen, along with a few great mammals including **Moose, Ermine (Short-tailed Weasel), Coyote, and Snowshoe Hare**. Full bird and mammal checklists can be found at the end of the report.

Detailed Report

Pre-trip, 12th January 2022. Arrival in Duluth, Canal Park birding

Several participants were planning to arrive the evening before, but all were originally scheduled to land in Duluth after sunset with no plans for birding. However, due to the nature of flight scheduling and airlines these days, Gene's flight was cancelled, and his new travel schedule had him arrive at 2pm. I picked him up, and then we checked into the hotel, put on a few more layers, and headed out for a little birding before dinner. We headed down to Canal Park, located right on the waters of Lake Superior, where a certain pure white gull had been seen on and off for the past week or so. We began scanning the ice and channel and were treated to about 200 **Common Goldeneyes** at close range. **Common and Red-breasted Mergansers** were far off on the lake and the ice chunks hosted a few **American Herring Gulls**. After about 40 min we started to head back to the vehicle to check somewhere else when I spotted a glowing white bird flying off in the distance. We tracked it for a while and eventually it began flying right towards us and landed on the wall of the channel. **Ivory Gull!** What a stunning bird, listed as Near Threatened by the IUCN, with an estimated 45,000 individuals remaining. We spent the next 40 minutes observing this small white gull, taking in the impact and luck we had to be in its presence. Eventually another birder showed up and we showed them the gull and moved on to celebrate at dinner.



*This amazing **Ivory Gull** made a brief visit from the Arctic.*

Day 1, 13th January 2022. Arrival and birding Duluth

The remainder of the clients arrived this afternoon and we headed back to Canal Park and Park Point areas in search of the little white gull. While unsuccessful here, we did manage to see **Common Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak, Common Goldeneye, and Hairy Woodpecker**. The sun sets early at this time of year in the north, so we headed off for a nice dinner and a chance to get to know each other a bit better.

Day 2, 14th January 2022. Sax-Zim Bog

This morning saw some snow flurries in the Duluth area, but as we traveled north to Sax-Zim Bog, conditions eventually cleared up for a nice sunrise. We spent the morning cruising along Route 7 in search of owls. It wasn't long before we were on a beautiful **Snowy Owl** atop a pine! A little further up the road we got onto a flock of **Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbills** picking through the grit in the road. We managed to pull over and watch them for a bit when Patricia spotted a large bird behind us. **Great Grey Owl!** Amazing to score these two within our first hour at the bog. From here we headed off to the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog Visitor Center. The feeders here were full of great birds including **Common Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadee, and Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers**. Continuing south a bit, in more farmland-type habitat, we managed to pick up **Black-billed Magpie** and **Northern (Common) Raven**, a few corvids which are always a treat to see. Next up was lunch but along the way we got onto a **Northern (Great Grey) Shrike** teed up nicely in a bush before flying off to several other perches along the road.

After lunch we began our ventures deeper into the bog area, mostly exploring up and down Admiral Road and McDavitt Road. **Canada** and **Blue Jays** along with **American Crow** helped us

round out our corvid sightings for the day. The feeders along these roads were a bit quiet, with more of the same species we had seen earlier in the day. However, it is always nice to see **Pine Grosbeak**, **Common Redpoll**, and **Black-capped Chickadee**. As dusk began setting in, we headed back out to Route 7 where we managed to find another **Great Grey Owl** hunting along the railroad tracks! We were lucky enough to have the opportunity to observe this bird from a safe distance, so as to not disturb it. It was turning its head, looking down, sitting quietly, listening for prey. We even got to watch it fly from perch to perch a few times, always a breathtaking experience. Eventually a train came through and our time with the owl was over, so we headed off to dinner to celebrate an incredible day!



Common Redpolls were present throughout our trip, being seen daily this year.

Day 3, 15th January 2022. More Sax-Zim Bog birding

Sax-Zim Bog is a massive area with loads of places to explore making one day not nearly enough for proper exploration. As such we headed back this morning with temperatures reaching the lowest for the entire trip, a frosty -19 F (-28 C)! Our first stop of the day was at a grouse lek area but no luck there besides **Black-capped Chickadee** and **Common Redpoll**. We continued to the visitor center again and ventured out for a small hike in the cold temperatures. At the end of the trail we were rewarded with amazing close views of **Boreal Chickadee**! Well worth the cold and adventure of the short hike. After getting back to the van and thawing out a bit, we back tracked to the lek area and set up camp for a little while to continue warming up. Suddenly, Chelleye spotted a large bird flying in, **Sharp-tailed Grouse**! It perched nicely for us atop a birch before heading down to get some free food at the feeders. These birds have been in great decline in this region recently and each year they become more and more difficult to spot, so we were all

extremely happy with our luck. On our way back into the bog we experienced a slight hiccup and delay, but it wasn't long before we were on our way north to Mary Lou's.

On our way we caught up again with the same **Snowy Owl** from yesterday but this time it is was closer and glowing in the sunshine! Eventually we made it to the northwest section of the bog area. We then spent time at Mary Lou's (surely one of the sweetest people around) house and feeder station which has become a very popular birding destination while in Minnesota. We enjoyed the huge number of **Wild Turkeys** in the yard including a few smokey morphs. Eventually Mary Lou herself showed up and we were able to chat with her for a bit which can be just as enjoyable as the birds. After about 30 minutes of waiting, the real stars showed up, three **Evening Grosbeaks**. Other species here included **Hairy Woodpecker**, **Red-breasted** and **White-breasted Nuthatches**, and **Blue Jay**. The rest of the afternoon and evening was spent exploring back in the heart of the bog. More of the usual suspects, **Common Redpoll**, **Black-capped Chickadee**, **Canada Jay**, and **Pine Grosbeak**. We did encounter a few more highlights including a low perched **Barred Owl** doing a bit of hunting and a couple of us managed to spot a fast-moving **Ermine** at a feeder station. Another epic day spent at the incredible Sax-Zim Bog. We then headed back to Duluth to warm up and have dinner.



*The group battled the cold for stellar looks at the adorable **Boreal Chickadee**.*

Day 4, 16th January 2022. Duluth Harbor and birding the coast of Lake Superior

Today we decided to head back to Lake Superior in search of more gulls, ducks, and others. We started at Canal Park which seems to change daily with water currents and ice buildup. It was a lot of the same with **Common Goldeneye**, **Common Merganser**, and **American Herring Gull** making up most of the birds with a **Canada Goose** sighted way out on the Lake, an uncommon bird for the area and time of year. On our way out we were treated to a pair of **Peregrine Falcons**

flying up the channel and perching on light poles. Next up was a “dump” area in hopes that more gulls were congregating. Certainly, more gulls but viewing access was difficult, however we had patience waiting for the birds to fly up and shuffle around their positions. Here we scored great **Iceland** and **Glaucous Gulls**, however the real highlight might have been seven **Bald Eagles** all perched in the same tree! From here we decided to dip over into Wisconsin to check a spot along the lake, however the snow build up around that road proved access too risky so we kept moving but did log two Wisconsin species, **Rock Dove** (Pigeon) and **Bald Eagle**.

We headed north along the shore until we reached the town of Two Harbors. We searched the neighborhoods for waxwings without much luck but did see a few more common species including **Black-capped Chickadee** and **Downy Woodpecker**. After lunch in town, we did a few more laps of the neighborhoods before continuing north to Grand Marais. Along the way, a giant **Pileated Woodpecker** flew across the road and we managed to safely pull over and re-find it for the whole group! Upon arrival we circled the quiet campgrounds before heading out to the neighborhoods. It didn't take long before we saw one of the most incredible avian spectacles I have ever witnessed. The sky was covered in huge flocks of birds in every direction you turned and the trees all around us were loaded up like Christmas tree ornaments. Something you might see of starlings, but these were all waxwings and likely 95% **Bohemian Waxwing** and 5% **Cedar Waxwing**. The whole flock was pushing 1000 birds total. Eventually a few of these groups broke off and headed in the direction of the campground where we had seen a lot of berries, so we headed back over there and sure enough the berries were covered by **Bohemian** and **Cedar Waxwings**! We watched them feed and circle the skies. What an incredible ending to the day and what truly might be a once-in-a-lifetime bird experience!



This Bohemian Waxwing was feasting on Mountain Ash berries.

Day 5, 17th January 2022. Superior National Forest and Grand Marais Harbor

Today we headed off to explore Superior National Forest. We arrived early in the morning before the logging trucks started to take over the roads, but unfortunately the birds were not cooperating well this morning and things were slow. Today ended up being more about mammals than birds it seemed, with several great sightings including a **Moose** that disappeared into the woods and a **Red Fox** quickly crossing the road. **Northern** (Common) **Ravens** seemed to be the only birds up and active on this day until about mid-morning when we encountered a small flock of **Common Redpolls** feeding in the road. Huge snowflakes began falling hard so we pulled over for a bit to get out and enjoy the true winter wonderland of the Boreal Forest surrounding us. We continued onto Ely for lunch and crossed a river with two adult **Bald Eagles** feasting on what appeared to be a deer carcass that had washed down the river.

On our way out of the forest, we had a close encounter with a **Coyote** along the roadside, posing for a few pictures and nice looks. Back in Grand Marais, we caught up with a portion of the huge waxwing flock again before scanning out from the harbor. Here we managed to pick up our final two species, a male, **Red-breasted Merganser** and a raft of **Long-tailed Ducks** all actively diving together! Stunning birds and a great way to watch the sunset.



*The male **Pine Grosbeak** glows with its warm pinkish-red color.*

Day 6, 18th January 2022. Departure day

After breakfast at the hotel, it was time to head off back to Duluth to catch flights home. We spent some of the drive and the dinner the previous evening discussing favorite moments and sightings of the trip. The group's top five birds ended up being **Bohemian Waxwing**, **Great Grey Owl**, **Boreal Chickadee**, **Snowy Owl**, and **Sharp-tailed Grouse**. We made it safely to the airport after a snowy morning where we said our goodbyes to half the group. The other half ventured back out

to Canal Park for one more gull search and managed views of **American Herring, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls** before it was time to load up and say our final goodbyes. We all left this trip with loads of great memories, lifers, and most importantly, new friends!

Bird List - Following IOC (12.1)

Species seen only on the pre-trip day of this trip are marked with (+) after the common name.

The following notation after species names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: CE = Critically Endangered, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Long-tailed Duck - VU	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies (Phasianidae)	
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)	
American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Ivory Gull (+)	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>
Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)	
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Snowy Owl - VU	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>
Great Grey Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates villosus</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Northern (Great Grey) Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
Falcons and Caracaras (Falconidae)	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Crows, Jays, and Magpies (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>
Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice (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>
Starlings (Sturnidae)	
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Waxwings (Bombycillidae)	
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)	
Evening Grosbeak - VU	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>
Old World Sparrows (Passeridae)	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Longspurs and Snow Buntings (Calcariidae)	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
Oropendolas, Orioles, Blackbirds (Icteridae)	
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Total Seen	41

Mammal List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Sciuridae (Squirrels and Allies)	
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares)	
Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>
Canidae (Dogs)	
Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Mustelidae (Weasels and Allies)	
Ermine	<i>Mustela erminea</i>
Cervidae (Deer)	
Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
Total	8