



## USA – MINNESOTA: SET DEPARTURE TRIP REPORT

02 – 07 FEBRUARY 2025

By Jacob Roalef



*Finding this **Boreal Owl** was the top highlight of the tour.*

### Overview

This tour was the second departure of back-to-back trips in Northern Minnesota in which we partnered with Golden Gate Bird Alliance and its members. This six day trip began in Minneapolis, Minnesota on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2025, and concluded back there on the 7<sup>th</sup>. Many fantastic birding sites were visited including Sax-Zim Bog, the Grand Marais harbor, Palmer Lake, the Boreal Forest, Willowsippi Wildlife Management Area, and Lake Superior.

With our route now beginning in Minneapolis, this tour was able to record an impressively high list of species despite the climate and season of the region. Avian highlights included **Boreal, Great Grey, Long-eared and Snowy Owls, Northern Hawk-Owl, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Redpoll, Canada Jay, Ruffed and Sharp-tailed Grouse, Two-barred (White-winged) Crossbill, Snow Bunting, Bohemian and Cedar Waxwings, Trumpeter Swan, American Tree Sparrow, and Great Grey (Northern) Shrike**. A total of 64 bird species were seen, along with a few mammals including **Red Squirrel, White-tailed Deer, and Coyote**. Full mammal and bird lists can be found at the end of the report. Full eBird trip report and lists can be found [here](#).



*Incredibly, **Great Grey Owl** was seen on several days throughout the trip.*

### Detailed Report

#### **Day 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2025. Arrival and Minneapolis birding**

While the first day of a trip is usually meant for arrival, our whole group arrived the evening before, which meant we could spend the first day full of birding. We grabbed breakfast at the hotel and headed off to the nearby Minneapolis airport viewing area to start the trip off with a big highlight, **Snowy Owl**! A stunning adult male, all white, flew right over our heads in the early morning light. On our way out, we spotted another **Snowy Owl** sitting low next to the runway and we were able to get prolonged views and photos of this incredible bird. From here we headed off for Palmer Lake Park to try our hand at another target owl. We hiked out through the field and grassy areas and picked up some first of the trip species like **Dark-eyed Junco**, **Hairy Woodpecker**, and **Great Grey (Northern) Shrike**. We made it out to the small patch of trees in the middle of the field, and we managed to find our target, **Long-eared Owl**! There were actually two individuals at least. Unfortunately they were quite skittish, so after everyone managed a decent view we hiked back out and headed for a well-earned lunch with two species of owl under our belt already.



*Starting the trip off with a **Snowy Owl** was very exciting.*

After lunch we headed for Black Dog Park and Nicols Road Marsh and really began to pick up species for our trip list. There was a small bit of open water here where loads of waterfowl were congregated like **Gadwall**, **Mallard**, **Hooded** and **Common Mergansers**, **Green-winged Teal**, **Northern Pintail**, **Trumpeter Swan**, and **Canada Goose**. Of course, we managed some nice forest birds as well like **Northern Cardinal** and **White-breasted Nuthatch**, which are tough further north on our route. We then headed off for some farm fields and picked up **Snow Bunting**, **Horned Lark**, and **Eurasian Collared-Dove**, all great species for the trip. It was nearly dusk now,



so we decided to head back to the airport, and we all enjoyed seeing two more **Snowy Owls** before sunset! We couldn't have asked for a better way to start and finish our first day of the trip. At dinner we discussed the plans for the remainder of the trip, before getting some rest.

### Day 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2025. North to Duluth and Sax-Zim Bog

We awoke to flurries and a small buildup of snow overnight, making our morning birding plans a bit difficult. The visibility really did not allow us much of anything, so we decided to get back to the highways, which were clear, and head north up I-35 towards Duluth. After about an hour or so of driving, we made it far enough north and the snow activity ceased, which allowed us to spot a **Rough-legged Hawk** as we drove. After a quick bakery and coffee stop, we made it to Duluth by mid-morning and pulled into the WLSSD dump for a quick check, but only the usual suspects of **American Herring Gull**, **Bald Eagle**, **Common Goldeneye**, and **American Crow** were present. We still had plenty of daylight left so we dropped off our luggage at the hotel and headed out for our first taste of Sax-Zim Bog, and lunch. It didn't take long before we were all out of the vehicle and enjoying a stunning **Great Grey Owl** hunt in the cloudy conditions. We watched this majestic bird move through the area before it disappeared back into the denser forest.



*It was a great year for **Redpoll** sightings in Minnesota.*

Next up was a stop at the feeders on Arkola Road. This was a nice stop that netted us several first of the trip species like **Brown Creeper**, **Purple Finch**, **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, and **Canada Jay**. We had to wait quite a while before we managed some brief glimpses of a **Boreal Chickadee**. By now we were all a bit frozen, so we loaded up and headed for the welcome center to visit the restrooms, feeders, and warm up a bit. These feeders hosted a nice assortment of species like **Redpoll**, **Hairy** and **Downy Woodpeckers**, **Pine Siskin**, and a **Great Grey (Northern) Shrike**,

which was stalking the feeders regularly. We had about an hour and a half of daylight left so we decided to cruise some of the roads of Sax-Zim Bog hoping to spot something and, wow, did we have some luck. Not long after turning back on Arkola Road, a small shape was sitting out on a branch near the side of the road. **Boreal Owl!** In all our excitement and efforts to get everyone a look, the little owl took flight, and we lost it for a bit. After alerting others nearby about our owl sighting, we managed to re-find the **Boreal Owl** further down the road and this time it was incredibly cooperative and allowed prolonged views as it sat in the open for us. What an absolute stunner and probably the most wanted species for everyone in the group! After maybe 30-40 minutes, the bird took off into the deeper woods, so we began to make our way out of the bog. We spotted a **Ruffed Grouse** on our way back to Duluth to add another great species to our list and close out the day. Back in Duluth we celebrated our fantastic day full of owls and discussed the plans for tomorrow.

### Day 3, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2025. Aitkin County and more Sax-Zim Bog

This morning was the coldest one yet but that didn't deter us. We headed out early and began our quest to Aitkin County where we wanted to get to an area before local traffic started. As we approached, there were already more than ten **Sharp-tailed Grouse** waiting for us along the road and a few were even on the telephone lines! The birds were flushed out further into the field, but we decided to wait some time and shut the engine off. Our patience was rewarded as the **Sharp-tailed Grouse** returned to their loose lekking efforts along the road and we all enjoyed some great views of them outside of the vehicle. By now we were all properly frozen solid, so it was time to crank the heat up and do a little birding from the car. It was worth it, though, for this increasingly difficult species in this region.



*It was amazing to see **Sharp-tailed Grouse** on a freezing morning (photo: John Casey)*

Our roadside birding efforts didn't yield much aside from **Horned Lark**, **Northern Raven**, and **Bald Eagle**. We didn't mind, though, as we were still thawing out. After a quick restroom stop, we ventured further into Aitkin County to our next birding stop near the Willowsippi Wildlife Area. It didn't take long before we spotted a tree-topper way off in the distance. A quick scope look confirmed it, **Northern Hawk Owl**! What an incredible bird. We watched this prized species for a while as we alert another local birder. We kept an eye on the owl until they arrived. A rambunctious **Great Grey** (Northern) **Shrike** made us nervous as it dive-bombed the Northern Hawk Owl a few times, but the owl stuck around, and all birders here enjoyed a great species.

After this hugely successful morning, we stopped to pick up some lunch to go and made the long journey back to the Sax-Zim Bog area. As we passed through the Meadowlands, we spotted a small flock of **Snow Buntings**. We chased these gorgeous birds around for a bit before finally losing them. Eventually we made it to the welcome center where we enjoyed our lunch, bird feeders, and warmth! With our remaining hours of daylight, we divided our time up between feeder stations and roadside birding. We noted a lot of the regular bog species for this year like **Redpoll**, **Canada Jay**, **Pine Siskin**, **Purple Finch**, **Black-capped Chickadee**, and **Wild Turkey**. As light began to fade, we switched our focus to the owl prowl, slowly cruising good habitat. Luck was on our side again tonight as we spotted a **Great Grey Owl** hunting the edges of the forest. A great cap to another successful (and frigid) day!

#### Day 4, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2025. Sax-Zim Bog, Mary Lou's, and Woodpecker Quest

After our regular breakfast at the hotel, we loaded up and headed off for the bog. The early morning was spent on an owl prowl, but this time we had no luck, so we headed to a feeder station called the Zabin. Here we had one main target, **Evening Grosbeak**. Thankfully, it didn't take long before a flock of about 40 birds descended on the feeders. These chunky finches are extremely gorgeous and fun to watch. A few other species were also enjoying the feeders like **Purple Finch**, **Pine Siskin**, and **Blue Jay**. From here we headed to Mary Lou's, another fantastic feeder area and one with a restroom as well. It's always a treat to visit this house and see all the efforts put into feeding the birds through the harsh winter months. We spotted **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, **Wild Turkey**, **Black-capped Chickadee**, **Hairy Woodpecker**, and new for the trip, **American Goldfinch**. After everyone had a chance to visit the facilities with heaters, we loaded back up and began our journey further north. It wasn't long though before we stopped again as we spotted three **Pine Grosbeaks** eating some berries along the side of the road! With another new bird in the bag, we made the rest of the journey to Plum Creek Road where our quest for woodpeckers began, but we made a slight detour as well to visit the childhood home of Bob Dylan.

Sadly, the wind was not our friend today as it made it difficult to hear any taps and the birds wanted to stay more on the interior forest rather than along the edges. After a long search, we only managed to turn up a **Downy Woodpecker** along with some flyover **Two-barred** (White-winged) **Crossbills**. We headed for lunch to warm up and reset. The rest of the afternoon was spent along a different road but with much of the same luck. This time we turned up a few **Hairy Woodpeckers** and a **Northern** (Common) **Raven**, but the forest was just quiet today with bird activity. Eventually we were all freezing enough that we decided to make the long journey back to Duluth for dinner and rest.





*Red-breasted Nuthatch always puts on a show at Mary Lou's feeders.*

### Day 5, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2025. Lake Superior and Grand Marais

Today we headed up Highway 61 along Lake Superior towards Grand Marais. We stopped early on to enjoy a stunning sunrise out over the water as an **American Herring Gull** flew by. Around mid-morning we arrived in Grand Marais and began our search for our targets. It was a beautiful day with the sun shining. We made our rounds through the town and campground, checking all the Mountain Ash berries as we went. Luckily it wasn't long before we spotted a large flock of waxwings feasting on the berries! We searched through the birds and were treated to amazing views of both **Cedar** and **Bohemian Waxwings**. It was such a stunning and amazing sight to see nearly 200 of these birds' plucking berries that it was difficult to leave, so we stayed for a while to enjoy these incredible birds. Eventually, we tore ourselves away and went to check the open water of Lake Superior and picked up some nice duck species for our trip, like **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Goldeneye**, and a surprising **Bufflehead**. It was time for lunch and something warm to drink.

After lunch, we made the journey back south to Duluth where we would spend the remainder of the afternoon birding. Along the way we had a **Pileated Woodpecker** fly over the vehicle, a new species for the trip, and which always livens up a long drive. When we arrived back in town we headed for Canal Park to search through the large raft of ducks. About 300 **Common Goldeneyes** were congregated here, but we managed to pick through them and pulled out a rare **White-winged Scoter** mixed in. Over on the island of Park Point, we caught up with some **American Black Ducks** mixed in with a few **Mallards** at their usual water outflow hangout location. By now, the darkness was creeping in, and it was time to head off for a tasty dinner and some rest after a long day of driving, birding, and cold weather. We celebrated all our fantastic bird sightings and shared our favorites over our final supper together.



*The sharp **Bohemian Waxwing** is always special to see in the sun.*

#### **Day 6, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2025. Back to Minneapolis and departure**

It was our final morning in Minnesota, and we needed to make it back to Minneapolis to catch our flights home. We loaded our luggage and began the approximately 2.5-hour journey south, stopping of course for a delicious pastry, some more coffee, and a restroom break. Along the way, we managed to spot a couple of **Rough-legged Hawks** hunting along the roadsides, always a welcome treat on any drive. Eventually, we made it back to Minneapolis and dropped those with earlier flights at the airport. The rest of us had later evening flights, which meant we could spend the whole afternoon exploring some local Minneapolis parks to see what else we could turn up for our trip list.

First up was Pamela Park, a cute little park that had been hosting a few winter rarities based on recent reports. It was a gorgeous winter day, so we spent some time wandering the path here. We managed to add several new trip species here including the two rarities: **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** and **Winter Wren**. Other species here included **Red-bellied Woodpecker** (new), **American Goldfinch**, **White-breasted Nuthatch**, and **House Finch**. Next up was a quick visit to the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. The headquarters area hosted some bird feeders which we enjoyed from the warmth inside the building. Several **Dark-eyed Juncos** were visiting here including at least one Oregon type subspecies, plus **Northern Cardinal**, **Downy Woodpecker**, and **House Finch**. Our final stop was the Old Cedar Avenue Bridge. This marshy wetland netted us a **Song Sparrow** (new trip bird) plus a **Muskrat** and **Coyote**, a few new mammals for our list. From here it was back to MSP to say our goodbyes and wrap up an incredibly successful tour of Minnesota in the winter!





This **Ruffed Grouse** was perched lower and allowed us to see some of its colors.

### **Bird List - Following IOC (14.2)**

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              |
|---|------------------------------|
| <b>Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)</b> |                              |
| 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>         |
| Northern Pintail                              | <i>Anas acuta</i>            |
| Green-winged Teal                             | <i>Anas carolinensis</i>     |
| White-winged Scoter                           | <i>Melanitta deglandi</i>    |
| Bufflehead                                    | <i>Bucephala albeola</i>     |
| Common Goldeneye                              | <i>Bucephala clangula</i>    |
| Hooded Merganser                              | <i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i> |

| Common Name  | Scientific Name                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Common Merganser                                   | <i>Mergus merganser</i>         |
| Red-breasted Merganser                             | <i>Mergus serrator</i>          |
| <b>Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies (Phasianidae)</b> |                                 |
| Ruffed Grouse                                      | <i>Bonasa umbellus</i>          |
| Sharp-tailed Grouse                                | <i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i> |
| Wild Turkey  | <i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>      |
| <b>Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)</b>              |                                 |
| Rock Pigeon  | <i>Columba livia</i>            |
| Eurasian Collared Dove                             | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>    |
| <b>Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)</b>        |                                 |
| American Herring Gull                              | <i>Larus smithsonianus</i>      |
| <b>Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)</b>     |                                 |
| Bald Eagle   | <i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i> |
| Red-tailed Hawk                                    | <i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>        |
| Rough-legged Buzzard                               | <i>Buteo lagopus</i>            |
| <b>Owls (Strigidae)</b>                            |                                 |
| Boreal Owl   | <i>Aegolius funereus</i>        |
| Snowy Owl – VU                                     | <i>Bubo scandiacus</i>          |
| Northern Hawk Owl                                  | <i>Surnia ulula</i>             |
| Long-eared Owl                                     | <i>Asio otus</i>                |
| Great Gray Owl                                     | <i>Strix nebulosa</i>           |
| <b>Woodpeckers (Picidae)</b>                       |                                 |
| Red-bellied Woodpecker                             | <i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>     |
| Yellow-bellied Sapsucker                           | <i>Sphyrapicus varius</i>       |
| Downy Woodpecker                                   | <i>Dryobates pubescens</i>      |
| Hairy Woodpecker                                   | <i>Dryobates villosus</i>       |
| Pileated Woodpecker                                | <i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>       |
| <b>Falcons and Caracaras (Falconidae)</b>          |                                 |
| American Kestrel                                   | <i>Falco sparverius</i>         |
| Merlin   | <i>Falco columbarius</i>        |

| Common Name                                    | Scientific Name              |
|--|------------------------------|
| <b>Shrikes (Laniidae)</b>                      |                              |
| Great Grey Shrike                              | <i>Lanius borealis</i>       |
| <b>Crows, Jays, and Magpies (Corvidae)</b>     |                              |
| Canada Jay                                     | <i>Perisoreus canadensis</i> |
| Blue Jay                                       | <i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>   |
| American Crow                                  | <i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i> |
| Northern Raven                                 | <i>Corvus corax</i>          |
| <b>Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice (Paridae)</b> |                              |
| Black-capped Chickadee                         | <i>Poecile atricapillus</i>  |
| Boreal Chickadee                               | <i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>    |
| <b>Larks (Alaudidae)</b>                       |                              |
| Horned Lark                                    | <i>Eremophila alpestris</i>  |
| <b>Wrens (Troglodytidae)</b>                   |                              |
| Winter Wren                                    | <i>Troglodytes hiemalis</i>  |
| <b>Nuthatches (Sittidae)</b>                   |                              |
| Red-breasted Nuthatch                          | <i>Sitta canadensis</i>      |
| White-breasted Nuthatch                        | <i>Sitta carolinensis</i>    |
| <b>Treecreepers (Certhiidae)</b>               |                              |
| Brown Creeper                                  | <i>Certhia americana</i>     |
| <b>Starlings (Sturnidae)</b>                   |                              |
| European Starling                              | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>      |
| <b>Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)</b>          |                              |
| American Robin                                 | <i>Turdus migratorius</i>    |
| <b>Waxwings (Bombycillidae)</b>                |                              |
| Bohemian Waxwing                               | <i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>   |
| Cedar Waxwing                                  | <i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>   |



| Common Name  | Scientific Name                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Old World Sparrows (Passeridae)</b>               |                                   |
| House Sparrow  | <i>Passer domesticus</i>          |
|  |                                   |
| <b>Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)</b> |                                   |
| Evening Grosbeak – VU                                | <i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i> |
| Pine Grosbeak  | <i>Pinicola enucleator</i>        |
| House Finch  | <i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>       |
| Purple Finch   | <i>Haemorhous purpureus</i>       |
| Redpoll  | <i>Acanthis flammea</i>           |
| Two-barred Crossbill                                 | <i>Loxia leucoptera</i>           |
| Pine Siskin  | <i>Spinus pinus</i>               |
| American Goldfinch                                   | <i>Spinus tristis</i>             |
|  |                                   |
| <b>Longspurs and Snow Buntings (Calcariidae)</b>     |                                   |
| Snow Bunting   | <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>      |
|  |                                   |
| <b>New World Sparrows (Passerellidae)</b>            |                                   |
| American Tree Sparrow                                | <i>Spizelloides arborea</i>       |
| Song Sparrow   | <i>Melospiza melodia</i>          |
| Dark-eyed Junco                                      | <i>Junco hyemalis</i>             |
|  |                                   |
|  |                                   |
| <b>Cardinals and Allies (Cardinalidae)</b>           |                                   |
| Northern Cardinal                                    | <i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>      |
|  |                                   |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>64</b>                         |

**Mammal List**

| Common Name                             | Scientific Name                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <b>Sciuridae (Squirrels and Allies)</b> |                                |
| Eastern Gray Squirrel                   | <i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>    |
| Red Squirrel                            | <i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i> |
| <b>Rodents (Cricetidae)</b>             |                                |
| Muskrat                                 | <i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>      |
| <b>Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares)</b>    |                                |
| Eastern Cottontail                      | <i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>   |
| <b>Canidae (Dogs)</b>                   |                                |
| Coyote                                  | <i>Canis latrans</i>           |
| <b>Cervidae (Deer)</b>                  |                                |
| White-tailed Deer                       | <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>  |
| <b>Total</b>                            | <b>6</b>                       |