Snowy Owl - Our Final Bird of the Tour!

Minnesota
Northwoods Winter Adventure

Tour Leaders: Eric Ripma and Tyler Ficker
January 21-26, 2023
January 22 - Sax-Zim Bog

After arriving in Duluth the day before, the group was eager to begin birding. The birding site for the day was the famous Sax-Zim Bog. This area is home to many target species for the tour. The multiple feeder setups allow for close viewing of several highly anticipated birds. We spent the morning cruising some of the roads in search of owls when we encountered our first bird of the trip, a group of three Ruffed Grouse that fed right on the side of the road. Early in the day, we located the Northern Hawk Owl in the field it has taken a liking to for the season. Although the look was distant, we were still happy to see this highly sought-after species. A visit to two feeder setups allowed for excellent looks at Pine Grosbeak, Canada Jay, Evening Grosbeak, and Pine Siskin. A Boreal Chickadee made a brief appearance with the group of Black-capped that frequented the feeders.

Following lunch, we set back out to look for a few new species. A tiny bit of thawed water yielded a Trumpeter Swan, a rare bird this time of year in the area! We had great scope views of a Northern Shrike that was hunting over one of the nearby fields. The day ended with another visit to the Northern Hawk Owl field only to find it was much closer to the road! We enjoyed far better views than we had earlier in the day!
January 23 – Richard Bong Airport, Canal Park/WLSSD, Two Harbors

Our second day focused on more of the lakefront birds around Duluth and Superior, Wisconsin. A brief stop at Pier B Resort provided Mallards and Herring Gulls, our first waterbirds of the trip. We visited Richard Bong Airport in Wisconsin in hopes of seeing Snowy Owl but unfortunately came up empty-handed. On our way up the shore, we stopped at a recycling drop-off center where we watched Bald Eagles and the northern subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk fly overhead. The highlights here were adults of both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. The Glaucous sat in the open and allowed for great scope views and the Iceland Gull provided a great learning experience as it flew over and showed off the faint wing-tip pattern. A visit back to the hotel provided a large raft of Red-breasted and Common Mergansers at a relatively close range. Common Goldeneyes flew past as well. On our way to Two Harbors, we visited a nearby neighborhood where we relocated the continuing Townsend’s Solitaire which is overwintering this year.

Following lunch, the group made a stop along the lakefront at Two Harbors where we had better looks at Common Goldeneye and added new species such as Redhead, Bufflehead, and Canada Goose. We made a stop at Lester River Park and enjoyed a nice walk through the boreal forest.
January 25 – Sax-Zim Bog

The third day of birding brought us back to Sax-Zim Bog to see some of the remaining species we hadn’t crossed paths with yet. We didn’t find any Great Gray Owls in the morning and began our search for Black-billed Magpies in the farms south of the bog. As soon as we saw the magpie, word came in of a Great Gray being seen. We rushed there just in time to see it shortly before it began hunting and flew out of sight. On our way to lunch, we found some Common Redpolls collecting grit on the roadside.

Following lunch, we walked the boardwalk at Winterberry Bog and were treated to many more Common Redpolls and much better views. We enjoyed photography opportunities here and the Admiral Road feeders before returning to Duluth for dinner.
January 25 - Superior National Forest, Two Harbors, Richard Bong Airport

The group departed early to head north into Superior National Forest in search of less commonly found species. We birded along a stretch of road that had experienced a large burn in search of Black-backed Woodpeckers. At one of our first stops, we had a fantastic look at a cooperative male Black-backed Woodpecker that sat in the scope’s view for quite some time!

Following the excitement of the woodpecker, we made a final visit to Richard Bong Airport in the afternoon to hopefully see the Snowy Owls that we had not been able to locate earlier in the trip. We hadn’t even arrived at the airport and found one of them sitting on a light post above the nearby Aldi’s! After an incredible look at one of these gorgeous birds, we drove down the airport road and very quickly located a second Snowy Owl! This individual was a much darker and more heavily marked individual, allowing us to enjoy the variation in this species at different ages/sexes. This was a fantastic way to end a great trip! This was our 44th and final species for the tour!