

Birding Ecotours



USA – MINNESOTA: SET DEPARTURE BIRDING TRIP REPORT

22-27 JANUARY 2024

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The majestic Great Grey Owl is always a top highlight of this trip!

Overview

This year's six-day trip commenced in Duluth, Minnesota on the 22nd of January 2024, and concluded there on the 27th of January 2024. Unlike most trips, almost all the trip participants arrived ahead of time, allowing for extra birding time on the 22nd. Over the course of the tour, we visited several renowned birding locations, including Sax-Zim Bog, Winterberry Bog, Superior National Forest, and Grand Marais Harbor. We also visited some new locations for the tour including Bowen Lodge and the quiet town of Ely.

Fortunately, this tour was able to locate several of the amazing target birds, yielding a list of very high-quality species despite the low numbers in the region. Avian highlights included **Great Grey Owl**, **Northern Hawk-Owl**, **Barred Owl**, **Evening** and **Pine Grosbeaks**, **Common Redpoll**, **Glaucous Gull**, **Long-tailed Duck**, **Canada Jay**, **Ruffed Grouse**, **Black-billed Magpie**, **Pileated Woodpecker**, **Red Crossbill**, **Snow Bunting**, and a breathtaking experience with **Bohemian Waxwing** and **Townsend's Solitaire**. A total of 49 bird species were recorded, along with a few great mammals, including **Canada Lynx**, **Red Squirrel**, and **White-tailed Deer**. The complete trip list, both birds and mammals, can be found below.



*This **Barred Owl** gave some incredible views and even showed off its impressive talon to us.*

Detailed Report

Day 1, 22nd January 2024. Sax-Zim Bog

Unlike most years, many of the participants arrived in Duluth the day before the trip began. Unfortunately, Ira and Ramona had some issues with their arrival the previous evening, but they were able to take the flight the following day from Minneapolis to Duluth. After dropping off their gear and changing, the group set off for our first stop: Sax-Zim Bog. We arrived at Byrne's Greenhouse (along Highway 7) and were immediately greeted with a very cooperative **Northern Hawk-Owl!** We loaded back into the van and headed down Admiral Road — making a quick stop to see our first **Canada Jay** of the trip before arriving at the feeder station. Within the first five minutes, a **Boreal Chickadee** made a fast appearance along with several other species, including **Hairy** and **Downy Woodpeckers**, **Common Redpolls**, and **Black-capped Chickadees**. By noon, most of us were hungry, so we headed to lunch (Wilbert's Cafe), but along the way, we found a **Great Grey** (Northern) **Shrike** perched high up in a pine along the road.



Northern Hawk-Owl is often seen perched at the apex of an evergreen.

After lunch, we headed to Winterberry Bog and walked along the snow-laden boardwalk. There, we had great experiences with our first **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, **Blue Jays**, and **American Goldfinches** of the trip, and redpolls once again offered spectacular views. Following our walk, we headed west along Arkola Road and hung out at the "hidden feeders," where another **Boreal Chickadee** quickly moved through, along with adorable **Red Squirrels**. After a while, the cold began to set in, so we headed down Owl Avenue to the Sax-Zim Bog Visitor Center, where we spent time watching the **Common Redpolls** playing in the snow at close range. We then returned to Arkola Road, where six **Ruffed Grouse** were perched high in a leafless tree. As we continued

along the road, BOOM — a **Barred Owl** nicely sat out in the open, allowing fantastic looks and photo opportunities. Slowly cruising down Highway 7 in the low light, we stumbled across our first gentle giant — the **Great Grey Owl**. Perched down the track, we watched this magnificent beauty for about 15 minutes before disappearing into the bog's wooded depths. After a spectacular start to the trip, we drove back to Duluth for a tasty dinner before heading back to the hotel for some much-needed rest.



Great Grey (Northern) Shrike was seen on several days throughout Sax-Zim Bog.

Day 2, 23rd January 2024. More Sax-Zim Bog and the Duluth Waterfront

We departed bright and early for our first morning hours at Sax-Zim Bog. To begin the day, we returned to the area where we had seen the **Great Grey Owl** the previous evening. Once again, the bird sat atop a snag about 300 feet (~100 meters) down the track. We spent about 45 minutes watching the owl and waiting for it to come closer, but as the day progressed, it opted to head back into its forested home. A fast-flying **Snow Bunting** rattled as we loaded back into the van. We continued along Highway 7 and found the same **Northern Hawk-Owl** perched on a distant willow. We spent the next 25 minutes watching the owl and were delighted to witness a **Great Grey (Northern) Shrike** happily sitting on top of a willow. We continued down Admiral Road again and waited an hour, watching the northerly feeder station. Patiently waiting, we enjoyed the local specials before a pair of **Boreal Chickadees** joined the feeding frenzy along with a small family group of highly cooperative **Canada Jays**.

Excited by our success, we headed northwest towards the infamous "Mary Lou's Feeders." On the drive, we were surprised to find a nice raft of **Wild Turkeys!** Upon arrival at Mary Lou's, we were delighted to find several **Evening Grosbeaks** visiting the feeders, later joined by a group of

30 individuals. We were also excited to see our first **Purple Finches** and **Pine Siskins** of the trip feeding on the sunflower seeds.

By noon, we began heading south back towards Duluth for the afternoon. But first, we slowly made our way through the Meadowlands and turned up a single, **Black-billed Magpie**. It was quite distant, however, and only a few group members could get on it, leaving us desiring better looks. Driving back to Duluth, we stopped for lunch before continuing to the Lake Superior waterfront. We stopped at Canal Park, where we encountered our first **American Herring Gulls** and **Mallards** of the trip. Walking along the ice-covered lake — a large flock of **Common Goldeneye** whizzed by before landing in the only open water in the harbor, allowing for stunning views at close range. Continuing towards the van, WHAM — a **Merlin** carrying a House Sparrow zoomed by the group and landed in a nearby tree. The whole group marveled as we watched it pull the sparrow apart. It was gruesome but amazing to witness.



Male and female Evening Grosbeaks were seen well at a feeder station.

Continuing along the waterfront, we arrived at Park Point and watched the ice fishermen in their tents on the frozen harbor. Walking up the boardwalk toward the beach, we began scoping Lake Superior, and a female **Long-tailed Duck** flew by and headed west. Unfortunately, only a few could get on the bird, but as we were driving to our final location of the day, we saw a large flock of **Mallards** clustered together on the frozen lake, joined by several **American Black Ducks** and a **Mallard x American Black Duck** hybrid. Arriving at our final location for the day, in fading light, we arrived at Pier B and scoped the large gull flock on the ice flows. Two magnificent juvenile cycle **Glaucous Gulls** sat within a large flock of **American Herring Gulls**. One was a first cycle, and the other was a third cycle, allowing for a nice comparison of different age groups. As the daylight diminished, we headed to dinner before returning to the hotel.

Day 3, 24th January 2024. Sax-Zim Bog Finale and Bowen Lodge

Leaving the hotel a bit earlier than the previous few days, we headed north towards Sax-Zim Bog for our final morning there. After a 40-minute drive from Duluth, we again headed up Highway 7 and located the **Great Grey Owl** in its usual spot perched atop a snag about 300 feet (~100 meters) down the track. It took off early this morning into the woods and did not offer the group desired views. Driving down McDavitt Road, we stumbled upon our long-awaited nemesis: **Black-billed Magpie**. It had perched in an open location, allowing for good views of this sleek and majestic corvid. After a successful magpie experience, we headed down Arkola Road and attempted to get one last experience with the deep boreal species. After watching the Arkola Feeders for about half an hour, a male **Pine Grosbeak** dropped into the feeders and was later joined by a female.

We watched the pair feed on sunflower seeds for nearly ten minutes before returning to the bog. Driving down Owl Avenue on our way to the bathrooms at the visitor center, we stumbled upon what we had been waiting for the entire trip up to this point, a **Great Grey Owl** at point-blank range. The grey ghost of the boreal forests peacefully sat in a birch tree, carefully watching, and listening to its surroundings. A flutter — bam! The owl quietly departed its perch and pounced on a vole below the tree where it was sitting. Sitting in the snow, it downed the vole in one go before it began walking out into the open on the ground, in its snowy environment. It took off and, just like that, disappeared into the bog as if nothing had happened, leaving the group utterly speechless. Struggling to comprehend fully what we had just witnessed, we continued to the Sax-Zim Bog Visitor Center for a quick look at the feeders before heading west.



This Grey-crowned Rosy Finch was a true rarity for the region!

We then began the long drive to Itasca County to search for a reported, **Grey-crowned Rosy Finch**. After an hour-and-a-half-long drive, we arrived at our destination, Bowen Lodge (Lake Winnibigoshish). Waiting patiently in the cold, watching the local **Hairy Woodpeckers** feed on the sunflower seeds, a **Red-bellied Woodpecker** dropped into the feeders. Nearly an hour later, in 24°F (-4°C) temperatures, the **Grey-crowned Rosy Finch** dropped down from the adjacent Poplar Tree and landed on the seed feeder, allowing for spectacular views at close range. Admiring the rosy finch until it left the feeder, we turned east and began the trek back toward Sax-Zim Bog.

Halfway through the drive, we made a stop for lunch in Deer Park and a stop to take a photo along the headwaters of the Mississippi River. We arrived at Mary Lou's Feeders in the hopes of relocating some of the same species we had seen the previous day, yet we had little luck in that endeavor. We, however, found our only **Mourning Doves** of the trip, another rafter of **Wild Turkeys**, and a small herd of **White-tailed Deer**. In the fading late, we headed south along McDavitt Road, and suddenly, Debi called out, "Mammal!" We immediately backed up, and standing in the field on the north side of the road was a **Canadian Lynx**! It quickly bounded into the woods and did not allow for good looks, but its large grey body and pointed ears made its identity clear. We continued down the road and stumbled upon a beautiful **Barred Owl**, which unfortunately only allowed for fleeting views before it flew back into the depths of the wooded bog. As the daylight disappeared, we returned to Duluth for some pizza before returning to the hotel for the evening.

Day 4, 25th January 2024. Woodpecker Day! Plum Creek and Johnson Roads and Grand Marais Waterfront

Despite some less-than-ideal forecasted weather conditions, we headed north toward the Canadian border in search of woodpeckers in northern St. Louis County. We were in search of boreal-specialist woodpeckers. We arrived after an hour's drive at Plum Creek Road. The dense spruce-covered area appeared perfect for the species we had in mind, and it took us only a short time to find our first target of the day, **American Three-toed Woodpecker**. This magnificent boreal woodpecker put on quite the show, allowing the group to get fantastic looks and photos at close range. After half an hour, the woodpecker decided it was time to go, and we opted to do the same. Continuing through the boreal zone, we arrived at Johnson Road after a fast half-hour drive. A mix of living and dead spruce trees lined the snow-dusted road, and after walking half a mile down the road, we stumbled into our second target of the day, a male **Black-backed Woodpecker**. Watching it glean the trunks of the snow-covered spruces, a female joined it, and then a few minutes later, another male joined the group. Enjoying the birds at close range, we watched them for about 15 minutes before disappearing into the dense timberland. The only other bird we saw on Johnson Road was a **Northern (Common) Raven**.

Famished, we headed to the small town of Ely for lunch. But before we sat down for lunch, we found a Mountain Ash Tree with eight female **Pine Grosbeaks**! Sitting down for lunch, we enjoyed the warmth of the café before heading back out to search for trees with berries in town. Despite our best efforts, we could not find any and decided to continue. Driving about an hour down the highway towards Lake Superior, we stopped along Highway 2 and almost immediately located a mixed winter flock, which held a dozen **Red Crossbills**! Feeding on the pinecones over 50 feet (15 meters) up, we watched them pick at their meal while being serenaded by the thunderous call of a **Pileated Woodpecker**. Fifteen minutes later, the crossbills decided it was

time to move on, and we did the same. Arriving in Grand Marais near sunset, we spent the last remaining light in the harbor and were pleased to find a small raft of eight **Long-tailed Ducks** and half a dozen **Common Goldeneyes**. As the light disappeared, we headed to the hotel to check in and decompress for an hour, before heading to dinner in town for a much-needed meal. Returning to the hotel later that evening, we headed to bed fully fed and ready for another day!



*This **Black-backed Woodpecker** put on quite a show for the group.*

Day 5, 26th January 2024. Gunflint Trail and Grand Marais

Waking up for our final full day of birding with excitement, we ate breakfast at the hotel before driving up the Gunflint Trail into the Superior National Forest. Slowly working our way north, we were enchanted to find the forest: quite literally a winter wonderland. The previous day's warm temperatures had allowed the tree branches to crystallize in the night, giving the appearance of an icy utopia. Arriving at our first stop after about an hour, we slowly walked along a snow-covered forest road and witnessed the Minnesotan winter in full effect. Watching a pair of **Red-breasted Nuthatches** make their eerily loud "yenk, yenk, yenk" calls, they made their way toward us, allowing for great looks. We meticulously searched the wintery landscape and came across a small family group of **Black-capped Chickadees** and a **Downy Woodpecker**. As we headed back towards the car, it began to snow on us, emphasizing the serenity of the area.

Loading back up in the vans, we continued to head north and stopped at the Trail Center Lodge and Restaurant to see if they had their feeders up this winter; however, we learned they had yet to be put up. As a consolation prize, we walked down the path to Poplar Lake, which had frozen over, and it allowed those brave enough, to walk on it. Heading back to Grand Marais, we continued to cruise the road slowly before arriving in Grand Marais for a quick lunch. After replenishing our appetites, we headed down to the harbor and located a trio of male **Red-breasted Mergansers** just

beyond the jetty, as well as a cluster of **American Herring Gulls** on the ice. Returning to the neighborhoods we had quickly driven through the previous day, we made our way up 8th Avenue, and sitting at the very top of a poplar was a flock of over 200 **Bohemian Waxwings**.



Bohemian Waxwings decimated the berry trees in Grand Marais.

We watched as the flock would rotate from the high poplars down to the low berry tree, some even going down onto the snow. Ten minutes later, we watched as the entire flock departed. During the frenzy of the waxwing spectacle, a **Townsend's Solitaire** made a brief appearance, but fortunately, we were eventually able to track it down, a few blocks down the road and got fantastic eye-level views. Heading back down to the icy harbor, we visited the northern section, and as we pulled up, another group of over 50 **Bohemian Waxwings** were perched up in a poplar in the parking lot. They only stuck around briefly, allowing us to begin scanning north with our scopes. Mary Lou suddenly spotted a large raft of ducks on the horizon. When we brought the scopes over, the entire flock suddenly vanished. Fortunately, they resurfaced, and it turned out to be a massive flock of over 150 **Long-tailed Ducks**. They had an interesting behavioral trait that led them to simultaneously dive in a synchronous pattern, likely to feed, explaining their sudden disappearance. Unfortunately, they were quite distant and did not allow for close photography. As we continued in the harbor, we turned the corner and found a second flock of 25 **Long-tailed Ducks** at a much closer range, allowing for much better photography conditions. With a few hours of daylight remaining, we opted to head back up the Gunflint Trail and re-walk the same trail we had done earlier in the day. Despite our best efforts, we could not find anything new, and we headed back to Grand Marais as the daylight faded. We headed back to the hotel for a quick break before heading to our final dinner of the trip. Feeling satisfied, we returned to our beds and rested for our final morning.

Day 6, 27th January 2024. Departure day and final birding

Our final morning in Minnesota. After eating breakfast at our hotel in Grand Marais, it was time to depart for Duluth for our flights home. Driving back along Lake Superior, we took in the breathtaking views and headed west. We stopped in Two Harbors for gas and restrooms and were delighted to find the **Dickcissel**, which had been hanging out with the local **House Sparrow** flock. However, it took a while to re-find it, given that an immature, **Sharp-shinned Hawk** was eyeing the flock from afar. Pushing further west, we made one last attempt at the dump. We found a flock of ducks in the outflow, which held the only **Greater Scaup** of the trip among the **Mallards** and **American Black Ducks**. We continued to the composting piles and found half a dozen **Glaucous Gulls** perched atop one of the buildings with the other gulls. Before heading to the airport, we had a quick lunch break and said our goodbyes. We headed to the airport and departed with memories that are certain to last a lifetime!

Bird List - Following IOC (13.2)

Birds 'heard only' are marked with (H) after the common name, all other species were seen.

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)	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
American Black Duck	<i>Anas rubripes</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Long-tailed Duck - VU	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies (Phasianidae)	
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)	
American Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)	
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Northern Hawk-Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>
Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>
Great Grey 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 (H)	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Falcons and Caracaras (Falconidae)	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</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>

Common Name	Scientific Name
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>
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
Starlings (Sturnidae)	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)	
Townsend's Solitaire	<i>Myadestes townsendi</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>
Purple Finch	<i>Haemorhous purpureus</i>
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
Grey-crowned Rosy Finch	<i>Leucosticte tephrocotis</i>
Longspurs and Snow Buntings (Calcariidae)	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Cardinals and Allies (Cardinalidae)	
Dickcissel	<i>Spiza americana</i>
Total Seen	48
Total Heard	1
Total Recorded	49

Mammal List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Sciuridae (Squirrels and Allies)	
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
Felidae (Cats)	
Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>
Cervidae (Deer)	
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
Total	4