

**Greg Miller Big Year Series: MINNESOTA "WINTER OWLS"**  
**February 21–25, 2018**

*Trip report and photos by Tom Reed*



**Day One: Wednesday, February 21**

Unlike the previous year, when snow caused the delayed arrival of tour participants, this time the plane arrived a full 30 minutes early! Pleased with the extra time, we made a quick stop at the hotel to switch into cold-weather gear and then headed out for our first evening of birding. We first visited Brighton Beach, situated on Lake Superior at the north end of Duluth, where we enjoyed some fascinating ice formations and our first few birds of the trip: Mallard, Red-breasted Merganser, and Herring Gull. We then headed inland a bit, to an area that was holding a number of Great Gray Owls. After about 90 minutes of searching we found our first Great Gray, perched high along an unplowed driveway in the middle of a quiet stretch of forest. As the sun dropped below the horizon we found another two, no more than 100 yards apart! It was a great start to our adventure.

## **Day Two: Thursday, February 22**

It was our first full day in the field, and we picked up where we left off: on the hunt for Great Gray Owls. We located 5 in short order, including 3 in a single field that offered some nice photo opportunities. In between we made a couple stops along the lakeshore, where the -12°F morning produced some spectacular “lake smoke” over Superior, an amazing sight to behold. Pleased with this, we continued north and west to Sax-Zim Bog. We stopped at a number of locations within this famous birding hotspot—some that offered bird feeders (and one that offered a heated port-a-john!), others seemingly out in the middle of nowhere, and others where we had a specific target bird in mind. It was a beautiful day and the birds cooperated nicely. Highlights included Boreal Owl and Northern Hawk Owl, hundreds of Common and multiple Hoary redpolls, Evening and Pine grosbeaks, Gray Jays, and several Northern Shrikes. As night approached we again lucked out with several more Great Gray Owls right along the road, bringing our day total to **10** Great Grays!

## **Day Three: Friday, February 23**

The previous night brought with it a decent little snowstorm, with over half a foot of the white stuff falling in the Duluth area. We gave the snowplow drivers a little extra time to clear up the roads before getting on our way. Given the late start, we did a little general exploring and sightseeing along the north shore of Lake Superior, taking in some picturesque old barns and some of the natural beauty along the lake. We enjoyed a wonderful brunch in the town of Two Harbors before exploring some birding sites there. A search of the adjacent Agate Bay revealed a mixed raft of Long-tailed Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers. Later we traveled to Gooseberry Falls State Park, where the feeders were jamming with Black-capped Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and a less-expected Dark-eyed Junco. Overall, though, it was a slower day for birding, as happens at times here in winter. We threw in the towel a little early and enjoyed a great dinner near the hotel.

## **Day Four: Saturday, February 24**

It was the last full day of our tour, and so it was off to Sax-Zim Bog one more time to track down some species we didn't see on our first visit. We met the sunrise at a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, where several were already dancing and others were putting on an amazing show at a nearby feeding station. From here we had to drive just another mile to find our first Great Gray Owl of the day, a true stunner in the early-morning sun. We then wound our way through the various roads that transect the bog, picking up a highly coveted American Three-toed Woodpecker, another half dozen Northern Shrikes, our first and only Black-billed Magpies, and several more Gray Jays. We were delighted to cross paths with a Boreal Owl again and, while waiting for another group to arrive, found out that a Northern Hawk Owl was showing well and no more than a mile away! We savored extended views of the Hawk Owl, both perched and in flight. On our way out of the bog we encountered a few Wild Turkeys and, at our last stop, a Black-backed Woodpecker (a species we had missed at numerous other stops along the way). There were a few hours of daylight remaining, so we drove back south and crossed the bridge into Superior, Wisconsin, where we explored the unique Wisconsin Point and nearby environs. We finished with a couple stops in Duluth, where we found two Snowy Owls. It was the perfect way to end our owl-centric trip!

Birding this region in winter is a truly unique experience, and as always, local and visiting birders help made our experience that much better. Special thanks go to Frank Nicoletti, John Richardson, and Steve Kolbe for their help in the field. I offer my sincerest thanks to the participants, who braved the cold and snow in the name of fun birding and great adventures. I hope you enjoyed the week as much as I did, and I hope to be birding with you again sometime soon!