

Birding Ecotours



USA – MINNESOTA: SET DEPARTURE TRIP REPORT

02 – 07 FEBRUARY 2026

By Jacob Roalef



*Our incredible experience with a **Snowy Owl** was a top highlight!*

Overview

This tour was the second of back-to-back tours of Northern Minnesota in partnership with Golden Gate Bird Alliance. This six-day trip began in Minneapolis, Minnesota on the 2nd of February 2026, and concluded back there on the 7th of February. The trip visited many excellent birding locations, such as Sax-Zim Bog, Springbrook Nature Center, Fort Snelling State Park, Canal Park, Superior National Forest, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, the Lake Superior shoreline and Blue Lake Water Treatment Plant.

This week was quite balmy compared with the first tour, but even then, conditions were still below freezing for the duration of the trip. This made for some beautiful birding days in this winter wonderland. Overall, the irruption was slow this year for many species, however, this tour still managed a fantastic bird list and some incredible encounters with many winter special species. Avian highlights included **Long-eared**, **Short-eared**, and **Snowy Owls**, **Eastern Screech-Owl**, **Northern Hawk Owl**, **Barrow's Goldeneye**, **Harlequin Duck**, **Evening** and **Pine Grosbeaks**, **Redpoll**, **Canada Jay**, **Ruffed** and **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, **Bohemian Waxwing**, **Black-backed** and **American Three-toed Woodpeckers**, **Trumpeter Swan**, **American Tree Sparrow**, and **Great Grey (Northern) Shrike**. A total of 62 bird species were seen, along with a few mammals, including **Red Squirrel**, **North American Porcupine**, and **White-tailed Deer**. Full mammal and bird lists can be found at the end of the report.



*We had to work hard before finally scoring views of **Northern Hawk Owl**.*

Detailed Report

Day 1, 2nd February 2026. Arrival and Minneapolis birding

Our small group all arrived by lunchtime, so we enjoyed a bit of lunch and introductions before heading out for our first taste of birding in Minnesota together. We started off strong with a visit to the dog park near the Minneapolis airport and scored some great views of a roosting **Long-eared Owl**. Hard to beat an owl as one of the first species of the trip, but we decided to try for a second one, so we headed off to Roberts Bird Sanctuary. We had a lovely walk and managed to find a sleepy red morph **Eastern Screech-Owl** facing out of its hole. What a start, two great owl species! Now it was time for a few more common species. We headed off to Minnesota Valley NWR and Fort Snelling State Park, where we added **Trumpeter Swan, Bald Eagle, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Dark-eyed Junco, House Finch, Northern Cardinal** and more to our trip list. We wrapped up the day with some cold, unsuccessful searching at the Minneapolis airport, but all things considered, we had a fantastic first half day of birding and the trip was off to a hot start that we hoped to continue! Time to celebrate our first owls with some delicious Midwest food.



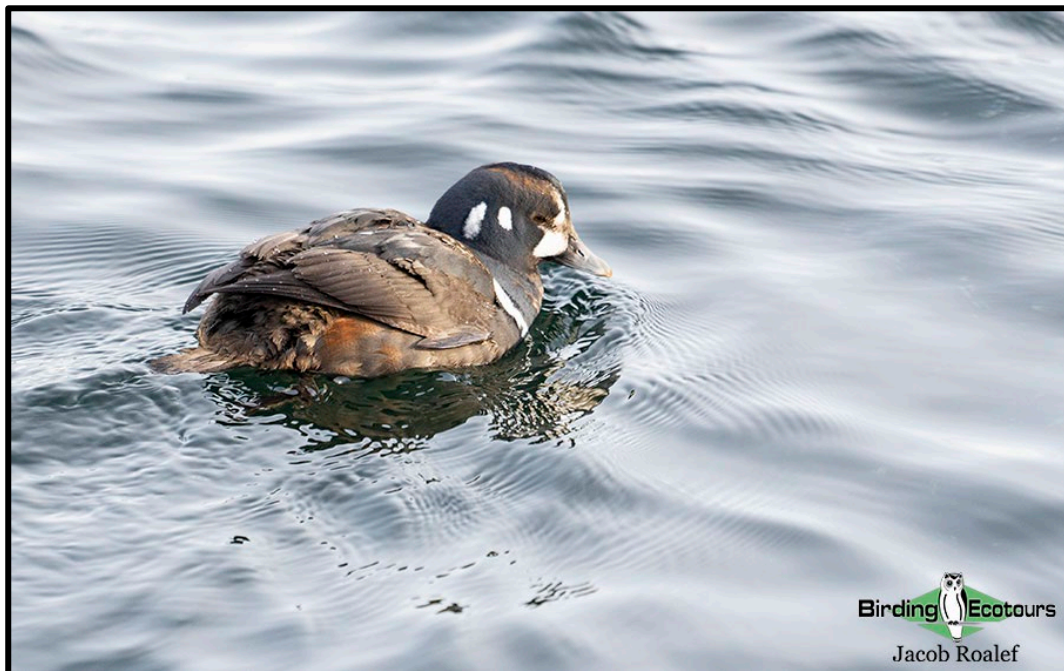
*This adorable, red morph **Eastern Screech-Owl** was snoozing away in its hole.*

Day 2, 3rd February 2026. Minneapolis birding and north to Lake Superior

Today was going to be a long day, full of birding and travel, so we hit the road early for a quick check of the nearby MSP airport. This turned up a nice **American Kestrel** for us, but not much else. Since we had nailed most of the Minneapolis targets yesterday as a full group, we began our journey north and made a brief visit at Springbrook Nature Center to snag the final target for the

area, **American Tree Sparrow**. This cute sparrow sure made us wait, before it eventually came into the feeders for breakfast. Of course, we enjoyed the other birds, like **Red-bellied Woodpecker**, **White-breasted Nuthatch**, **Dark-eyed Junco**, and **Northern Cardinal**, before heading out and continuing north. Along the highway, we managed to spot a **Rough-legged Buzzard** (Hawk). It perched and flew nicely, allowing us some excellent views from all angles. A few **Ring-necked Pheasants** were also nearby in the prairie along the road. After a pit stop for some food, coffee, and tasty treats, we arrived in Duluth to spend the afternoon in search of more birds!

Up first was the WLSSD dump, since we all know good birding takes place at dumps. This did not disappoint with eighteen **Bald Eagles** perched all around as we scanned through the gulls on the roof. With a little effort, we managed to pick out both **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls** mixed in with the numerous **American Herring Gulls**. At one point, we even had all three species lined up, which made for an excellent comparison view. From here we ventured off the beaten path a bit, to some residential streets that were loaded with berries in the low bushes near the road. As soon as we pulled up, we were greeted by 100+ **Bohemian Waxwings** having an afternoon feast! What a treat to see these gorgeous birds. After a few minutes, they all picked up and took off to roam in search of more berries, so we also headed off to Canal Park to check on the open water there. As we walked up to the channel, we were surprised to see loads of birds extremely close to the edge! Most were **Common Goldeneye**, but after a little time we picked through them and spotted a stunning **Barrow's Goldeneye**, as well as a cute **Harlequin Duck** in close! We soaked up some close experiences with these ducks as we watched them dive down and swim up. The water was clear enough that you could see them coming up, so cool! We drove across the bridge onto Park Point and picked up **American Black Duck** in its usual hangout location, before heading off to Wisconsin for our final bit of birding.



*We scored unbelievably close views of the rare **Harlequin Duck**.*

As we approached Richard Bong airport, we nearly drove right past a stunning **Snowy Owl** perched right along the roadside on a light pole! We circled back around to get some close views from the van and really sensed the size of this impressive bird. We then pulled in across the street and hopped out to observe from a safe distance. While there, we spotted a second **Snowy Owl** across the road at the airport. So, we loaded up and drove over to look at that one from a bit nearer as well. We watched the owls until the sun started setting and then headed off to dinner in Duluth. What an amazing day of birding, with some incredible close encounters with many key and highlight species!

Day 3, 4th February 2026. Sax-Zim Bog

This morning we loaded up and headed out for our first exploration of Sax-Zim Bog. We started with the usual strategy of owl prowl in the first hour of light, but we were unsuccessful in this poor irruption year. Nevertheless, we did manage some other excellent birds in the morning at the Sisu feeders, such as a huge flock of **Evening Grosbeaks**, **Canada** and **Blue Jays**, **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, and **Pine Grosbeak**. From here we headed over to the Admiral Road feeder station and bagged a cute little **Boreal Chickadee** mixed in with lots of **Black-capped Chickadees**. Next, we enjoyed the feeders and warmth of the Sax-Zim welcome center, where **Hairy** and **Downy Woodpeckers** visited along with other usual suspects. The remainder of the morning was spent on another owl target, which also proved unsuccessful and would have to wait for another time. We managed to add **Great Grey** (Northern) **Shrike** to our trip list, so all was not lost.

After lunch we went for a lovely little hike through Winterberry Bog to enjoy the snow, forest, and birds. It was peaceful and quiet here, but we still found a few nice birds like **Redpoll** and **Pine Grosbeak**. We continued with afternoon birding around the bog, mostly via the vehicle. We checked on our owl location again, but without luck. We hoped our luck would turn as evening approached and, thankfully, it did. We spotted **Ruffed Grouse** perched up in the aspen trees and watched as it munched on the buds, before flying down and away, out of sight for the night. Around dusk we cruised down Sax Road and found a **Short-eared Owl**, just posted up on a tree stump for us to enjoy. It took off and we loved watching it fly and hunt the prairies below, until the sun faded and it was too dark to see well. We were also a bit frozen by now, so it was back to Duluth for dinner, after a successful owl prowl evening!



*It was a real treat to watch this **Short-eared Owl** hunt the prairie.*

Day 4, 5th February 2026. Sax-Zim Bog and northern forest birding

After another quick and unsuccessful owl prowl through the bog this morning, we continued further north to the town of Palo to search the prairie habitat for grouse. We were coming up empty handed but managed to call in a **Pileated Woodpecker** from the nearby forest. This stunner flew in and gave us some excellent views before flying back into the deeper woods. Just as we were about to call it, we gave the area one more pass and spotted a few **Sharp-tailed Grouse** foraging in the treetops, score! We enjoyed watching these birds for a bit and even helped a group of younger birders in the area get onto the **Sharp-tailed Grouse**. We then ventured off to our next stop, the burned area in Brimson. It was a beautiful day, not too windy or cold, perfect for a woodpecker search. It wasn't long before we heard the taps of a **Black-backed Woodpecker** nearby. This recently burned area is a favorite for them and, after a bit of searching, we all enjoyed nice views of this excellent bird. Since it was so nice out we continued exploring along the road and eventually heard the light taps and peeling of another woodpecker. With great eyes, Karen managed to spot **American Three-toed Woodpecker** through the forest. It just sat there and gave fantastic views for quite a while! This species can be quite difficult, and it was great to nail so many amazing woodpeckers today. Then we made the hour or so drive back towards the bog for a late lunch.

During our last few hours of the day we cruised around the bog. We ventured back to our normal owl hunting locales and this time the birds cooperated! A **Northern Hawk Owl** was teed up nicely atop a spruce tree as we rolled up. After the previous three or four unsuccessful searches, it was that much sweeter to finally score some nice views of this incredible species. We continued and managed to find the second **Northern Hawk Owl** that had established a territory here this winter. Two for one on the owls! From here we made a brief visit to Mary Lou's house to check out her feeders and saw **Wild Turkey**, **Downy** and **Hairy Woodpeckers**, and **Red-breasted** and **White-**

breasted Nuthatches. For our final hour of the day, we spent time searching for owls again but only came up with a **North American Porcupine** munching through some thick trees. A local pulled up and gave us some intel on an owl she often sees and, while this didn't yield any fruit, we did have fun trying! Back to Duluth for dinner and a rest after a long day birding.



*The elusive **American Three-toed Woodpecker** was accommodating on this trip.*

Day 5, 6th February 2026. Superior National Forest and more Sax-Zim Bog

Today was our last full day birding northern Minnesota, and we were quickly running out of targets because of our great luck to date with all the species on offer. We spent the morning cruising the roads of Superior National Forest. Things were quiet this morning, so we decided to hike around the forest at Greenwood Lake. We even braved the frozen lake for a little, this is always a cool experience. While the birding was slow, we all enjoyed the peacefulness of the mighty Boreal Forest. Of course, we did see a few birds like **Northern Raven** and **American Crow**. We circled back to Betty's Pie in Two Harbors on Lake Superior for lunch with a **Boreal Chickadee** and **Redpoll**. Tough to beat that. For the afternoon we decided to give the bog one last visit, so off we went to check the usual feeder stations. It was a pleasant afternoon with some of the usual suspects of the area like **Pine Grosbeak**, **Canada Jay**, **Black-capped Chickadee**, and **Hairy Woodpecker**. We also managed a few more uncommon species like another **Boreal Chickadee** and a lingering **White-throated Sparrow**. Our final hour here was spent on a desperate search for owls. Just as we were about to give up, the two of us in the front seat spotted a huge bird perched out in the distance, **Great Grey Owl!** Unfortunately, just as we pulled over to get on it, the bird took off and disappeared into the far woods. Light was almost nonexistent at this point and, sadly, those in the back never managed a glimpse of this mystical beast of the northern woods.

A bittersweet moment for sure, but something to leave on the table for next time. We headed back to Duluth for our final dinner and to celebrate this great trip.



Redpoll was a treat to see.

Day 6, 7th February 2026. Back to Minneapolis and tour conclusion

It was time to make the two and half hour drive back to the Minneapolis airport. We loaded our luggage into the vehicle and headed south. Some of us had late morning flights home so needed to get back to the airport early. We nevertheless managed a quick pit stop for some baked goods and coffee along the way. Those with later flights had time to bird the nearby Blue Lake WTP. This bit of open water produced loads of new trip birds in the form of ducks, mostly like **Hooded** and **Common Mergansers**, **Ring-necked Duck**, **Bufflehead**, **Gadwall**, and **American Coot**. A nice way to cap off our trip. It was time to say all our final goodbyes and head home after a truly amazing adventure through 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
Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Trumpeter Swan	<i>Cygnus buccinator</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
American Black Duck	<i>Anas rubripes</i>
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>
Hooded Merganser	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies (Phasianidae)	
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>
Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Rails, Gallinules, and Coots (Rallidae)	
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)	
American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)	
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Eastern Screech-Owl	<i>Megascops asio</i>
Snowy Owl - VU	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
Great Gray Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</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>
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
Falcons and Caracaras (Falconidae)	
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
Crows, Jays, and Magpies (Corvidae)	
Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
American Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice (Paridae)	

Common Name	Scientific Name
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 (Sturnidae)	
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)	
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
Waxwings (Bombycillidae)	
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>
Old World Sparrows (Passeridae)	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)	
Evening Grosbeak - VU	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>
House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>
New World Sparrows (Passerellidae)	
American Tree Sparrow	<i>Spizelloides arborea</i>
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
White-throated Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>
Cardinals and Allies (Cardinalidae)	
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Total Seen	62

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>
Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares)	
Eastern Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>
Canidae (Dogs)	
Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>
Cervidae (Deer)	
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
Total	6