



Sax-Zim Bog and Northeast Minnesota in Winter

February 1-5 2018

Tour leader: Josh Engel

Minnesota in winter is not for the faint of heart. With temperatures in the double-digits below zero and birds few and far between, it is a unique kind of birding. But the birds themselves make the trip what it is, and what birds there are! This year's trip saw the four northern owls, including incredible views of Great Gray, Boreal, and Northern Hawk. We saw all three grouse, including dancing Sharp-tailed and an 11th hour Spruce. Add in Boreal Chickadee, Black-backed Woodpecker, Hoary Redpoll, Evening Grosbeak, Northern Shrike, and plenty of other northwoods denizens, and you understand what a special place Northeast Minnesota is in winter. It was a great trip, with cold weather but little snow keeping road conditions good, and a wonderful community of birders sharing information to ensure that everyone in the area saw as many birds as possible.



It was a great year for Boreal Owls and we had tremendous views of this individual.

TOP 5 BIRDS

1. BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER
2. (TIE) SPRUCE GROUSE
2. (TIE) NORTHERN HAWK OWL
4. (TIE) BOREAL OWL
4. (TIE) BOREAL CHICKADEE
4. (TIE) EVENING GROSBEEK

TOUR REPORT

We met in the lovely lakefront hotel and set out up the North Shore. A Boreal Owl that we knew the location of had moved when we arrived at the spot, so we forged on. A flock of Bohemian Waxwings was a nice surprise in a sub-par winter for them. We had great looks at Pine Grosbeak in Two Harbors, before heading back west. We took side roads and, with a bit of birder-watching, ended up with incredible looks at a Great Gray Owl, the singular bird that birders associate with this part of the world. It was a great way to cap our first afternoon of birding.

Our second day was devoted to the world-famous Sax-Zim Bog. Our first order of business was to find Sharp-tailed Grouse near a lek, which proved easy today. We had wonderful looks at them not only perched in the tops of spruces and eating seed underneath bird feeders, but even dancing out in the field. A couple of Pine Grosbeaks were also attending the feeders. Moving on, we stopped for a lovely Black-billed Magpie, here at the eastern tip of their range. We took our first of two walks in a small bog forest where both Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers had been recently seen, but couldn't find either bird.



An iconic species of the northwoods, we saw Great Gray Owl on two different days.

We spent much of the day checking various spots around the bog. As usual, birds weren't dense, but quality was high. A stunning Northern Hawk Owl was perched atop a tall spruce for as long as we stayed watching it. A feeder setup had a large number of Evening Grosbeaks that showed beautifully along with a single Hoary Redpoll, standing out in its paleness with a flock of Commons, which were numerous throughout the bog. We had wonderful views of Ruffed Grouse, Rough-legged Hawk, Bald Eagle, Gray Jay, Hairy Woodpecker, and, to top it off, another cooperative Great Gray Owl.

Our second full day started in Superior National Forest looking for Spruce Grouse. It was a close-but-no-cigar experience, missing one by minutes and not finding another. We made up for it a short while later with great views of Black-backed Woodpecker and Boreal Chickadee. After lunch in a local restaurant, it was back to the shore for another Boreal Owl hunt. We searched and didn't find, so we hit up Two Harbors waterfront, finding Long-tailed Duck and Common Goldeneye. Then it was back to Boreal Owls, and this time, SWEET SUCCESS. A very cooperative bird had been found earlier in the day and was still in the area. We got great views with the frozen waters of Lake Superior in the background. With some daylight remaining, we decided to look for one last owl, and sure enough, a Snowy Owl was sitting on the very highest tower in Duluth's Port Terminal, checking out its surroundings.



Publicly available feeder setups provide great views of a variety of “winter finches,” including the Common Redpolls and Evening Grosbeak shown here.

After not seeing Spruce Grouse yesterday, we went for it one more time. The car thermometer this morning reached -28F, the coldest temperature that most of us had ever felt. So we searched from the comfort of our car. We searched and searched and found nothing, until a friend called that they found one a few minutes from where we were. We rushed over and got brief views before it was flushed. We tried to relocate and there it was, sitting up in a pine, spotted by Diane. We got out and had spectacular views of a male Spruce Grouse sitting in the sun, eating in the pine tree. Another sweet success after much effort.

We decided to take the easterly route to return to Sax-Zim, stopping in Ely for a visit to the fantastic snow sculpture garden and some hot coffee before continuing on to the bog (with a detour for a photo with the can't-miss World's Biggest Hockey Stick). The bog was quiet, though we did get lovely views of Hoary Redpoll and Gray Jay.

We had one final morning to do some local birding around Duluth. We birded some local parks, where we had beautiful views over the city and lake, and where we added White-breasted Nuthatch and Pileated Woodpecker to the trip list. We also found out that winter storms in Chicago disrupting some of our travel plans, so we made alternate plans, said our goodbyes, and parted ways. It was a great trip to the northwoods, with wonderful birds, great company, delicious food, and memorable experiences.



A tour highlight was finding this beautiful male Spruce Grouse after putting in our fair share of time looking! We found it thanks to a phone call from friends who were birding in the area.

BIRD LIST. 39 species. Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird Checklist, 2017 update.

ORDER NAME: Family Name precedes the list of birds observed in each family.

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*)

Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*)

Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)

GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae

Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*)

Spruce Grouse (*Falcapennis canadensis*)

Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*)

Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*)

CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)

COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)

STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae

Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)

Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*)

Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*)

Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*)

Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*)

PICIFORMES: Picidae

Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*)

Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*)

Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*)

Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae

Northern Shrike (*Lanius borealis*)

PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae

Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*)

Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)

Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*)

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*)

PASSERIFORMES: Paridae

Black-capped Chickadee (*Poecile atricapillus*)

Boreal Chickadee (*Poecile hudsonicus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae

Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)

White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*)

PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

PASSERIFORMES: Bombycillidae

Bohemian Waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*)

PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae

Evening Grosbeak (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*)

Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*)

Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*)

Hoary Redpoll (*Acanthis hornemanni*)

PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

MAMMAL LIST. 6 species.

RODENTIA: Rodents

American red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*)

Vole sp. (*Microtus/Myodes* sp.)

LAGOMORPHA: Hares

Eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

MUSTELIDAE: Mustelids

American marten (*Martes Americana*)

CANIDAE: Dogs & allies

Coyote (*Canis latrans*)

CERVIDAE: Deer

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)



Emperor Penguin snow sculpture in Ely. Surprising experiences like our stumbling into the snow sculpture garden is one reason why traveling is so fun.