

# Birding Ecotours



USA – MINNESOTA: SET DEPARTURE BIRDING TRIP REPORT

26–31 JANUARY 2026

By Jacob Roalef



*These cold Long-eared Owls were a top highlight on this year's trip!*

## Overview

This tour was the first of two consecutive Northern Minnesota departures run in partnership with Golden Gate Bird Alliance and its members. This six-day trip began in Minneapolis, Minnesota on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2026, and concluded back there on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January. The tour visited many great birding sites, such as Sax-Zim Bog, the Grand Marais harbor, Fort Snelling State Park, Canal Park, Superior National Forest, and Lake Superior.

Despite battling extreme, freezing-cold temperatures for the duration of the tour, our group still managed a lot of fantastic species and fun-packed birding. The tour was able to achieve an impressive list by the end of the trip, considering the weather. This included five species of owl: **Long-eared, Snowy, Short-eared, Great Grey and Northern Hawk Owl**. Other bird highlights included **Barrow's Goldeneye, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Redpoll, Canada Jay, Ruffed and Sharp-tailed Grouse, Bohemian Waxwing, Black-backed Woodpecker, Trumpeter Swan, American Tree Sparrow, and Northern Shrike**. A total of 51 bird species were seen, along with a few mammals, including **Red Squirrel, North American Porcupine, White-tailed Deer, and Red Fox**. Full mammal and bird lists can be found at the end of the report.



*The subtle beauty of the female **Pine Grosbeak** is often overlooked.*

## Detailed Report

### Day 1, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2026. Arrival and Minneapolis birding

Several of the group had arrived the previous night, so we decided to squeeze in a little extra birding time this morning while we waited for the others in the group to arrive. We cruised over to the nearby Nicols Road Marsh but were a bit disappointed to find the access road closed due to construction. We still managed to tick our first few species for Minnesota like **Dark-eyed Junco** and **House Finch**. From there we popped over to Fort Snelling State Park and were treated to quite a show of fourteen **Bald Eagles** in a single spot, plus a large group of **Trumpeter Swans** gathered in the only small bit of open water around. Our final stop of the morning was the Minnesota Valley NWR feeders where we picked up some nice species like **Red-bellied Woodpecker**, **Blue Jay**, **White-breasted Nuthatch**, and **Northern Cardinal**. After this we had some lunch to thaw out and took a little break as the others in our group arrived.

Once all the arrivals were sorted, we had a little time left before dark to bird. Everyone was game and layered up, so we headed off to Roberts Bird Sanctuary. While we didn't find much in the way of birds aside from **American Robin**, it was a peaceful walk and adventure in the cold, which at this point was about -20 °F (-29 °C). With our final bits of light, it was time to target some owls near the Minneapolis airport. The dog park nearby yielded some incredibly accommodating **Long-eared Owls** close to the car, minimizing the freezing. The airport itself proved a bit more difficult, but right as we were about to give up, a stunning **Snowy Owl** appeared to soak up the last bit of the sunset light! What a great start to our trip. Time for our official welcome dinner and some tasty Midwest food.



*The adorable, Red-breasted Nuthatch was seen throughout the tour.*

**Day 2, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2026. Minneapolis birding and north to Lake Superior**

Since we only had part of our group for some of our birding yesterday, we spent some of the morning playing catchup at Fort Snelling SP and Minnesota Valley NWR. Once the key species like **Northern Cardinal**, **Trumpeter Swan**, and **Red-bellied Woodpecker** were in the bag, we began our journey north towards the lake. In the northern portion of Minneapolis, we made a quick stop at Springbrook Nature Center to enjoy the feeders set up here and to stay out of the cold. **American Tree Sparrow** was the top highlight, but we also enjoyed **American Goldfinch**, **Wild Turkey**, and **White-breasted Nuthatch** here. We continued our nearly three-hour drive north with a quick stop along the highway when we spotted a **Rough-legged Buzzard** (Hawk) hunting the grassy fields.

After a tasty lunch with a side of delicious baked goods to go, we finished our drive to Duluth to check in and drop off our luggage and have a little break. We still had a bit of time left for some birding along Lake Superior. Canal Park netted us a nice raft of a few hundred **Common Goldeneyes**. We continued with some birding by van as the temperatures made it difficult to stay outside for long. Our cruise of Park Point yielded an **American Black Duck**, a lifer for some, and a great way to cap the day.

**Day 3, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2026. Sax-Zim Bog**

Today was full of excitement as we would finally venture into the famous Sax-Zim Bog for the first time! Temperatures were still well below 0 F (-18 C), but we were not deterred! This was a very low irruption year for a lot of species, but we still put the work in during twilight hours and cruised the roads for owls. No luck today, but when we rolled up to the Sisu feeder station, we were welcomed by a flock of **Evening Grosbeaks**. We all hopped out to enjoy these incredible birds and also found a few other nice species like **Redpoll**, **Canada Jay**, and **Northern Shrike**. Next up was a visit to the Admiral Road feeders. We waited and waited for our target chickadee to show, until we were nearly frozen to the road. It would have to wait for another time, but we did enjoy all the **Black-capped Chickadees** and **Red-breasted Nuthatches** working on the peanut butter. The Welcome Center feeders were up next on our feeder circuit. Here we could watch from inside the warm building, a huge plus! A small flock of **Pine Grosbeaks** descended on the seeds below as we watched with oohh's and aahh's. It was mid-morning by now, time for our next target species. We loaded up and headed south just outside the official bog area to some side streets where a particular owl had made a territory for the winter. Thankfully, this stunning **Northern Hawk Owl** was perched on its favorite tree when we pulled up, so the search was an easy one! It is always great to get an owl before lunch.

After we filled up and warmed up at Wilbert Café, we headed off for the final few hours of birding of the day. It was too cold to do much aside from roadside birding, so we drove all over Sax-Zim Bog and noted **Ruffed Grouse**, **Northern Raven**, **Blue Jay**, **Northern Shrike**, and more. For a split second, an **American Goshawk** peeled out of the tree line, flew across the road and into the distance where it seemingly appeared to fly into a local barn structure. Sadly, it never appeared again, and our views were only fleeting glimpse. Our evening owl prowl session proved more fruitful than the morning as we managed to find a pair of **Short-eared Owls** hunting the prairie fields, a new species on our Minnesota birding tours! We enjoyed these incredible birds just until it was too dark to see and then headed back to Duluth for dinner after a great first day in the bog.



*This **Northern Hawk Owl** assumed its usual tree-topper pose for us.*

#### **Day 4, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2026. Sax-Zim Bog and northern forest birding**

After breakfast and our usual prowl through prime habitat in the bog, we headed north to the town of Palo to check out a grouse lek area. While we struck out on the grouse, we did score some incredible views of **Pileated Woodpecker** as it worked on some dead trees! It is always incredible to see these giant woodpeckers. We continued north into Superior National Forest where a section near Brimson had recently been burned. This was prime habitat for some special woodpeckers, and it didn't take long for us to hear the tapping and scrapping of a **Black-backed Woodpecker**. With a little effort, we managed to score some excellent views of this cool species. It was the coldest day yet, limiting our ability to bird outside before conditions became unpleasant. We loaded back up and headed for a late lunch and to do some final birding around the bog. The afternoon and evening was a bit slow with the cold weather, but we did add a **Brown Creeper** to our species list. Our evening owl prowl somehow turned into more of a mammal safari as we spotted a **North American Porcupine** munching on a tree in the distance and then a **Red Fox** was running along the road in our headlights just as the sun had set. It was back to Duluth for dinner and to warm up after several bone-chillingly cold days in a row.



*Black-backed Woodpecker gave us some nice views in the cold.*

### Day 5, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2026. Final bog birding and lakefront to Grand Marais

This morning was our last full day, and we decided to give the owl prowl one more chance around Sax-Zim Bog. It was the coldest day yet, pushing -30 F (-34 C) windchills. Our persistent efforts were bittersweet, as we cruised the roads a resident **Great Grey Owl** swooped low and flew across the road in front of the van. Sadly, only one other person managed a glimpse of this elusive, mythical bird of the north. Despite some fair efforts of searching in the freezing cold, we couldn't relocate this beautiful owl as it disappeared just as quickly and quietly as it appeared. In a year where almost no Great Greys were being seen, we were lucky to even catch this glimpse. The remainder of the early morning was spent around the bog where we managed to pick up a few new trip species, including **Black-billed Magpie** and a lingering **White-throated Sparrow**. By mid-morning we circled back to the Lake Superior shore to scan any open water we could find. Our cold efforts proved fruitful as we managed to pick up on a rare **Barrow's Goldeneye** and a few **Red-breasted Mergansers** mixed into a flock of **Common Goldeneyes**. Time for lunch and some delicious pie at the local Betty's Pies.

As we enjoyed our food and dessert, we watched the few feeders the restaurant put out front. Amazingly, we managed to catch up with a **Boreal Chickadee** here, a species we had missed several times thus far in the bog. Warm pie and coffee while watching an adorable **Boreal Chickadee**—lunch doesn't get much better! We spent the remainder of the day driving north along the Lake Superior shoreline to Grand Marais. It took a lot of effort and a close call creeping around neighborhoods, but we finally managed to find the roaming flock of **Bohemian Waxwings** here as they feasted on berries! The birds were feeding down low which allowed for some excellent views of this stunning species, what a treat! Once the birds flew off, we headed over to the break wall to scan the mighty Lake Superior. The scenery here with all the amazing colors and ice structures were incredible. Of course, finding a few **Long-tailed Ducks** out in the distance only

added to the beauty here. Alas, it was time to make the two-hour drive back to Duluth and enjoy our final dinner together.



*The stunning **Bohemian Waxwing** was a real treat to see down low.*

### **Day 6, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2026. Return to Minneapolis and tour conclusion**

On our final morning, we had a little unfinished business from earlier in the trip. The group all chimed in and decided to leave a bit earlier to give us enough time to try one more location for this species before heading back to the airport in Minneapolis. So, we were up early and out of the hotel before sunrise to drive about an hour and half to Aitkin County. Our efforts paid off and we scored a small group of **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, a species that eluded us earlier and is getting increasingly difficult to find in the area! What a great species to cap off our trip. It was then time to make the long journey back to Minneapolis, with a pit stop at the delicious Tobie's Bakery for baked goods and coffee of course. We arrived in the early afternoon, said our goodbyes, and headed our separate ways after a fantastic, albeit extremely cold, tour of Northern Minnesota.

**Bird List - Following IOC (15.1)**

All species were seen. The following notation after species names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: VU = Vulnerable.

| Common Name  | Scientific Name                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| <b>Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)</b>      |                                 |
| Trumpeter Swan                                     | <i>Cygnus buccinator</i>        |
| Mallard  | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>       |
| American Black Duck                                | <i>Anas rubripes</i>            |
| Long-tailed Duck                                   | <i>Clangula hyemalis</i>        |
| Common Goldeneye                                   | <i>Bucephala clangula</i>       |
| Barrow's Goldeneye                                 | <i>Bucephala islandica</i>      |
| Red-breasted Merganser                             | <i>Mergus serrator</i>          |
| <b>Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies (Phasianidae)</b> |                                 |
| Ruffed Grouse                                      | <i>Bonasa umbellus</i>          |
| Sharp-tailed Grouse                                | <i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i> |
| Wild Turkey  | <i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>      |
| Ring-necked Pheasant                               | <i>Phasianus colchicus</i>      |
| <b>Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)</b>              |                                 |
| Rock Pigeon  | <i>Columba livia</i>            |
| <b>Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)</b>        |                                 |
| American Herring Gull                              | <i>Larus smithsonianus</i>      |
| <b>Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)</b>     |                                 |
| Bald Eagle   | <i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i> |
| American Goshawk                                   | <i>Astur atricapillus</i>       |
| Red-tailed Hawk                                    | <i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>        |
| Rough-legged Buzzard                               | <i>Buteo lagopus</i>            |
| <b>Owls (Strigidae)</b>                            |                                 |
| Snowy Owl - VU                                     | <i>Bubo scandiacus</i>          |
| Northern Hawk Owl                                  | <i>Surnia ulula</i>             |
| Long-eared Owl                                     | <i>Asio otus</i>                |

| Common Name                                    | Scientific Name              |
|--|------------------------------|
| Short-eared Owl                                | <i>Asio flammeus</i>         |
| Great Grey Owl                                 | <i>Strix nebulosa</i>        |
| <b>Woodpeckers (Picidae)</b>                   |                              |
| Red-bellied Woodpecker                         | <i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>  |
| Black-backed Woodpecker                        | <i>Picoides arcticus</i>     |
| Downy Woodpecker                               | <i>Dryobates pubescens</i>   |
| Hairy Woodpecker                               | <i>Dryobates villosus</i>    |
| Pileated Woodpecker                            | <i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>    |
| <b>Shrikes (Laniidae)</b>                      |                              |
| Northern Shrike                                | <i>Lanius borealis</i>       |
| <b>Crows, Jays, and Magpies (Corvidae)</b>     |                              |
| 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 Raven                                 | <i>Corvus corax</i>          |
| <b>Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice (Paridae)</b> |                              |
| Black-capped Chickadee                         | <i>Poecile atricapillus</i>  |
| Boreal Chickadee                               | <i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>    |
| <b>Nuthatches (Sittidae)</b>                   |                              |
| Red-breasted Nuthatch                          | <i>Sitta canadensis</i>      |
| White-breasted Nuthatch                        | <i>Sitta carolinensis</i>    |
| <b>Treecreepers (Certhiidae)</b>               |                              |
| Brown Creeper                                  | <i>Certhia americana</i>     |
| <b>Starlings (Sturnidae)</b>                   |                              |
| European Starling                              | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>      |
| <b>Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)</b>          |                              |
| American Robin                                 | <i>Turdus migratorius</i>    |

| Common Name  | Scientific Name                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Waxwings (Bombycillidae)</b>                      |                                   |
| Bohemian Waxwing                                     | <i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>        |
| <b>Old World Sparrows (Passeridae)</b>               |                                   |
| House Sparrow  | <i>Passer domesticus</i>          |
| <b>Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)</b> |                                   |
| Evening Grosbeak - VU                                | <i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i> |
| Pine Grosbeak  | <i>Pinicola enucleator</i>        |
| House Finch  | <i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>       |
| Redpoll  | <i>Acanthis flammea</i>           |
| American Goldfinch                                   | <i>Spinus tristis</i>             |
| <b>New World Sparrows (Passerellidae)</b>            |                                   |
| American Tree Sparrow                                | <i>Spizelloides arborea</i>       |
| Dark-eyed Junco                                      | <i>Junco hyemalis</i>             |
| White-throated Sparrow                               | <i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>     |
| <b>Cardinals and Allies (Cardinalidae)</b>           |                                   |
| Northern Cardinal                                    | <i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>      |
| <b>Total Seen</b>                                    | <b>51</b>                         |

### Mammal List

| Common Name                                  | Scientific Name                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| <b>Sciuridae (Squirrels and Allies)</b>      |                                |
| Eastern Grey Squirrel                        | <i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>    |
| Red Squirrel                                 | <i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i> |
| <b>Erethizontidae (New World Porcupines)</b> |                                |
| North American Porcupine                     | <i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>      |
| <b>Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares)</b>         |                                |
| Eastern Cottontail                           | <i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>   |

|                        |                               |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Canidae (Dogs)</b>  |                               |
| Coyote                 | <i>Canis latrans</i>          |
| Red Fox                | <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>          |
| <b>Cervidae (Deer)</b> |                               |
| White-tailed Deer      | <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i> |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>7</b>                      |