

Birding Ecotours



USA – MINNESOTA: SET DEPARTURE TOUR REPORT

12 – 17 JANUARY 2023

By Jacob Roalef



The special American Three-toed Woodpecker treated us to amazing looks as it peeled bark!

Overview

This six-day set departure tour of Minnesota began in Duluth on the 12th of January 2023 and visited a variety of fantastic birding locations including Sax-Zim Bog, Lake Superior shoreline, Canal Park, Park Point, Winterberry Bog, Grand Marais Harbor, and the Gun Flint Trail. The group also enjoyed a few drives along the scenic North Shore Highway 61, multiple gorgeous sunsets, and an exploration of the Boreal Forest.

This tour connected with many of our target bird species, giving us a high-quality trip list for our six days in the region. Avian highlights included **Great Grey** and **Snowy Owls**, **Northern Hawk-Owl**, **Evening** and **Pine Grosbeaks**, **Common Redpoll**, **Iceland** and **Glaucous Gulls**, **Canada Jay**, **Spruce Grouse**, **Great Grey Shrike**, **Bald Eagle**, **American Three-toed Woodpecker**, **Black-billed Magpie**, and **Bohemian Waxwing**. In addition to these great species, we noted two rarities for the region, namely **Trumpeter Swan** and **Townsend's Solitaire**.

A total of 40 bird species were seen, along with a few mammals including **Red** and **Eastern Grey Squirrels** and **White-tailed Deer**. Full bird and mammal checklists can be found at the end of the report.



An amazing sunset over the mighty Lake Superior.

Detailed Report

Day 1, 12th January 2023. Arrival and birding Duluth and Lake Superior

All participants arrived in Duluth by midday and after checking into the hotel and lunch, we headed out for some afternoon birding in the cold. Our first stop was along Lake Superior at Canal Park. The water was open but not many birds were around. We checked off our first few species of the trip like **Bald Eagle**, **American Crow**, and **American Herring Gull**. A young **Iceland Gull** flew overhead for a moment, then we loaded back into the van to move on to Park Point. Birding was a bit slow until we came across fantastic views of a **Great Grey (Northern) Shrike** as it flew across the road and perched in a small tree. From here we headed off across the state line into Wisconsin where we drove some loops around the Richard Bong Airport. Our scanning paid off as we spotted a gorgeous **Snowy Owl** on top of a light fixture and had some excellent scope views. We still had some time before dinner, so we headed off to follow up on a recent rare bird report in Duluth close to the hotel. Amazingly, it took us about 30 seconds to spot the **Townsend's Solitaire** feasting on berries. It had been hanging out in this neighborhood for a week or two. What an excellent pickup for the trip and it was a lifer for some. After an amazing first day we went for dinner and then a good night's sleep.



This Townsend's Solitaire was certainly an unexpected species for the trip!

Day 2, 13th January 2023. Sax-Zim Bog

We departed the hotel in the cold, pre-dawn darkness and headed north towards the fabulous birding of Sax-Zim Bog. The morning was spent cruising up and down various hotspots searching for owls that might still be out after a night of hunting. Unfortunately, this didn't turn up much

besides our first **Northern (Common) Raven** and **Canada Jay**. We pulled into the visitor center parking lot and enjoyed the feeders here, which held a large flock of **Evening Grosbeaks**, a cold-looking **White-throated Sparrow**, and a few **American Goldfinches**. There were also both **Hairy** and **Downy Woodpeckers** nearby which allowed us time to study the differences in size and proportion. From here we ventured down the snowy trail named Grey Jay Way. It was an incredibly peaceful and beautiful morning with the serenity of snow and evergreen trees. At the end of the trail, we came up to a few feeders where we enjoyed a **Boreal Chickadee** – a fantastic sighting and a lifer for some – amongst the numerous **Black-capped Chickadees**. We headed to lunch and thawed out a bit. Along the way, we picked up **Wild Turkey** and a roaming flock of **Common Redpolls** that just would not sit still.

After lunch, we slowly cruised up and down the many roads of the bog and kept our eyes peeled for anything good. Our route was mostly determined by the various feeding stations set up on the different roads and we enjoyed a few new species for the day which included **Pine Grosbeak**, **Blue Jay**, and **Red-breasted Nuthatch**. It was also fun to watch the **Red Squirrels** compete with the birds for any peanut butter and seeds they could get. As dusk approached, we looped back, searching for owls. Unfortunately, just like in the morning, we were again unsuccessful. This was nevertheless a fantastic day full of great birds and scenery. We headed back to Duluth for a tasty dinner and then the hotel to get some rest.

Day 3, 14th January 2023. More Sax-Zim Bog birding and northern forests

This morning we ventured back into the bog to explore a few new areas. First, we entered via a different southern entrance along some farmlands which netted us a pair of **Black-billed Magpies** mixed in with **American Crows**. This was about the eastern-most extent of the magpies range, so it was really great to see them here. The rest of the morning was spent on the prowl for owls. We were delighted when we spotted a **Northern Hawk-Owl** atop a very distant pine tree! We spent the next 30-40 minutes finding different vantage points and eventually had a solid view through the scope. We then made a quick stop along a side street where a small creek was open with flowing water and a long-staying **Trumpeter Swan** had been hanging out. This was another unexpected species for the trip. It was now mid-morning and we headed off to the northwest corner of the bog to visit Mary Lou's house and her special feeding station. While we didn't spot anything too exciting besides some **Wild Turkeys** and **Blue Jays**, it was nice to visit this very important birding location. From Mary Lou's we continued north, out of the bog and into some beautiful sections of the Boreal Forest. Early into our exploration, we nailed our target bird, a stunning male **American Three-toed Woodpecker**. We watched on as he quietly tapped and peeled the bark away in search of insects. As we watched, a **Northern Goshawk** zoomed by overhead, but unfortunately only a few of us managed a view and even that was mostly a glimpse.

After a delicious lunch in the city of Cook, we drove an hour south towards Sax-Zim Bog. We spent the afternoon just east of "the bog" at a quiet place with a lovely snow-covered boardwalk trail called Winterberry Bog. Here we took a few laps in this excellent woodland and saw plenty of **Hairy Woodpeckers** as well as some fabulous views of **Pine Grosbeak**. The dusk hours were spent in the van as we drove around in search of owls again but, like the previous evening, we had no luck. It was then time to head back to Duluth for another lovely dinner and a good night's rest.



*We enjoyed good views of the striking male **Evening Grosbeak**.*

Day 4, 15th January 2023. Sax-Zim Bog and the North Shore

Today we decided to head back to Sax-Zim Bog for the morning in a last-ditch effort at a certain owl that we had some unfinished business with. As the sun rose we searched and searched, along with 50 other people. Time ticked by with no sign of any owls and then Jacob had a phone call from a local birder with a report. We hurried over to the location only to learn that the owl was out of sight for the moment. A few minutes went by and then, majestically, the **Great Grey Owl** appeared! This beautiful bird gave us some very fine views and even a flight or two. What a perfect morning! We returned to the hotel, packed our baggage and checked out, and then continued with some more epic birding on this gorgeous day.

Next stop was the Duluth WLSSD (or the dump, for short), because no birding trip would be complete without a visit to the local waste management facility! Since it was Sunday, we weren't disturbed by large waste trucks coming and going. The place was loaded with birds foraging through the scraps so we spent some time here and picked through the gulls. We picked up excellent views of both **Iceland** and **Glaucous Gulls** in different plumage states amongst the many **American Herring Gulls**. In addition to the gulls, there were at least a half dozen **Bald Eagles** perched nearby as they watched over the dump, and a group of **American Robins** picking through some exposed ground. After a proper study, we loaded up and drove along the scenic Northshore Highway 61. A quick stop picked up **Mallard** for our list, before we made it to the town of Two Harbors for another tasty lunch. The next hour and a half were spent enjoying the scenery of the mighty Lake Superior before arriving at our destination, Grand Marais, in the mid-afternoon. Clouds had begun rolling in and the light was not ideal, but we were determined and we drove through the neighborhoods searching for our target species. Thankfully it didn't take too long before we were enjoying a flock of about 25 **Bohemian Waxwings**! We still had time for a quick scan of Lake Superior, which resulted in **Common Goldeneye** and **Long-tailed Duck**, as well as

a stunning sunset over the water. This was a great cap to a great day, finished off with a delicious dinner.



*Everyone was ecstatic to finally see **Great Grey Owl** (photo Jim Sculetti).*

Day 5, 16th January 2023. Gunflint Trail and Grand Marais

After a tasty breakfast at the hotel, we loaded up and ventured out to the Gunflint Trail, a 57-mile scenic roadway in far northern Minnesota. As the sun rose, we began our climb up the road, away from the lake and into pristine forests. Things were slow with a few **Northern** (Common) **Ravens** and a lone **Canada Jay**. After about an hour we pulled off, down a snow-covered side road, and adventured in the quietness of the trees and snow. We crept along slowly but no birds were to be seen. Eventually we found a good place to turn around, which was literally a group effort, and headed back out. As we approached the end, a grouse shot off the edge of the road into the trees. We approached, got out and managed to spot four **Spruce Grouse**! They were all female and were very calm, foraging and eating pine needles. We had amazing views of this very difficult-to-find species. A few **Black-capped Chickadees** called nearby while we watched the grouse. As we said goodbye to the grouse and made it back to the main road, we spotted a flock of **Pine Siskins**, another new species for the trip. They came down to the exposed road to pick for grit and any food they could find.

We continued along the road until we reached a general store and had a restroom break on Poplar Lake. The owners kindly allowed us to walk on the frozen lake and explore the property behind the store. It is always neat walking out onto the snow-covered ice, and we even managed a few birds including **Pine Grosbeak**, **Common Redpoll**, and **Blue Jay**. Snow began falling and the forecast was looking grim for the afternoon, so we decided to begin our descent of the Gunflint Trail and head back towards Grand Marais. Along the drive a **Pileated Woodpecker** flew out from

the trees and flew in front of the van for a while before disappearing just as quickly. By the time we arrived back in town the snow and ice were falling hard so we decided to have lunch in town. Unfortunately, the weather didn't clear and we decided that birding in these conditions would be miserable, so we agreed on an afternoon off to enjoy the fantastic views of Lake Superior from the hotel. Later we had a delicious local meal, our final dinner together. What an adventure we had experienced in the snowy wilderness of northern Minnesota.



*We all enjoyed fantastic views of this **Spruce Grouse** foraging in the treetops.*

Day 6, 17th January 2023. Departure day

On our final morning together we enjoyed a hearty breakfast together before loading up the van and driving south along the Lake Superior shoreline to Duluth. Along the way we discussed our favorite moments and species of the trip. Everyone agreed that the top five species of the trip were **Great Grey Owl, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse, Northern Hawk-Owl,** and **Snowy Owl**. On arrival at the airport, we all said our goodbyes, wrapping up another amazing trip to the winter wonderland of Minnesota.

Bird List - Following IOC (13.1)

Birds 'heard only' are marked with (H) after the common name, all other species were seen. Species seen only on the pre-trip day of this trip are marked with (+) after the common name.

The following notation after species names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: CE = Critically Endangered, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)	
Trumpeter Swan	<i>Cygnus buccinator</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Long-tailed Duck – VU	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies (Phasianidae)	
Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)	
American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)	
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Snowy Owl – VU	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>
Northern Hawk-Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>
Great Grey Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates villosus</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Great Grey (Northern) Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
Crows, Jays, and Magpies (Corvidae)	
Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
American (Black-billed) Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Northern (Common) Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice (Paridae)	
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>
Nuthatches (Sittidae)	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>
Starlings (Sturnidae)	
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)	
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
Townsend's Solitaire	<i>Myadestes townsendi</i>
Waxwings (Bombycillidae)	
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>
Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)	
Evening Grosbeak – VU	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
Old World Sparrows (Passeridae)	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
New World Sparrows (Passerellidae)	
White-throated Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>
Total Seen	40

Mammal List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Sciuridae (Squirrels and Allies)	
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
Cervidae (Deer)	
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
Total	3