



Sax-Zim Bog and Northeast Minnesota

January 25-29, 2020
Private Tour

Tour leader: Josh Engel

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This was a trip for the ages. Thanks to a combination of luck, timing, being in the right place at the right time, and with a bit of skill and experience thrown in, we found an incredible number of quality birds and had great views at pretty much all of them. Our bird list reads like a most-wanted boreal birds list: **Boreal, Northern Hawk, Great Gray, and Snowy Owls, American Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers, Boreal Chickadee, Northern Goshawk, Spruce, Sharp-tailed, and Ruffed, Grouse, White-winged Crossbill, Canada Jay**, and more. A few irruptive species were absent this winter, as sometimes happens, but the birds that were present made for our most successful Northeast Minnesota in Winter trip yet.

TOP 5 BIRDS AS VOTED BY THE GROUP

- 1 (tie). Great Gray Owl**
- 1 (tie). Boreal Owl**
- 3. Boreal Chickadee**
- 4. Northern Hawk Owl**
- 5. Black-backed Woodpecker**



This Boreal Owl tied with Great Gray Owl for top bird of the trip. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 1, Jan 25: Arrival, Canal Park and Bong Airport

We started out birding right outside the hotel in Duluth's Canal Park after a brief orientation in the lobby. It didn't take long to find the flock of **Common Goldeneye** with a single female **Long-tailed Duck**. There were a bunch of **American Black Ducks** as well. We then crossed the bridge into Wisconsin to look for a classic northern bird, **Snowy Owl**. Again we found it easily, this time by looking where the photographers were pointing their cameras. We had great views of it perched atop a light pole. We returned to Duluth to take another look at the harbor. A flock of ducks flew in, mostly **American Black Ducks**, with a couple of **Mallard x Black Duck hybrids** and the single female **Northern Pintail** that is wintering here.

Day 2, Jan 26: Sax-Zim Bog

We set out in the morning full of excitement for our first day in Sax-Zim Bog, which has become one of the top winter birding destinations in the country. We learned why very quickly--almost our first bird of the morning was a **Northern Hawk-Owl**! It would turn out to be the first of three we would see throughout the day. Just a short distance away we joined a small group of birders looking for a **Great Gray Owl** that had been in the area the evening before, but it didn't come out. We did enjoy nice views of a **Northern Shrike** at that spot.

Then it was on to the woods. We arrived to Winterberry Bog to find an unbelievably tame **Barred Owl** sitting over the sign marking the bog. After taking our fill of photos, we went into the woods in search of northern woodpeckers. We eventually found a male **American Three-toed Woodpecker** and got nice views. After a bathroom break, we went to the south end of the bog to see if **Sharp-tailed Grouse** were around. Sure enough, three of them were right in a front yard, showing off for us. Before lunch, we swung by another **Northern Hawk-Owl** spot where we quickly found the bird perched atop an enormous spruce.



American Three-toed Woodpecker. Photo by Josh Engel.

After lunch in the small town of Cotton, we headed back into the bog. Our first stop of Winterberry Bog, where we again found the **Three-toed Woodpecker** but could not locate a Black-backed. The **Barred Owl** was back in its spot guarding the reserve entrance. Heading north through the bog from there, we stopped by some feeders where by great coincidence a **Ruffed Grouse** was feeding in the adjacent bushes. We enjoyed many **Canada Jays** on the feeders along with **Red-breasted Nuthatch** and the usual collection of **Black-capped Chickadee** and **Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers**.

From there we made a mammal stop for a **porcupine** sleeping in an alder, then spent some time with other birders driving around likely spots for Great Gray Owls, but everyone came up empty.

Day 3, Jan 27: Superior National Forest, Sax-Zim Bog, and Duluth

We set out early to the boreal forest northeast of Duluth to look for the dreaded **Spruce Grouse**. It's dreaded because so often we go to the right area, drive the right roads, and don't see it. Not today. Today we saw it before we had even gotten to the "right" area! We had wonderful views of a male in the middle of the road eating grit. Fortunately it wandered off the road before too many cars were passing. Elated, we continued north into the forest. We stopped to look for another recently reported Great Gray Owl, but it didn't seem to be around. There were other birds around, with a flock of **Pine Siskins** and **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, so we thought to try for some of our other target birds. We played tape for **Black-backed Woodpecker** and **Boreal Chickadee**. The **Black-backed Woodpecker** came right in, landing on top of a spruce, right where we could all see it! It eventually moved on, and just then a pair of **Boreal Chickadees** came in! We could hardly believe it. Not even 8:30 and we had seen our top target birds. We weren't done yet though, just a short drive up the road we flushed **White-winged Crossbills** that flew up into the treetops.



Spruce Grouse. Photo by Josh Engel.

Having wrapped up so early in the national forest, we thought to press on to Sax-Zim. We stopped in Ely on the way, to look in some likely spots for Bohemian Waxwing, but they just aren't around this winter and we didn't find any. We continued on to the bog. David spotted **White-winged Crossbills** in the road and this time I was able to stop in time. We had much better looks at the pair than the ones we had seen earlier in the morning. Soon thereafter David was spotting again, this time a raptor sitting on high in a tree; I couldn't believe when I looked

and it was an adult **Northern Goshawk**! It quickly flew off, but luckily landed again in a distant tree, where we were able to get good scope views of this huge *Accipiter*.

We carried on, but were soon interrupted by a phone call. A **Great Gray Owl** was being seen and was cooperating--in Duluth! Our plans quickly changed and off we were, racing back to Duluth, to the highway offramp where the bird was seen. We saw it as soon as we arrived, an enormous owl in the strangest of settings. It was the third time today that we couldn't believe our good fortune. We spent some time photographing and watching it as it flew between perches, hoping that the bird was in good health in what was no doubt a very strange place for it to find itself. With that, we returned to our hotel, just down the road from the huge owl.



Great Gray Owl in Duluth. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 4, Jan 28: Sax Zim Bog and Duluth

Today we hoped to clean up the few birds remaining in the area that we hadn't yet seen. We started with trying to get improved views of Ruffed Grouse, but couldn't find one. Then we drove around looking for Black-billed Magpie, but couldn't find that, either. Then we looked for some recently reported American Tree Sparrows, but again, nada (except we did have great views of a **Northern Shrike** here). Had we used up all of our luck yesterday?

Not so fast. We headed to a feeder setup that's usually a reliable location for **Evening Grosbeak**. We only had to wait a few minutes for a flock to drop in. They didn't stick around long, so we felt lucky with our timing. We also added our first **White-breasted Nuthatch** and **Wild Turkey** of the trip here. We moved on again, to look further for magpies and grouse when news came through, there was a **Boreal Owl** in the bog and it seemed to be sticking around! We rushed over to find a small crowd gathered, it was still there! We were in disbelief--the most sought-after of all the Sax-Zim winter specialties, the most difficult of all American owls to see, and one that

had hardly been seen at all this winter. And there it was right in front of us. We got very close studies of its plumage and took hundreds of photos as it sat by a group of bird feeders along the forested road. We were once again left in disbelief at our luck.

Finally it was time for lunch, but we made one more pass through a good area for **Black-billed Magpie**. Our luck was clearly back--a pair of magpies flew over a herd of cows and into the woods beyond.

After lunch, we decided what the heck, let's see if we can find the **Snowy Owl** that's hanging around nearby. It was indeed there, perched way out across a field, but it looked great through the scope. Since we were nearby, how about the **hawk owl** that's been hanging out? Sure enough, it was there, too. How about that crazy **Barred Owl** that lives over the bird feeders at Winterberry Bog? Yep, it was also there. Could we make it back to Duluth for a Five Owl Day? Sure could, with the **Great Gray Owl** patrolling the same small patch of grass as the day before. Incredible! It was a second straight fairy tale day of birding, days that we will remember for a long, long time.



Northern Hawk Owl. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 5, Jan 29: North Shore and Superior Landfill

With a final morning before the tour's end, we started out driving up the North Shore to look for a long shot Bohemian Waxwing. We found our first **Common Merganser** of the trip on the way to the area. We did find a good-sized flock of **waxwings**, but they were all **Cedars**. We were in for a good surprise as we left the waxwing area when we spotted a **Northern Hawk Owl** sitting over a house. It was the fourth individual hawk owl of the trip.

Our final stop would be the dump in Superior, Wisconsin, where we got nice looks at a couple of **Glaucous Gulls** mixed in with the Herrings. It was nice to end the trip with another true northern bird, even if it wasn't a bird of the forest.

It had been an incredibly successful trip, one that will go down in the annals of Red Hill Birding. It was a great group, we had remarkably not-unpleasant weather, and the birding was absolutely as good as it gets.

BIRD LIST. 45 species (including 1 heard only). Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird Checklist, 2019 update. Former (or alternate) English names are in parentheses. (H) = heard only; (L)=Tour leader only. The global IUCN red list status is listed for threatened and near-threatened species: CR=Critically Endangered, EN=Endangered, VU=Vulnerable, NT=Near-threatened.

Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
American Black Duck	<i>Anas rubripes</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Long-tailed Duck (VU)	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>
Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcipennis canadensis</i>
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Snowy Owl (VU)	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>
Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>
Great Gray Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>
Boreal Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</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	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
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>
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>

Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
Brown Creeper (H)	<i>Certhia americana</i>
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
White-winged Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>

MAMMAL LIST. 5 species. As there is no standard list of names for mammals, the names used here are simply commonly used names. Alternate names are in parentheses. IUCN Red List status listed for threatened and near-threatened species: CR=Critically Endangered, EN=Endangered, VU=Vulnerable, NT=Near-threatened.

Eastern Gray Squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*
American Red Squirrel - *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*
North American Porcupine - *Erethizon dorsatum*
Eastern Cottontail - *Sylvilagus floridanus*
White-tailed deer - *Odocoileus virginianus*



Evening Grosbeaks. Photo by Josh Engel.



Gray Jay. Photo by Josh Engel.



Boreal Chickadee. Photo by Josh Engel.