Great Gray Owl - One of two we saw!

Minnesota
Northwoods Winter Adventure

Tour Leader: Tyler Ficker
January 20-25, 2024
January 21 - Sax-Zim Bog

We spent the first full day of birding at the famous Sax-Zim Bog. Although we had seen some American Crows and Common Ravens on the drive up, our first bird when we arrived at the bog was Northern Hawk Owl! This was one of the trip's primary target species, and we were excited to have seen it that quickly. We visited some of the feeders throughout the area and were treated to great views of large flocks of Common Redpolls on nearly every feeder setup. A Boreal Chickadee made a quick appearance at one stop, but we knew we would want to return for better views later in the trip. As we cruised the roads in search of owls that evening, an American Pine Marten made an appearance on one of the feeder setups! Just before we left the bog, we spotted a group of Ruffed Grouse feeding in a distant tree.
January 22 – Sax-Zim Bog, Plum Creek Road

We returned to Sax-Zim Bog the next day, hoping for a Great Gray Owl. Although we didn’t find any that morning, we had brief looks at a few Pine Grosbeaks, a species in very low numbers this year. As we birded the open habitat on the south side of the bog, we enjoyed Black-billed Magpies, one of which flew low over the car. After lunch, we ventured about an hour north of the bog to look for some different species. While we didn’t find any new species at this stop, we enjoyed a second Northern Hawk Owl right along the side of the road and a flock of chickadees that provided better looks at a Boreal Chickadee while also allowing for a great comparison of the calls between that and the Black-capped Chickadees. We returned to the bog that evening and enjoyed a beautiful sunset with a Great Gray Owl!
January 23 – Duluth and Two Harbors

Having spent time with both target owl species, we decided to bird the lakefront and neighborhoods in Duluth to add a different set of birds to the trip list. Within walking distance of the hotel, we had Common Goldeneyes, Red-breasted and Common Mergansers, and a beautiful male Long-tailed Duck! We then cruised the nearby neighborhoods in search of the nomadic flock of Bohemian Waxwings that feed on the fruiting trees. After some searching, we found a flock of nearly 60 Bohemian Waxwings accompanied by a few Cedar Waxwings. We then drove along the lakefront to have lunch in Two Harbors before returning to Duluth to continue birding. A visit to a tree recycling site in search of gulls quickly turned into an eagle show as 14 Bald Eagles vocalized and chased each other around. We later located the gull flock closer to the hotel, where we had an excellent opportunity to study adult and juvenile Glaucous Gulls in the herring-dominated flock.
January 24 - Sax-Zim Bog

For our final morning of birding, we returned to Sax-Zim Bog, hoping to add a few more species to the trip. Our first stop finally gave us the close and open views of Boreal Chickadee we had hoped for! We visited Mary Lou’s feeder setup. As soon as we got out of the car, we found a group of six Red Crossbills right above the car. Purple Finches and a large group of Pine Siskins on the feeders were new species for the trip. After we enjoyed some photography opportunities at the feeders, a few female Evening Grosbeaks stole the show. After lunch, we walked a couple of the boardwalks through the forest in search of Black-backed Woodpeckers. We found evidence of them chiseling the bark off but could not locate the birds. As we went to bird the southern part of the bog again, we passed the Northern Hawk Owl we had seen before and enjoyed significantly closer views than we had before. We ended the bird with an even closer Great Gray Owl that put on quite a show for us. It was the perfect way to finish the trip.

We ended with 42 species, covering many of the target species for this tour!