



Sax-Zim Bog and Northeast Minnesota

January 23-27, 2019

Tour leader: Josh Engel

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Sax-Zim Bog has become a world-famous winter birding destination despite its frigid temperatures and unpredictable weather and road conditions. And with good reason! The quality of birds and the world-class photo opportunities are worth braving the Minnesota winter. Despite a below-average year for owls, we had tremendous looks at **Northern Hawk**, **Great Gray**, and **Snowy Owls**, along with many other sought-after birds, including **Black-backed Woodpecker**, **Evening** and **Pine Grosbeaks**, **Red** and **White-winged Crossbills**, and **Sharp-tailed Grouse**. Despite the cold we had good weather, with mostly clear skies, little wind, and virtually no snowfall.



Great Gray Owl

Day 1, Jan 23: Arrival, North Shore

We met in the hotel lobby in the afternoon with a couple hours of daylight left, and set out along the North Shore of Lake Superior. That moment was the highest temperature we would experience during the trip—about 17°F. We headed straight to the area where **Bohemian Waxwings** were being seen and after a bit of searching, we found an extremely cooperative

flock and got great views of their exquisite feather details. We returned back to Duluth via the lakeshore, but the recent cold weather combined with southeast winds meant it was totally iced over. We did find a couple of **American Black Ducks** with a flock of **Mallards** in a small bit of open water as we entered Duluth.

Day 2, Jan 24: Sax-Zim Bog

We headed to the great Sax-Zim Bog this morning. There were plenty of **Common Ravens** along the road, but our first goal was to find **Sharp-tailed Grouse**. We watched **Pine Grosbeaks** while we waited, and after a short wait we saw a single grouse fly in and land in the yard. Just as we were leaving we saw a flock of grouse flying into the yard with their favored feeders, where we got even better views. We looked around for the Snowy Owls that had recently been seen in the area but had no luck. Our next stop was the bog's visitors' center, where we warmed up and watched the feeders, which were active with **Pine Grosbeak**, **Common Redpoll**, **Hairy Woodpecker**, and **Canada Jay**.

We then moved over to Warren Nelson Bog to walk the boardwalk where a Black-backed Woodpecker had been seen off-and-on recently. No luck with that, but just up the road we had tremendous looks at a **Northern Shrike**, who was probably stalking the bird feeders nearby. After warming up again at lunch, we stuck to the northern part of the bog for the afternoon. The Northern Hawk Owl was a no-show in its usual location, so we moved over to the feeders just to the east. There we were greeted by a gorgeous **American (Pine) Marten** gorging on peanut butter. It came and went several times, posing for photos and giving great looks. Our main bird objective here, **Boreal Chickadee**, was also very cooperative. We finished the day looking for Great Gray Owl, but without luck.



American Marten in Sax Zim

Day 3, Jan 25: Superior National Forest and North Shore

This morning we drove northeast into Superior National Forest. Beautiful and desolate in winter, this area has a low density of birds but the birds that are there are of high quality if you can find them! On our way we were pleasantly surprised to encounter two **Moose** along the road—numbers of Moose have declined dramatically in Minnesota so we considered ourselves very lucky. We searched hard for Spruce Grouse in early the morning, but they've been elusive all winter and we couldn't find them. We did get great views of **Red Crossbills** and enjoyed the solitude of the Northwoods in winter—we even enjoyed feeling what -30° feels like!

After a delicious brunch in Ely, we returned to the woods, stopping on the way at a dam with a flock of **Common Goldeneye** on the patch of open water. We hit another side road, especially looking for **Black-backed Woodpecker**. This time we found our target after following faint tapping sounds and had great views of cooperative female. Our next stop was Two Harbors, where we found a close flock of **Red-breasted Mergansers**. Then it was back through Duluth and on to Superior, Wisconsin, to look for **Snowy Owls**. We found our first one easily—it was sitting on the roof of Menard's! Another Snowy was nearby sitting on top of a pine tree and posed for nice photos. We even saw a third Snowy sitting on top of a billboard as we returned to Duluth. A great way to end a great day.



Northern Hawk-Owl with an itch.

Day 4, Jan 26: Sax Zim Bog

Today was our second shot at Sax-Zim Bog. We had a great day there earlier in the trip but we had a few birds yet to find. On our way up a friend texted to let us know that he had spotted a Great Gray Owl, no doubt the bog's most famous bird, so we headed straight there. Sure

enough, a huge, stunning, **Great Gray Owl** was sitting out on a broken, dead tree, looking for all the world like a broken branch, until you saw it through binoculars and its yellow eyes stared back. Our timing was lucky; just a few minutes after arriving a train came by and flushed it to another perch much farther away. It was the perfect way to start the day.

We left the owl and the growing group of admiring birders and headed to the opposite side of the bog. We still wanted to see and photograph **Evening Grosbeak** and they didn't disappoint. Ella glimpsed a **Great Horned Owl** as we pulled up to the feeders, which also had a **Fox Sparrow** (rare here in winter), **Pine Siskin**, **White-** and **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, and a small group of **Wild Turkey**. Our next target was **White-winged Crossbill**. I had just finished another trip where we found them gritting on a certain section of road. The birds weren't there, so we tried a little playback of their calls at the same spot and sure enough they flew right in giving us great views. Our first of three **Northern Shrikes** for the day was nearby.

On our way to lunch, we stopped at another feeder setup to see if we could get better views and photos of **Boreal Chickadee**. They cooperated brilliantly, along with **Canada Jay** and **Pine Grosbeak**. At lunch we got word that **Bobcats** were seen in the morning at a spot right near where we were going after lunch anyway. We pulled up to the spot and there one was! A beautiful, fluffy cat enjoying the sunshine as it groomed itself. We drove around the bog a little bit longer looking for Snowy Owls, but not finding any, so we decided to return to Superior to get another view of the **Snowy Owls** there. We easily found the same two birds that we had seen yesterday, finishing off another great day, this one bookended by northern owls.

BIRD LIST. 39 species. Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird Checklist, 2018 update. Former (or alternate) English names are in parentheses. (H) = heard 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 - *Anas platyrhynchos*
American Black Duck - *Anas rubripes*
Common Goldeneye - *Bucephala clangula*
Red-breasted Merganser - *Mergus serrator*
Sharp-tailed Grouse - *Tympanuchus phasianellus*
Wild Turkey - *Meleagris gallopavo*
Rock Pigeon - *Columba livia*
Herring Gull - *Larus argentatus*
Northern Goshawk - *Accipiter gentilis*
Bald Eagle - *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
Red-tailed Hawk - *Buteo jamaicensis*
Great Horned Owl - *Bubo virginianus*
Snowy Owl (VU) - *Bubo scandiacus*
Northern Hawk Owl - *Surnia ulula*

Great Gray Owl - *Strix nebulosa*
Black-backed Woodpecker - *Picoides arcticus*
Downy Woodpecker - *Dryobates pubescens*
Hairy Woodpecker - *Dryobates villosus*
Pileated Woodpecker - *Dryocopus pileatus*
Northern Shrike - *Lanius borealis*
Canada Jay - *Perisoreus canadensis*
Blue Jay - *Cyanocitta cristata*
American Crow - *Corvus brachyrhynchos*
Common Raven - *Corvus corax*
Black-capped Chickadee - *Poecile atricapillus*
Boreal Chickadee - *Poecile hudsonicus*
Red-breasted Nuthatch - *Sitta canadensis*
White-breasted Nuthatch - *Sitta carolinensis*
European Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris*
Bohemian Waxwing - *Bombycilla garrulus*
Evening Grosbeak (VU) - *Coccothraustes vespertinus*
Pine Grosbeak - *Pinicola enucleator*
Common Redpoll - *Acanthis flammea*
Red Crossbill - *Loxia curvirostra*
White-winged Crossbill - *Loxia leucoptera*
Pine Siskin - *Spinus pinus*
American Goldfinch - *Spinus tristis*
Fox Sparrow - *Passerella iliaca*
House Sparrow - *Passer domesticus*

MAMMAL LIST. 6 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.

American Red Squirrel - *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*
Eastern Cottontail - *Sylvilagus floridanus*
American (Pine) Marten - *Martes americana*
Bobcat - *Lynx rufus*
Moose - *Alces alces*
White-tailed deer - *Odocoileus virginianus*



Yes, that is a Northern Hawk-Owl on top of the tree behind the group.



Snowy Owl