



Great Gray Owl - The Phantom of the North, one of the biggest targets and our first bird of the tour!

Minnesota

Northwoods Winter Adventure

Tour Leaders: Tyler Ficker & Eric Ripma

January 22-27, 2022

January 23 – Sax-Zim Bog

After arriving in Duluth and enjoying a welcome dinner the night before, the group set out early to arrive at Sax-Zim Bog right at sunrise in hopes of finding a Great Gray Owl hunting the roadsides. This plan worked out great and we were enjoying our first Great Gray a mere 10 minutes after sunrise! We continued through the north half of the bog picking up many of the classic boreal targets such as Evening Grosbeak, Pine Grosbeak, Boreal Chickadee, and Common Redpoll. The group then stopped for a warm lunch before heading back out for an afternoon birding the southern half of Sax-Zim Bog.

Boreal Chickadee



Following lunch, we started out visiting a few feeder setups near our lunch location and saw a Porcupine feeding up in one of the trees! While we were watching this awesome mammal, a group of White-winged Crossbills made a brief appearance before disappearing off into the forest. One feeder setup provided excellent side-by-side comparison views of Common and Hoary Redpolls. We stopped to see a Northern Shrike sitting up at the top of one of the spruce trees as it hunted.

Later in the afternoon, we decided to visit where a Snowy Owl had been being seen in the bog and much to our surprise, we were able to enjoying a point blank Snowy Owl AND a great look at a Great Gray Owl from the same spot! It was awesome being able to see the largest owl by weight (Snowy) and length (Great Gray) in the US at the same time. One more drive down a nearby road yielded our third and final Great Gray of the day.

January 24 - Duluth, Two Harbors, Grand Marais

This day was spent in search of Bohemian Waxwings. Due to the nature of this species in the winter, they were going to prove to be tricky to track down. Several towns had flocks going around to different fruiting trees and feeding. Our first spot along the lake in Duluth yielded a couple of Bald Eagles, a Peregrine Falcon, and Common Goldeneye. A little further north in Two Harbors, a Red-breasted Merganser and 4 distant Long-tailed Ducks joined the Common Goldeneye Flocks. Once we made it to the north shore of Lake Superior in Grand Marais, we finally came across a flock of Bohemian Waxwings in one of the neighborhoods. We also saw an overwintering Rusty Blackbird and were treated to scope views of a White-winged Crossbill that showed off for a while. Following lunch, we started the drive back to Duluth.



Snowy Owl

January 25 - Sax-Zim Bog

Our day in Sax-Zim Bog was spent focusing a bit more on some of the more difficult birds that we hadn't come across yet. We started the morning at a feeder setup hoping to see the Sharp-tailed Grouse that are known to come into the feeders. After a bit of waiting, two birds came in and stayed for quite some time! The nearby trees held quite a few Black-billed Magpies as well. Following lunch, we visited another feeder setup where we got to enjoy many close Wild Turkeys including quite a few smoke-phase individuals, a light and gray color morph. The feeder setups included many of the usual but great boreal species as the day before.

Canada Jay



Common Redpoll



January 26 - Superior National Forest, Ely

Our final day was going to be spent cruising roads in Superior National Forest in search of several of the more difficult species. Our first stop looking for Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers did not have either of the woodpeckers despite evidence of them foraging in the area. We did, however, get great looks at a Ruffed Grouse feeding high in the aspens along the road. A nearby feeder setup at one of the houses provided yet another great comparison between Common and Hoary Redpolls! After lunch in Ely, we drove around town looking for another Bohemian Waxwing flock, hoping to improve on the group from before. Although we found a smaller group of 3, they were more cooperative and allowed for longer looks than the group prior.

We ended the tour with 39 species. However, the quality of the species on this tour is high due to the irruptive nature of many of these species. This area is one of the best places to access many of these boreal birds and makes for a beautiful setting to bird in!

Pine Grosbeak

