



A [Tropical Birding](#) custom BIRDING tour

CANADA: Winter Owls and Boreal Birding

26th February - 1st March 2017



We traveled to the outskirts of **Montreal** to fulfill our principal birding objective, getting great looks at the "Gray Ghost": **Great Gray Owl**

Tour Leaders: Sam Woods (Report and all photos by Sam Woods) and Tom Hince

INTRODUCTION

This short custom tour was set up at the last minute (in early February), when news came through of fair numbers of **Great Gray Owls** around at that time in Ontario. The person, for whom this was arranged, had the main objective of finding this so-called "Phantom of the North". For this tour we were accompanied by Tom Hince, who has many years under his belt chasing owls and boreal birds of all sorts throughout Canada, and so was the perfect companion, with his owl-finding skills and vast network of local connections, ideally suited for us on this "owl quest". The tour started and ended in Toronto in Ontario, but we also ventured into Ottawa and Montreal too, to allow us to cast a wide net in which to search, where needed. Our Great Gray Owl quest was entirely successful (eventually), with us being able to spend ages staring at this boreal beast, as it sat nonchalantly above us. We had the bird all to ourselves for most of the time, and we didn't need to use the controversial method of baiting with mice that some others choose to do. The tour was designed with a little flexibility, and so, once we had this marquee species in the bag, we opted to visit **Algonquin Provincial Park**, which held some notable new species for the participant John, and was somewhere he had wanted to see all the same, birds or not, for it is one of Canada's most revered parks. This yielded our most productive day's birding, with **Evening and Pine Grosbeaks**, **White-winged and Red Crossbills**, **Boreal Chickadee**, **Black-backed Woodpecker**, and even a confiding **American "Pine" Marten** seen during an immensely enjoyable day there. In the end, we racked up 4 species of owls, and added a suite of cool boreal winter birds with it, like **Bohemian Waxwing** and **Gray Jay**, to complete a really gratifying short venture into the beautiful boreal north.



Snowy Owls were typically straightforward to find in the Ottawa region

Tour Summary

Day 1 (26th Feb.) Toronto to Ottawa

A short search at a known spot for *saw-whet owl* near **Toronto** was our starting point, but the owl had unfortunately likely moved on, (a short, unexpected spring spell of temperatures for three consecutive days immediately prior to our arrival had caused an early, unseasonal clear out of some of the hardier boreal birds). But, we also stopped off at a coastal site that had long been hosting a wandering male **King Eider**, which was quickly found on arrival. The same site also held some sharp winter plumage male **Long-tailed Ducks**, several **Red-necked Grebes**, and a **Red-breasted Merganser** too, alongside the more abundant **Common Mergansers** there.

By the afternoon, we had moved northeast to the outskirts of **Ottawa**, where a *Gyr Falcon* had been frequenting the area around *Appleton Side Road* the day before, but had since vanished and had unfortunately not been seen all daylong. However, our first owl of the trip more than compensated us for our visit to this site, as a magnificent **Snowy Owl** (photo page before) was seen, bathed in the unseasonal warm afternoon sun. The bird had clearly become accustomed to being admired at close quarters, as we were among a small huddle standing right underneath it, while it squinted in the sun, and barely gave us a glance throughout our time in its imposing presence. We closed out the day on the outskirts of the city of **Ottawa**, trying for our main target species – *Great Gray Owl* – with other like-minded folks, all of which failed to find it that afternoon. A **Northern Shrike** though was present in the area, and provided another new boreal species for John. During the afternoon we also encountered three different **American Porcupines** curled up in the treetops, which were the only ones seen during this brief Canadian foray.



Barred Owl Ottawa

Day 2 (27th Feb.) Montreal and Ottawa

The clear goal of this day was to find a *Great Gray Owl*, with our first site the day before having left us empty-handed, and our nerves a little frayed. While some other local birders checked some other recent reports, we headed into the French Canadian province of **Quebec**, and checked a place where a recent pair had been regularly seen in **Parc National de Plaisance**. The park was wonderfully bereft of people, but sadly so too for owls, which appeared to have left the site, likely following that unusually warm period just before the tour. Similarly, another local birder, having checked another site nearer *Ottawa*, had not found the usual birds present there either! A smart **Rough-legged Hawk** was seen on site, and ended up being one of five birds seen during the morning, providing a rich vein of form for the species.

We clearly needed to change tack, and so we pointed the car north and headed into the **Montreal** region, where another (supposedly reliable) *Great Gray Owl* had been seen up until at least three days before our visit. On arrival at this seemingly unremarkable site, a single vehicle parked alongside a deserted farm road, alongside an inauspicious looking wooded patch, alerted us to the possibility that we were not the only ones seeking the “Phantom of the North” that day. However, the occupants of the car were nowhere to be seen, and the nearby wood seemed empty of owls too! We walked the edge of the wood, and quickly located both the pair of birders present, and a commanding ashen object perched conspicuously above them: **Great – Gray – Owl** (photo below) John and looked at it through the ‘scope in our hurried excitement, but then felt rather silly, when it then allowed us to walk right up to it, where it remained rooted to the same perch until we walked away, considerably happier than when we had arrived. The other birders soon left and John and I were alone with his main quarry, which fulfilled the substantial promise that this master owl offered. It literally stands as one of the World’s most impressive owls, being one of the largest due to its sizeable feathered bulk, and also ranks as one of the best birds in the world, period.



At the end of the afternoon we visited *Fletcher Wildlife Garden in Ottawa*, where a *saw-whet owl* had been the day before, but was not present in the very same cedar tree, or any surrounding ones we checked that day. Signs of the abnormally early spring continued with several male **Red-winged Blackbirds** in full song on site. Our owl search did produce two separate **Barred Owls** (photo page 3), both of which gave great looks in the late afternoon sun, as they snoozed in the trees overhead.



One of the main motivations for visiting *Algonquin* was a chance at **Evening Grosbeak**; with some 170 seen in a single morning, we accomplished that target with room to spare!

Day 3 (28th Feb.) Algonquin Provincial Park

Having scored big with the *Great Gray Owl* the day before, our time was now rather more relaxed, and with John being keen to experience the World famous *Algonquin Provincial Park*, we spent most of the day there, (instead of prowling for more owls elsewhere). This turned out to be an inspired decision, as it was a simply magical day, from start to finish. The weather was good throughout, and the birding could not have been better, with almost all of the key birds of the area seen. As usual, we started out with a *Tim Hortons* breakfast (we were in Canada, after all, where this chain is virtually a religion!); and then stopped in the rural town of Whitney, just outside the park. Tom had singled out this village, as there are sometimes berries around town that host the much-wanted **Bohemian Waxwing** (photo page 8). Almost immediately after alighting from the vehicle, one had been located by sound, and was soon after watched at eye level plucking berries from a stunted tree in a small garden. The views were superb, though strangely there seemed to be only one present, oddly for this highly gregarious, and irruptive, species. The sounds of one of John's other singled out targets, **Evening Grosbeak**, was also heard, and some distant views in the treetops were had of twenty or so birds. However, these lofty looks were very soon to be completely upstaged, once we entered into the park...Also during this short stop around town, two female **Pine Grosbeaks** were also located, sitting at the apex of a nearby spruce. We could not have hoped for a better start. Shortly after, we entered the provincial park, and flushed a couple of ruddy shapes off of the middle of the road. Suspecting what they might be, we halted the car and waited. Sure enough, a few minutes later a few **Red Crossbills** (photo page 8), returned to the road, and seen perched in the surrounding trees; yet another stated target bird for the day! By 9am, we had arrived at the park's centerpiece, the visitor center, which at this time of year is run on a skeleton staff. However, the feeders were still well stocked, and were also well attended by a constant stream of hungry birds. Most notable among them was a mobile, hyperactive flock of 150+ **Evening Grosbeaks** (photo above) many of which gave stunning views from the center's balcony. These numbers were unusual

in recent times, and were being talked of as something of an 80s-style revival! We were totally transfixed by these crippling birds for some time, but were then drawn away, first when a **Ruffed Grouse** attempted to creep past unnoticed, and then again, once a salmon pink **White-winged Crossbill** alighted in the trees behind the feeders. These were merely the first of many of these irruptive birds seen through the day, which included some flocks in excess of 40 birds.



This **American (Pine) Marten** was hanging around the yurts at the *Mew Lake campground*

The bird tables not only attracted birds, but birders too, and a chance encounter with Ottawa birder Geoff Carpenter alerted us to a *Boreal Chickadee* having been seen that morning at a nearby forest feeder, and so, (after a prolonged photo shoot with the *grosbeaks*), we headed in the direction of that particular section of forest. The suet feeder was busy with birds, **Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers** often sharing the same trees, and ultra confiding **Black-capped Chickadees** and **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, but no *Boreal Chickadee*. Vowing to return, we set off for *Mew Lake*, as other news reached us of an **American (Pine) Marten** (photo above) hanging around the modern-style yurts in the campground. Although we were informed they were regular at the time, we did not expect to find one within ten minutes of being in the area! It scampered up a tree, stared at us, then rushed back down the trunk and disappeared below the nearest yurt, where it would peer up at us intermittently. Nearing lunchtime, we returned to the forest feeder, and ate our

(Tim Hortons) field lunch there, waiting for the arrival of the *Boreal Chickadee*, which subsequently did not appear at all! However, following another chance encounter with a birding group, we were walked a short distance into the forest where a fantastic **Black-backed Woodpecker** was waiting, shinning up the trunk of a tall spruce! After taking lunch, we visited another area of the park, the infamous *Opeongo Road*. Once again, we were hoping for *Boreal Chickadee*, which (*once again*) eluded us, but we had some great looks at the ever-tame **Gray Jay** (*below*) and were regularly stalked by a small party of **Black-capped Chickadees** and a very tame **Red-breasted Nuthatch** (*photo page 9*). Best of all though, was a second **Black-backed Woodpecker** for the day. We could not resist one, final, check of the forest feeder near *Spruce Bog*, where a **Boreal Chickadee** (*photo page 9*) was initially located inside the forest nearby, before making its way to the feeder, to cap off a great day within the beautiful boreal forests of *Algonquin*.



Gray Jays are a famously tame boreal bird!

Day 4 (1st March) Thickson's Woods, Whitby to Toronto/Departure

For our final morning we tried to find a *fourth* owl; and succeeded, but not the one we were especially hoping for! We visited **Thickson's Woods**, near Whitby in southern Ontario, where just two days earlier a *Northern Saw-whet Owl* was present. We had the specific details of the exact tree it had been in, but found the tree to be bare of any birds at all. We searched the park again and again, but could not locate that inconspicuous species of owl, before time ran out with our departing flights looming ever closer on the horizon. However, a fourth owl species in four days was seen, with a **Long-eared Owl** tucked up against the trunk of a tall spruce tree, thanks to Tom's sharp eyesight; a nice way to round out a gripping tour of the "Great White North".



This **Red Crossbill** came down to the road in *Algonquin Provincial Park*



This lonely **Bohemian Waxwing** was seen just outside the park at *Algonquin*



Boreal Chickadee and **Red-breasted Nuthatch** (both *Algonquin Provincial Park*)





The **Evening Grosbeaks** of *Algonquin*



BIRDS:

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*
Trumpeter Swan *Cygnus buccinator*
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*
Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*
Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*
King Eider *Somateria spectabilis*
Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*
Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*
Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*
Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii*
Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*
Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus*
Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*
Iceland Gull *Larus glaucoides*
Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*
Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*
Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*
Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*
Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*
Barred Owl *Strix varia*
Great Gray Owl *Strix nebulosa*
Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*
Downy Woodpecker *Picoides pubescens*
Hairy Woodpecker *Picoides villosus*
Black-backed Woodpecker *Picoides arcticus*
Pileated Woodpecker *Dryocopus pileatus*
Northern Shrike *Lanius excubitor*
Gray Jay *Perisoreus canadensis*
Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*
American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*
Common Raven *Corvus corax*
Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*
Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus*
Boreal Chickadee *Poecile hudsonicus*
Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*
White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*
American Robin *Turdus migratorius*

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*
Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*
Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*
American Tree Sparrow *Spizelloides arborea*
Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*
Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*
Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*
Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator*
House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*
Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*
White-winged Crossbill *Loxia leucoptera*
Common Redpoll *Acanthis flammea*
Pine Siskin *Spinus pinus*
American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis*
Evening Grosbeak *Coccothraustes vespertinus*

MAMMALS:

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*
American Marten *Martes americana*
White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus*
North American Porcupine *Erethizon dorsatum*
Eastern Gray Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*
American Red Squirrel *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*

