



A [Tropical Birding](#) SET DEPARTURE tour

## Minnesota in Winter I

January 18-23, 2020



*Great Gray Owl is one of the main targets in Sax Zim Bog and does not disappoint!*

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## Summary

Northern Minnesota might seem an unlikely birding destination in the middle of winter. The diversity is low, and the days are short but spectacular scenery and some absolute all-star species make this a fantastic and entertaining spot for a short trip! Visiting the famous Sax Zim Bog we picked up the lion's share of boreal specialties the very first day. A morning walk through a spruce bog connected us with **American Three-toed Woodpecker** and an obliging **Northern Hawk Owl** perched at the pinnacle of a tall pine. After lunch we rounded up a **Black-backed Woodpecker** and a few dashing **Canada Jays**. Around dusk we had a brief but satisfying encounter with the ghost of the north – **Great Gray Owl**. After seeing it fly through the trees several times, we eventually connected with it, perched calmly on a small spruce for a few minutes before fading back into the forest. A fantastic end to the day we were happy to head back but not before encountering one more surprise – a **Northern Goshawk** rocketing across the road and disappearing in a flash. Heading even farther north towards the Canadian border, a brutally cold day kept the bird activity down but with some work we managed to find a few more **Canada Jays**, an incredibly cooperative pair of **Boreal Chickadee**, another **Black-backed Woodpecker** and some **Common Goldeneye**. Later that evening we went out in search of the Northern Lights and while the Aurora was only a glimmer on the horizon we were treated to a stunningly dark and starry sky and a handsome Red Fox. The next morning was spent cruising around Grand Marais in search of Bohemian Waxwings and winter finches. While there were abundant fruiting trees that were popular among the **American Robins** and **Cedar Waxwings**, there wasn't much else to be found. Heading inland on a remote forest road we were treated to hundreds of finches – **Pine Siskins**, **Purple Finches**, **Red** and **White-winged Crossbills** – all sitting the middle of the road gathering grit to aid in digesting pine nuts and birch catkins. After making our way back to Duluth, we continued across the bridge into Wisconsin for our final birding of the day. At the tiny airport in Superior we capped things off by spending some time with one of the **Snowy Owls** that usually spends the winter here. Our final day found us returning to Sax Zim Bog for another round of birding. After locating some of the great birds we had already seen, we finally came across a run of new species – a trio of **Sharp-tailed Grouse** in a snowy field, a **Ruffed Grouse** nipping buds off a dogwood and a noisy flock of **Evening Grosbeaks**. On our way to lunch a **Barred Owl** crossed the road in front of us before disappearing back into the forest – our 4<sup>th</sup> species of owl for the trip! The rest of the day was pleasantly spent in the company of **Northern Hawk Owl**, **Northern Shrike** and some other great boreal birds, though nothing new for the trip. Heading back to Duluth we had a final dinner in town that featured some great local beer, locally grown wild rice and a menu highlighting the comfort food that makes these cold winter days feel a little cozier. While most of us had early morning flights the next day a few of us headed down to the Duluth harbor for some quick morning birding. While there was only a very small patch of open water it did contain a large flock of **Common Goldeneye**, a small flock of **Herring Gulls** and a few **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls** along with them. With this last taste of winter birding, the last of us headed back to warm up and reflect on a great couple days in Minnesota.

## Trip Report

A thick blanket of snow piled on top the already towering drifts as people arrived in Duluth. Despite a little chaos in the airports we had all soon arrived and after some dinner nearby we settled in to prepare for our first day of birding in Northern Minnesota.

The efficiency of local snow removal meant that it was smooth sailing as we drove west in the dark the following morning. With the sun rising late we had plenty of time to have a leisurely start to the day and still make it to Sax-Zim Bog by first light. In the grey of early morning we had our first views of the snow-capped spruce and tamarack trees that dominate the boreal forest here. This was followed shortly by our first few birds – common and hardy winter residents like **Black-capped Chickadee**, **Red-breasted Nuthatch** and **Common Raven**. As we cruised the roads around the bog, we caught sight of an oddly shaped white lump in a snowy field. Closer inspection revealed a **Snowshoe Hare** sitting in plain view, confident in its camouflage. While the hare remained safe, further down the road a few predators were out in

search of smaller prey – a **Northern Shrike** sat sentinel on slim spruce branch while farther down the road a **Northern Hawk Owl** peered pensively from the pinnacle of a pine. Our first northern owl of the trip and great views to boot!



*Snowshoe Hares are masters of winter camouflage and important prey for the Canadian Lynx.*

Taking a break from the van, we set out to experience the winter landscape in earnest. Leaving the road, we set off down a well worn trail through the deep snow into a silent spruce bog. In the stillness we could hear the gentle tapping of a woodpecker. The first few we tracked down were the widespread **Hairy Woodpecker**, as comfortable here as in the cloud forests of Costa Rica. A few piles of small bark flakes littering the snow alerted us to the presence of one of the rarer boreal woodpeckers and we soon found a male **American Three-toed Woodpecker** feeding calmly on a nearby spruce at eye level. With another great bird in the bag we headed to lunch to warm up before the afternoon push.

After lunch we headed back into the bog where we rounded up a **Black-backed Woodpecker** and a few dashing **Canada Jays**. Moving down the road a crowd of people had shown up to sit vigil and wait for the bog's biggest celebrity. As dusk approached, we got a hot tip and quickly set off down the road. As we parked, we saw a large shape flying silently through the forest. Quickly exiting the van, we set off down the road at a quick pace seeing something fly again. Finally, we caught up with a massive gray bird perched atop a small spruce, the phantom of the north – a **Great Gray Owl!** After admiring it for a few minutes we watched as it dropped without a sound and faded back into the forest. A fantastic end to the day we were happy to head back to Duluth. There was still one more surprise left for us however– a **Northern Goshawk** rocketing across the road and disappearing in a flash.

The following morning, we set off for the vast Superior National Forest that lies between Duluth and the Ontario border. Overnight the mercury had dipped well below zero and as the sun rose over the expansive tracts of forest the temperature had dipped to breath-catching -18 F. Wanting to experience these ridiculous temperatures first hand, the more foolhardy of us hopped out of the vehicle for a few minutes to stroll through the silent forest, snow squeaking under our boots. The birds were evidently less eager to venture around in this frigid landscape and all was quiet except for a few **Canada Jays** and **Black-capped Chickadees**. Despite this it was a beautiful clear morning and every



*Northern Hawk Owl is a speedy diurnal predator that plans ahead by caching prey for the lean times.*

tree was coated in a gleaming coat of hoarfrost. We soon had a warm cup of coffee and with the day slowly warming we were ready to try again for some more birds.

It took some time but we eventually located a very cooperative pair of **Boreal Chickadee**, the chocolate-dipped parids frantically feeding in the larch boughs letting out a wheezing nasal version of the familiar chickadee song. They were soon joined by a flock of **Black-capped Chickadees** and disappeared back into the woods. Further down the road we heard the light tapping and calls of a **Black-backed Woodpecker**, but it remained hidden inside the forest and the snow was too deep to enter (though not for lack of trying). With another major target in the bag we turned our sights to Grand Marais where we would be spending the night. After a rather uneventful afternoon, we had dinner at a local brewery where some hearty food and maybe a beer or two got us ready to go out seeking the northern lights. As we cruised up the Gunflint Trail, the thermometer read a balmy -2 and with all our winter gear it felt pleasant in the winter night air. Far on the northern horizon we could see a bright glow even though there were no cities there. The aurora sat just below the horizon illuminating the distant sky while above us an inky black night sky was dotted with one of the most brilliantly starry skies any of us had ever seen. After admiring the cosmic scene above us we returned to Grand Marais where a **Red Fox** crossing the road welcomed us back to town for the night.



*Grand Marais Harbor hosts some stark and spectacular winter scenery. (Photo by PJ Wilkerson)*

winter. From town we headed back up the Gunflint Trail in search of winter finches. Earlier that morning a plow truck had passed and spread sand on the road much to the delight of both us and numerous finches! We watched as hundreds of **Pine Siskins** and **American Goldfinches** were joined by dozens of **Purple Finches**, **Red**, and **White-winged Crossbills** as they dropped to the road to gather grit for their crops. After admiring these rose, raspberry and crimson bird gleaming warmly on the blue-tinged snow we headed back to Grand Marais and down to Duluth.

With our morning birding so close and the sun rising so late we took our time getting started in the morning. After breakfast we drove a few minutes out to the Grand Marais Harbor which was a rolling and shifting mass of ice. In the few spots of open water a few **Common Goldeneye** and a single **Bufflehead** paddled in water that was a good 40 degrees warmer than the air – but undoubtedly still frigid despite the steam rising off it. In town we searched the dozens of Rowan trees dotted in bright red berries for any frugivores that may have taken interest. While there were dozens of **American Robins** and **Cedar Waxwings** feeding eagerly in the area, plentiful food up north seems to have kept any Bohemian Waxwings from settling in town for the



*White-winged Crossbills are a delightful rosy color, especially against the blue snow.*



*Red Crossbills are nomadic winter wanderers so running into them is always a nice surprise.*

The drive passed rather quickly, though we made a stop to spend some time with a **Pileated Woodpecker** perched on a small twig, eating berries and shockingly a **Wilson's Snipe** shot across the road in front of us. Evidently only the second winter record for this corner of Minnesota, it must have found some open ground and water nearby where it could overwinter.

Reaching Duluth we passed the towering iron ore docks and shipping yards and crossed a soaring bridge over the St. Louis River before descending into the small city of Superior Wisconsin. Cruising past shopping centers and tightly packed residences, it seemed an unlikely place to find our next target. We turned in past a small fairground to the Richard I Bong Airport – a small runway for commuter planes and small aircraft – and almost immediately saw a pile of snow balanced precariously on an antenna. Once again, it turned out to not be a pile of snow but a well-dressed **Snowy Owl** searching this urban approximation of tundra for prey. Few birds match the level of celebrity that Snowy Owls have gained but cigar labels and Harry Potter have nothing on seeing the real thing. We watched this serene predator sitting statuesque, unperturbed by the coming and goings of small planes, until it began to grow dark and we took our leave.

Our final full day of birding saw us returning for another round at Sax Zim Bog, hoping to revisit some of the earlier highlights and perhaps pick up a few new birds on the way. After cruising a few back roads in search of Bohemian Waxwings, we headed into the bog proper via the open fields on the south end. A few woolly cattle chewed their cud around a trough and the

small patch of bare earth had attracted a few enterprising **Black-billed Magpies**. While observing these piebald, oil-slick iridescent corvids we noticed a few large brown lumps sitting in stark contrast with the snowy fields behind. Setting up the scope we all enjoyed long views of a trio of **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, stock still in the open. During some winters these birds fall prey to Snowy Owls but with relatively few around this winter they sat brazenly, unconcerned with how obvious they were.

At one of the bogs many well-maintained feeding stations we saw a flock of large finches flying into the trees as we approached. Upon exiting the van we heard the ringing, clear calls of **Evening Grosbeaks** and soon found a group of these jet and saffron megafinches happily hopping through the aspens. Less than a mile down the road we came to a quick stop again as a pair of **Ruffed Grouse** sat in a dogwood a few feet off the ground, nipping at buds. At the beginning of the trip we had sadly found a Ruffed Grouse that had been struck by a car and so we were all thrilled to see a pair alive and well. Having picked up a few lifers for the whole group we headed to lunch for some of the locally-famous wings at the Thirsty Moose (somehow beating out Ruffed and Sharp-tailed Grouse for our favorite galliform of the day).

The rest of the day passed quickly as we revisited **Northern Hawk Owl**, **Northern Shrike** and some other past favorites. We had a **Barred Owl** briefly cross the road in front of us landing just inside the dense



*Dogwood buds are an important winter food source for Ruffed Grouse. (Photo by PJ Wilkerson)*

forest. While we could hear birds mobbing the unwelcome predator, we only caught a glimpse of the owl as it disappeared further into the forest and fully out of sight. Leaving the bog we were treated to much longer looks at a **North American Porcupine**, actively stripping bark from a small larch. With one more fantastic boreal animal in the bag, we headed back to Duluth for a final dinner and some fond farewells.

While most of the group had early morning flights the following day, a few of us were in town until the afternoon and took advantage of the last morning to go search the harbor for any lingering waterbirds. There was little open water in the harbor itself but a small patch at the mouth of the St. Louis River held some nice surprises. Aside from the small flocks of **Common Goldeneye** and **Bufflehead** there were a few **Herring Gulls** loafing out on the ice and among them were several **Glaucous** and a single **Iceland Gull**. The air was nearly 50 degrees warmer than it had been two days ago and light snow was once again falling as we bid farewell to Duluth and returned up the hill to the airport. It had been a wonderful five days of birding highlighted by great company, good food, spectacular scenery and of course cripplingly good looks at boreal birds.



*The White-tailed Deer in Minnesota are woolier than their southern relatives. (Photo by PJ Wilkerson)*

**BIRD LIST**

The taxonomy of the bird list follows eBird/Clements (available here: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/clementschecklist/download/>)

(H) indicates a species that was HEARD only.  
 (G) indicates a species recorded by the GUIDE ONLY.

<b>Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)</b>	
<b>Mallard</b>	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
<b>American Black Duck</b>	<i>Anas rubripes</i>
<b>Bufflehead</b>	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>
<b>Common Goldeneye</b>	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
<b>Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and</b>	

<b>Allies)</b>	
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
<b>Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)</b>	
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
<b>Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)</b>	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus smithsonianus</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>
<b>Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)</b>	
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis atricapillus</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis borealis</i>
<b>Scolopacidae (Shorebirds)</b>	
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>
<b>Strigidae (Owls)</b>	
Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>
Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>
Great Gray Owl	<i>Strix nebulosi</i>
<b>Picidae (Woodpeckers)</b>	
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>
Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
<b>Laniidae (Shrikes)</b>	
Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
<b>Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)</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>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
<b>Alaudidae (Larks)</b>	
Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
<b>Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)</b>	
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>
<b>Sittidae (Nuthatches)</b>	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
<b>Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)</b>	
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
<b>Sturnidae (Starlings)</b>	
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
<b>Bombycillidae (Waxwings)</b>	
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
<b>Emberizidae (New World Buntings and Sparrows)</b>	
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
<b>Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)</b>	
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
Purple Finch	<i>Haemorhous purpureus purpureus</i>
White-winged Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus pinus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
<b>Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)</b>	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
<b>Additional species</b>	
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
North American Porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>



Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>