

MINNESOTA WINTER OWLS : Feb 6–11, 2011

TRIP REPORT and photos by Adrian Binns



I escaped the deep snows of Philadelphia by going to Minnesota for a short winter birding trip with an intrepid group of California Ladies; Ann, Janis and Michelle, none of whom have ever felt a northern winter! With constant, below-zero temperatures, this was definitely a new experience for them!

We spent much time northwest of Duluth, at the zenith of Minnesota winter birding hotspots, Sax-Zim Bog, named for two gentlemen, neither of whom were birders. This region is characterized by a mixture of farms, fields, mixed woods and spruce bogs, with a smattering of small hamlets. Was it cold? Absolutely! We maintained at least a 100-degree difference between inside our vehicle and outside. 90-degrees inside to keep us cozy and limber enough to withstand temperatures as low as minus-27 when we stepped outside into the arctic air.



On such a northern winter trip, the focus is on the quality of bird species, not quantity. Owls are the big target, and we were not disappointed. Northern Hawk Owl is best spotted at the very tops of trees surveying the landscape, and that is exactly how Janis spotted our first one. The second one (above) was ridiculously confiding, landing just a few feet away and staring at us with a scornful look.



On our second full day in the bog, we enjoyed excellent views of the majestic Great Grey Owl (left). We saw this bird the previous night only briefly at dusk, after searching up and down the road for over an hour. We were keen to relocate it and, luckily, Michelle spotted it beside the road. It flew into the woods, then out onto a tall stump, where we watched it peer downwards and rotate its head in all directions, looking and listening for a rodent.

Many feeding stations are located along the roads of Sax-Zim bog region – some are free-standing set-ups seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and others are maintained in residential yards, where visitation is generally welcomed. Steady streams of Black-capped Chickadees flew back and forth from feeders to trees enjoying a buffet of suet and seeds. Occasionally, a Boreal Chickadee (below) and a handful of Red-breasted Nuthatches joined in the activity.



We examined sporadic flocks of Common Redpolls (below right) hoping for a Hoary; only one individual was a possible candidate. Every feeder station featured a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers, and most feeders attracted about a dozen Pine Grosbeaks. At one station we saw one Pine Siskin and three Gray Jays (below left).



With two owls and wintering passerines already ‘ticked’, we were pleased with our progress, and looking forward to a few more chilly days in the north country.

Our winter birding trip to Minnesota was proving very successful, with great looks at Northern Hawk Owl and Great Gray Owl, as well as Pine Grosbeak, Gray Jay and Boreal Chickadee at some of the numerous feeders in the Sax-Zim bog region. Sub-zero temperatures reigned, as we continued on to explore the Duluth/Superior area, in search of additional species to augment our small but impressive list. We were fortunate to find 3 different immature Snowy Owls (below). Two of them were located predictably in snow-covered fields. The third was perched at the top of a tall evergreen tree, at the edge of a residential neighborhood. All 3 Snowies were wing-tagged with blue markers, the subjects of a long-running, local research project.



At Canal Park in Duluth we saw only a few gulls, but they were good ones – Glaucous and Thayer’s flying in circles over the frozen jetties. At the Superior Landfill Bald Eagles flushed huge groups of larids, enabling us to pick out several Iceland Gulls of different ages. Further up the Lake Superior scenic shoreline (right), bodies of open water yielded some hardy waterfowl, including numerous Common Goldeneye, a few female Common Mergansers and a flock of Long-tailed Ducks.



We were thrilled when Ann spotted a Sharp-tailed Grouse near the top of a maple tree. Looking around, we realized there were 3 of them feeding on maple buds. During our travels, we noticed scattered groups of Ruffed Grouse along the side of the road. One evening at dusk, we watched one drop from onto the ground from 10 feet up in a shrub, then wiggle itself down into the snow and out of sight (below). It popped back up briefly with snow on its head, to our great amusement and delight. It was obviously settling in for the night, perfectly warm and protected inside it’s wintery roost.



We spent our last day sweeping the area for any missed species. We found a half-dozen Evening Grosbeaks (below left) at a backyard feeder, and added Wild Turkeys, Ring-necked Pheasant, Dark-eyed Junco and a flock of Snow Buntings to our list. We searched unsuccessfully for Grey Partridge, though we did see tracks and evidence in the snow.



Our woodpecker tally already included Hairy, Downy and Pileated, and we were hoping to add the two three-toed species to our list. We were rewarded with excellent views of a male Black-backed Woodpecker (above right) energetically flaking large pieces of bark from a dead evergreen.



Our Minnesota winter birding trip ended with an impressive number of 45 bird species and 3 mammals – White-tailed Deer, Coyote and Red Squirrel (above).