

Greg Miller Big Year Series: "WINTER OWLS" February 7–12, 2017



Trip report and photos by Tom Reed

Day One: Tuesday, February 7

In classic Minnesota fashion, our hardy participants arrived into Duluth just as a snowstorm was ending! Luckily, we experienced only the slightest of delays and were even able to get out for some late-day birding. After dropping gear at the hotel, we made a couple brief stops in the Duluth area. First up was Canal Park, where massive Great Lakes freighters roll in and out of port during the warmer months, and where gulls and waterfowl congregate during the colder months. On this visit, all we found was a very fierce Lake Superior (extremely impressive on its own!) and no birds. As the last few storm clouds cleared out and the sun was setting, we were able to locate our first Snowy Owl of the trip (and the first lifer for a participant!) in nearby Superior, Wisconsin, with the help of some friends. We celebrated our first success with a great dinner of wild rice burgers and local fish.

Day Two: Wednesday, February 8

It was our first full day in the field, so we headed to the world famous Sax-Zim Bog, about 45 minutes north of Duluth. The temperature at sunrise was an icy -11°F, but no matter, we were on a mission! Our main quarry today was the majestic Great Gray Owl, and we quickly connected with one thanks again to on-the-ground intel from another guide friend. This would be a

relatively brief encounter--but we certainly wouldn't be done with Great Grays for this tour, not at all! The rest of the day was spent touring this spruce-tamarack winter wonderland, where we enjoyed Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Gray Jays, Ruffed Grouse, Snow Buntings, White-winged Crossbills, Common Redpolls, and a Rough-legged Hawk. Come evening we were back on the prowl for Great Grays, and encountered the same individual from earlier in the day—but this time we watched it hunt for nearly 30 minutes! It was truly special to share the sunset with this majestic predator.



Day Three: Thursday, February 9

Today we made our first trip into Lake County, heading northward and uphill into the Superior National Forest. It was also here that we encountered the coldest temperatures of the tour (-16°F at sunrise!). Our early start would be richly rewarded when we encountered a male Spruce Grouse in the middle of a road, and were able to watch for 10 minutes before it eventually retreated into the woods. This was the best look any of us had ever enjoyed of the species, and was a lifer for one participant. The rest of the morning was spent exploring the vast, snow-covered wilderness of the National Forest, where we eventually encountered another of our primary targets: Black-backed Woodpecker. Unfortunately, we weren't able to detect any Boreal Chickadees, but knew we'd have more chances to find them. After a delicious, locally sourced lunch we explored the Two Harbors area where a wintering Townsend's Solitaire was eventually found near the lakeshore, and where we also enjoyed a raft of 10 Long-tailed Ducks and several dozen Red-breasted Mergansers. We caught word of a Northern Saw-whet Owl about 15 minutes away, but by the time we arrived the Saw-whet had been replaced by a Great Gray! We were able to enjoy the big bruiser at close range for quite a while, and all agreed that it was (once again) the perfect way to end the day.



Day Four: Friday, February 10

Our objective today was to explore the North Shore of Lake Superior, by way of scenic Highway 61. Early morning snow and freezing rain made for a slow go of it, but we weren't in any particular hurry. We made stops at various State Parks and other birding sites on our way to Grand Marais, a summer vacation destination that doubles as an interesting place for odd birds. This winter was no exception, and one particular feeding station in town provided us with a fun mix of birds: Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Siskin, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Purple Finch, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Cardinal, and Common Grackle, among others. The grackle is quite rare here in midwinter! A couple scans of the harbor produced our first Common Goldeneye and the only Canada Geese of the trip. After a quick lunch at Sven & Ole's (the Uffda pizza was a real hit!), we retraced our steps south on Highway 61 and back toward Duluth, enjoying the rugged and dramatic beauty of the shoreline the whole way. We had to hit the brakes for a River Otter that crossed the road, and also paused to admire a roadside congregation of Common Ravens and Bald Eagles feeding on a deer carcass. In the evening we returned to Superior, where the temperature was a remarkable 40°F (yes, a full 56 degrees warmer than Thursday morning!). We enjoyed great views of two more Snowy Owls at the Bong Airport, bringing our total for the tour up to three.



Day Five: Saturday, February 11

We returned to the Sax-Zim Bog for another morning of birding, and to “clean up” a few species we missed earlier in the week. First up was Sharp-tailed Grouse, and although it took some patience we eventually located a group of 8 at a roadside feeding station, and were even able to hear them vocalizing! The open-country habitat here also yielded the only Black-billed Magpie of our adventure. Next up was Boreal Chickadee. We soon arrived at Admiral Road and, after enjoying the antics of Gray Jays for 20 minutes, were delighted to find 2 Boreal Chickadees with a large flock of Black-capped. This was a very meaningful life bird for one participant, and we all soaked up this special moment. Brunch at the Wilbert Café came next, and was followed by yet another scenic drive back to Two Harbors and the lakeshore. The main target here was Eurasian Tree Sparrow, a stray that we had missed on our two previous attempts. The third time was the charm for this multi-participant life bird! We ended the day at nearby Castle Danger, where a Great Gray Owl once again provided the perfect finishing touch to a successful day afield.



Day Six: Sunday, February 12

Our final morning was bright and sunny but quite windy. We investigated a few locations in Superior and then returned to Duluth, where the wastewater treatment plant offered up a rare-in-winter Red-winged Blackbird and our only Sharp-shinned Hawk. A midday visit to Canal Park finally produced a couple adult Thayer's Gulls and a brief look at a Glaucous Gull, plus a small collection of waterfowl that contained Common Mergansers, Common Goldeneye, Mallards, and a handful of American Black Ducks. The Black Ducks would end up being our 55th and final species for the tour. We ended with one final lunch and then said our goodbyes at the Duluth Airport.

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 Glenn Olsen 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!



