

Birding Ecotours



BIRDING TOUR USA: OWLS AND WINTER BIRDING IN THE BOREAL FOREST OF MINNESOTA

21 - 26 JANUARY 2025



*One of several species of owl on this tour, the massive **Great Grey Owl** surveys from atop its perch.*

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In true winter wonderland fashion, Minnesota offers picturesque scenes of snow-covered evergreens and iced-over lakes. This Minnesota birding tour focuses on a variety of birds that use Lake Superior and the boreal forest as their winter homes. The famous USA birding location, Sax-Zim Bog, offers an incredible variety of habitats and is undoubtedly one of the best places for amazing owls like **Great Grey Owl**, **Northern Hawk-Owl**, and **Boreal Owl**. Of course, the bog features more than just owls with other incredible boreal bird species including **Evening Grosbeak**, **Pine Grosbeak**, **Ruffed Grouse** and **Black-backed Woodpecker**. After a few days focused at Sax-Zim Bog, the tour moves up the coast of the mighty Lake Superior towards the small town of Grand Marais, stopping at a few birding areas along the way. A run through Superior National Forest, and other nearby state parks on the way north, offers a good chance at spotting **Spruce Grouse** and **Boreal Chickadee**. Just north of Grand Marais, the Gunflint Trail is known to hold some irruptive finch species such as **Common Redpoll** and **Red Crossbill**, with luck together with less frequent species such as **Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbill** and tantalizing ones. After scoring these fantastic winter denizens and many more, the tour concludes back in Duluth where folks can thaw out and make their journeys home after another unforgettable experience.



Another of our owl targets will be the beautiful Snowy Owl.

Itinerary (6 days/5 nights)

Day 1. Arrival at Duluth International Airport

After arrival, if there is time, we will bird around the Duluth area until dinner. We'll try Canal Park and Wisconsin Point landfill for **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls**. We might also see the giant

Great Black-backed Gull. Then as the sun begins to set, we will begin our search for the breathtaking **Snowy Owl** in the Duluth-Superior Harbor. Dinner will taste so much sweeter after a hopefully successful owl search. Then off to our hotel for a good night's rest before starting our first full day of birding.

Overnight: Duluth

Days 2-3. Birding the famous Sax-Zim Bog Important Bird Area (IBA)

These next two days will focus exclusively on birding the giant area of the Sax-Zim Bog IBA. With its combination of open meadows, aspen and thick evergreen stands, rivers, farmlands, and more, it is no wonder so many boreal species call "the bog" home in the winter. Due to the extremely cold conditions of Minnesota in the winter, we will do most of our birding along the roadsides, never straying too far from the vehicle. We will cruise the roads in the mornings hopeful for a **Black-billed Magpie** mixed in with the **American Crows** and **Common Ravens**.



The delightful Evening Grosbeak is often seen in Sax-Zim Bog.

The southern portion of the bog is home to a known **Sharp-tailed Grouse** lekking area and sometimes these sneaky birds will visit a nearby feeder in the winter. Using various feeder setups throughout the area will be key as several of our targets enjoy the free buffet including **Pine** and **Evening Grosbeaks**, **Black-capped Chickadee**, **Canada Jay**, and even a hungry **Great Grey** (Northern) **Shrike**, from time to time. While driving around this vast area, we will keep our eyes peeled for silhouettes in the empty branches as **Ruffed Grouse** and **North American Porcupines** feed and rest. The open meadows play host to a nice variety of diurnal raptors including **Bald Eagle**, **Rough-legged Buzzard** (Hawk) and **Northern Hawk-Owl**. As day turns

into evening, the anticipation builds for an appearance of the amazing **Great Grey Owl** silently hunting the roadsides and snowbanks. We will spend two full days exploring this amazing area which will certainly yield us some fantastic birding.

Overnight: Duluth



*The adorable and quizzical **Canada Jay** is always a fan favorite.*

Day 4. Heading north and Superior National Forest

Today we will start our journey north to the small town of Grand Marais with a birding stop in Superior National Forest first. An early morning start will have us slowly patrolling the roadsides, searching for **Spruce Grouse**, which pick at the roadside grit and salt. As the sun continues to rise, finch flocks of **American Goldfinches** and **Pine Siskins** begin their sporadic flights, searching for seed pods. We will continue our birding of the great forest listening and looking for **Boreal Chickadees** and **American Three-toed** and **Black-backed Woodpeckers**. After a nice morning and afternoon of birding, we will arrive in Grand Marais. With our last few hours of light, we will scan the harbor for a potential **Long-tailed Duck**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, or **Common Goldeneye**.

Overnight: Grand Marais

Day 5. The Gunflint Trail and Grand Marais

A National Scenic Byway, the Gunflint Trail, curves its way north through the hills of Superior National Forest and along the edge of the US/Canadian Border. We will enjoy several scenic views along this 57-mile (92-kilometer) road this morning, stopping occasionally at safe pull

offs. The far-reaching white pines combined with a bit of altitude make for a finch hotspot including species like **Purple Finch**, **House Finch**, **Red Crossbill**, **Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbill** and **Pine Siskin**. The cute **Red-breasted Nuthatch** and occasional **Hairy Woodpecker** can be found mixed in with these foraging finch flocks along the trail. The afternoon will be spent birding around the town and campgrounds of Grand Marais for roaming flocks of **Cedar** and **Bohemian Waxwings** feeding on the prevalent berries in the area. We will take one last check of the harbor and lake for any waterfowl or gulls we might be missing before calling it a day.

Overnight: Grand Marais



Northern Hawk-Owl will hopefully be another delight in Minnesota.

Day 6. Back to Duluth and departure home.

On our final day, we will make the trip south along the Lake Superior shoreline, back to Duluth, to catch our flights home. We recommend getting an afternoon or evening flight if possible. Depending on timing, we may be able to make one or two more birding stops along the way. The tour will conclude with a drop off at the [Duluth International Airport](#).

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different international guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling.

Duration: 6 days
Group Size: 4 – 8
Dates: 21 – 26 January 2025
Start: Duluth
End: Duluth
Prices: US\$2,780 per person sharing (2025)
Single supplements: US\$430 (2025)

Price includes:

Meals
Accommodation
Transport
Guiding fees

Price excludes:

Flights
Personal insurance
Alcoholic beverages
Gratuities – (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))
Laundry service
Personal expenses such as gifts