



Sax-Zim Bog and Northeast Minnesota

Jan 30 - Feb 3, 2020

Tour leader: Josh Engel

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Having just completed one super successful trip with the same itinerary, I couldn't imagine that there would be a second straight trip that matched the first trip's success. Fortunately, I was wrong! It was another incredible trip to the winter wonderland of Northern Minnesota, with stunning birding, mild weather, and great company.. 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 Grouse, Sharp-tailed, Ruffed Grouse, Red Crossbill, Canada Jay**, and more. A few irruptive species were absent this winter, as sometimes happens, but the birds that were present made for an impressive trip.



Snowy Owl. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 1, Jan 30: Arrival, Duluth and Bong Airport

With a **Great Gray Owl** hanging out just minutes from our hotel, our first destination after meeting up was a no-brainer. The enormous Northwoods owl was there, but unfortunately looking a little worse for wear, right near downtown Duluth. We then crossed the bridge into Wisconsin to look for a classic northern bird, Snowy Owl. Unfortunately we couldn't find one in any of the usual spots, so we headed back to Duluth, knowing we would have more chances to see a Snowy. We returned with enough time to look for ducks in the harbor mouth, the only open water around. There was a nice flock of **American Black Ducks**, with a couple of **Mallard x Black Duck hybrids** and the single female **Northern Pintail** that is wintering here, along with a flock of **Common Goldeneye**.



Great Gray Owl. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 2, Jan 31: 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 thanks to its concentration of highly-sought northern birds. Things got off to a little bit of a slow start. We began the day by checking for the Boreal Owl that was being seen recently, but it wasn't in the usual place. We did enjoy great views of **Canada Jay** and nice comparisons of **Downy** and **Hairy Woodpeckers** while we waited to see of the owl would show. We then checked for wintering hawk owls, but, again, were skunked, in part because foggy weather made it difficult to see some of their favorite perches. We did see a **Northern Shrike** here, the first of many we would see over the course of the trip.

Things picked up when we got to Winterberry Bog, one of the top Sax-Zim hotspots this winter. A **Barred Owl** (or, rather, *the* Barred Owl) was sitting in its usual perch over the feeders at the

entrance to the bog, giving us incredible studies and photo ops. As we started walking through the bog, it didn't take us long to find another target bird, **Black-backed Woodpecker**. We had stunning views of a female picking away at a tree trunk. As we left, we enjoyed fantastic views of a female **Pileated Woodpecker** at the feeders.

We decided to have an early lunch before regrouping for the afternoon. By the time we finished eating, the fog had cleared and the **Northern Hawk Owls** were back--we quickly saw two different birds along a short stretch of road. We had wonderful scope views of this rare owl, perched in the tippy top of trees as they like to do. After enjoying the hawk owls, we set out towards the other end of the bog. A **Black-billed Magpie** flew in front of the car on our way. But before we reached our destination, we got a text that the **Boreal Owl** was back!

We turned right back around and headed back towards where we had just come from (impatiently waiting while stuck at a railroad crossing waiting for a freight train to pass!). When we got there, we joined a throng of birders and photographers, because the **Boreal Owl** was there! The most difficult-to-find of the northern owls that make Sax-Zim famous, we could hardly believe our luck. It was sitting in an open perch, surveying its surroundings, waiting for its chance to catch a vole.

After getting our fill of the little owl, we made our way back through the bog. We were pleasantly surprised to see an adult **Northern Goshawk**, another rare Northwoods raptor, flying alongside the car, giving us decent views. After a full day in the bog, we headed back to Duluth.



Boreal Owl. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 3, Feb 1: Superior National Forest, the North Shore, and Superior

We set out early to the boreal forest northeast of Duluth to look for **Spruce Grouse**, an elusive Northwoods grouse that sometimes comes onto the road in the early morning to eat grit to aid its

digestion. Hardly a minutes after I announced to the group that we had arrived to the best area, there it was! We had wonderful views of a male in the middle of the road eating grit. It stayed there even after a couple cars passed, and we were joined by a couple of other birders to enjoy the moment.

We continued birding the same area, especially to look for **Boreal Chickadee**. We found them pretty easily, a pair that came in to playback, giving us all good views. There were other birds around, too, with small flocks of **Pine Siskins** and **Red-breasted Nuthatches**. We got brief views of **Red Crossbill**, but they weren't so cooperative, and we couldn't find White-winged Crossbills anywhere.

After picking up lunch in Ely, we headed back to Lake Superior and made our way back towards Duluth. Despite much open water, ducks were in short supply on the shore, so we continued through Duluth and back to Superior, Wisconsin, to give another shot at **Snowy Owl**. This time we were more successful, finding a tagged female who, after actively looking around, we watched fly to another perch across the road. We got good views, but decided to look for another on our way back. That one was present, too, an untagged bird, and was much closer than the first. It was great to get such good studies of another **Snowy Owl**.



Spruce Grouse. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 4, Feb 2: Sax Zim Bog

Today we hoped to clean up the few birds remaining in the area that we hadn't yet seen. We were happy to find a flock of **Black-billed Magpies** as we entered the bog, on our way to look for **Sharp-tailed Grouse**. The grouse weren't present at first at their usual spot, so we drove around searching unsuccessfully, only to return to the original area and find one was sitting in a treetop! It eventually flew across the road and fed on bird seed that had fallen from a feeder onto the snow-covered ground. Right nearby we found our third and final grouse species, a **Ruffed Grouse** that Eric impressively spotted in the roadside vegetation. It gave us great views as it fed on buds.

We then made our way to a feeder setup that's usually a reliable location for **Evening Grosbeak**, stopping along the way to see a couple more **Northern Hawk-Owls**. It took some patience, but the grosbeaks eventually did arrive. At first we saw two females that landed in the front yard, before a flock of more than 30 birds came in and landed. Happy with our grosbeaks, we moved on to looking for a **Porcupine** in a spot where one had been living for over a month. It had moved slightly from its prior location, but we did find it and even watched it climb a ways down the tree it was in. We wrapped up our morning visiting the Sax-Zim Bog Welcome Center (with **Canada Jays** on the feeders), before heading to lunch.

After lunch we returned to Winterberry Bog to look for the **American Three-toed Woodpecker** that had been reported again after a several-day absence. Again luck was on our side--we quickly found a photographer who was taking pictures of it as we walked up. Our timing was good, too, since after enjoying the woodpecker for a few minutes, it flew off and we couldn't relocate it. We finished the day driving around looking for White-winged Crossbills, not finding any, but getting good views of more **Northern Shrikes**. We headed back to Duluth for dinner and to watch the Super Bowl.



Black-backed Woodpecker. Photo by Josh Engel.

Day 5, Feb 3: Canal Park

There wasn't much birding left for us to do close to Duluth, so we thought we would check out the local dumps to look for Glaucous Gull. But since the harbor next to our hotel was now free of ice, we swung by there first to check for ducks. We did find a flock of **Common Goldeneye**, but even better were the three **Glaucous Gulls** with the flock of **Herring Gulls**, sitting on the ice and occasionally being flushed by a Bald Eagle. A pair of Peregrine Falcons also flew in and perched on the building right next to us. Getting good views of Glaucous Gulls already, we decided to skip the dump visit and call it a day. It was a great way to end a great trip.

BIRD LIST. 42 species (including 1 leader 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>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>
Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcipennis canadensis</i>
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Sharp-shinned Hawk (L)	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Snowy Owl	<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>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</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
European Starling
House Sparrow
Evening Grosbeak
Red Crossbill
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch

Certhia americana
Sturnus vulgaris
Passer domesticus
Coccothraustes vespertinus
Loxia curvirostra
Spinus pinus
Spinus tristis

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*



Pileated Woodpecker. Photo by Josh Engel.



Sharp-tailed Grouse shares a feeder with a White-tailed Deer. Photo by Josh Engel.



Barred Owl. Photo by Josh Engel.