

MINNESOTA TRIP REPORT Feb 21-25, 2019

by Debbie Beer; photos Adrian Binns
Leaders: Alex Lamoreaux and Chris Brown

Day 1 / Feb 21 - Duluth and Superior

Our winter birding trip to Minnesota began in true seasonal style, with several cancelled and re-routed flights due to snowstorms in Philadelphia and Minnesota. Eventually, nearly all of our group, including leaders Alex Lamoreaux and Chris Brown (minus his luggage), along with Erin, Debbie, Ginny, Gary, and Kathy and I, converged at our hotel in Duluth, and we set off for afternoon birding a little before 3:00 pm. (Participants Sandy and Bob would join us tomorrow morning, after a full day delay).



Caravanning in two vehicles, we crossed the bridge into Superior, Wisconsin, amazed at the vast, snow-covered frozen Lake Superior below. We soon reached the Superior Landfill, where gulls often congregate in great numbers. Today, just a few soared overhead, but one of them was a nice 1st cycle Glaucous Gull, standing out amidst the Herrings. Several Bald Eagles circled overhead, along with more than a dozen Common Ravens.



We moved on to check a small pond located along the entrance road of Enbridge, a natural gas facility containing huge white tanks, towers, and chain link fences. Oblivious to heavy trucks rumbling past, more than 500 Mallards clustered in the open water, flapping and quacking constantly. One male Wood Duck and 3 American Black Ducks huddled among them. While scanning the industrial landscape, Erin spotted our first Snowy Owl perched atop one of the tank towers inside the facility. We enjoyed fine scope views of the wing-tagged bird. A Northern Shrike was spotted atop a nearby tall conifer. Getting ready to leave, another Snowy Owl was spotted perched on a distant electric pole, then another just outside the entrance! It was fascinating to see that all 3 owls featured wing tags numbered 62, 67, and 6(?).

A short distance away, around Richard Bong Airport and the Menard's shopping center, we were delighted to see 3 more Snowy Owls perched on buildings and light poles, all tagged with numbers 60, 63, and 66. Our total of 6 Snowy's was a new one-day trip record!

In the last hour of daylight, we crossed the bridge back to Duluth, and stopped briefly at Port Terminal. In a narrow strip of open water along the north shore of Saint Louis Bay, we scoped 4 Common Goldeneye mixed with a large flock of Mallards and handful of American Black Duck. A Peregrine Falcon stood on sentry on the corner of a tall grain silo near the bridge.

Our day ended with beer, burgers, and good laughs at the "Lucky 13" restaurant across the street from our hotel. Tomorrow would start early, to search for more winter specialties in northern Minnesota.

Day 2 / Feb 22 - Superior National Forest, Ely, and Sax-Zim Bog

We were up and out early, for the drive north into Superior National Forest on a cold, clear morning. We hoped to reach the remote roads before logging vehicles moved through and spooked any roadside Spruce Grouse deeper into the woods. Vehicles were few, but Spruce Grouse remained out of sight on quiet roads. Tall narrow conifers sparkled in the picturesque, snow-covered landscape. Common Ravens swooped overhead, and several Black-capped Chickadees moved through trees. A male Red Crossbill and a flock of Common Redpolls foraged briefly in roadside trees.



We were awed by the beauty of a furry Red Fox that crossed in front of us, then paused to look at us, looking at him! A Red Squirrel gathered pine cones on a nearby branch, showing well for photos.

In the town of Ely, population ~3,400, we stopped for a delicious lunch in the "Boathouse" brewpub and restaurant on the main drag. The walleye fish fry was a big hit with many in our group. No visit would be complete without a stop at the Crapola World Headquarters for coffee, tea, and souvenirs with a sense of humor! In high spirits with full bellies, we looped slowly around minor roads to discover several flocks of Bohemian Waxwings, Pine Grosbeaks, Common Redpolls, and Pine Siskins. Birds were actively feeding on crabapples and mountain ash berries, pausing for great looks.



Turning south, we reached Sax-Zim Bog by mid afternoon. Located about 50 miles north west of Duluth, this area encompasses 300 square miles of wetlands, aspen and conifer groves, meadows, rivers, farms, and even small towns. The mosaic of habitats host several wintering boreal specialties that are made accessible by feeders, trails, a visitors center, and hundreds of acres protected by the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog. Soon we were watching a very confident Northern Hawk Owl, who perched atop a bare gnarled tree, unconcerned with nearby birders and photographers. We were amazed to see it coughing up two pellets! The Sisu feeding station attracted Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Nuthatch, multiple Black-capped Chickadees and a lone Pine Siskin. In the last hour of daylight we scanned several likely spots for Great Gray Owl. A snow squall reduced visibility and pushed us back to Duluth without seeing this major target. Tomorrow would bring more chances.



Alex, who had lived in Duluth while counting raptors from the Hawk Ridge, recommended one of his favorite places, "Pizza Luce," for gourmet pizza and craft brews. It did not disappoint, especially with colorful watercolors of owls and ravens on the walls!

Day 3 / Feb 23 - Sax-Sim Bog

Fueled by Caribou Coffee, we headed back to Sax-Zim Bog in search of Great Gray Owl. Snow swirled early, but temps hovered at a balmy 30 degrees for most of the day. We tracked up and down highway 7, and snow-covered dirt roads, looking for any 'large blobs' on a tree branch at the edge of a clearing.

We lingered at the Sax-Zim Bog Visitors Center where multiple feeders attracted a dizzying array of hungry birds. Hundreds of Common Redpolls clustered in trees and around seed hoppers, vying with some Pine Siskins. Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches snatched seeds in constant motion. Dozens of Pine Grosbeaks perched on boughs, biding their time to glide down to trays. Blue Jays squawked while a pair of Canada Jays pecked frozen bits from a deer carcass. Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers drummed on tree bark.



Travelling from one end of the Bog to the other, we reached Mary Lou's house, where she welcomed birds and birders with a lively setup of feeders. About 50 stunning Evening Grosbeaks graced her property, along with Black-capped Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Grosbeaks, and redpolls. Debbie found a flock of Wild Turkeys foraging just inside the evergreens on the edge of the open field.



The Admiral Road feeders were just as active, with the now-familiar assortment of chickadees, redpolls, and woodpeckers eagerly snatching seeds or pecking suet bags. A Boreal Chickadee joined the flock briefly before disappearing for a long while. We held our breath as an American Marten emerged from the woods, unable to resist snatching a chunk of peanut butter in full view. It paused a moment to look at us before vanishing under snow-covered trees.

Lunch was eagerly devoured at the Wilbert Cafe, a casual diner with homemade dishes, and old-fashioned signs on the walls (a flyer from 1966

advertised the "Poachers Ball" on November 10. Guess what day hunting season began?!). Full and satisfied, we set out to search for Black-backed Woodpecker in the Warren Nelson Memorial Bog. We walked single-file down a snow-packed boardwalk trail, watching chickadees flit around, and listening for tapping. The two common woodpeckers, Downy and Hairy, were busy working the trees, and a Pileated Woodpecker was heard in the distance. A Northern Shrike alighted at the top of a spruce while calling White-winged Crossbills flew over. We checked the many Common Redpolls flocking at feeders near the trailhead entrance (no Hoary Redpolls among them), and spotted a Black-billed Magpie flying across the road. Our target Black-backed Woodpecker eluded the group, so we moved on.

On the southern end of the Bog, we sought a reported Snowy Owl hanging-out in a field. It was a special treat for Sandy and Bob, who missed out on the 6 Snowy Owls we saw on our first afternoon. We enjoyed excellent views of this immature sitting high atop an electric tower. Erin spotted two Bald Eagles perched together in a distant tree. Back on McDavitt Road, the Northern Hawk Owl was perched just two trees away from its location yesterday, providing additional photo ops. We spent the remainder of the afternoon scanning three roads where Great Gray Owls had been reported in the last 48 hours. Alas, our efforts were unsuccessful, except for a pair of Snow Buntings that Sandy spotted on railway tracks.



Our dinner tonight was Mexican food at Azteca, where we sampled fajitas, burritos, and margaritas.

Day 4 / Feb 24 - Sax-Zim Bog



Our last full day in northern Minnesota was quite memorable. We started early amid frigid temps and wind gusts of 30-40 mph, yielding a wind chill factor well into minus degrees. Overnight snowfall was blowing hard, reducing visibility, and sinking hopes of seeing the elusive Great Gray Owl - or any birds - perched in the open. Still, we continued to Sax-Zim Bog to look for the big trip target.

We were delighted to see a Sharp-tailed Grouse on the edge of the Racek Road lek. A small woodland grove provided shelter from howling winds and driving snow, allowing the bird to forage cautiously under feeders. Wind-swept snow drifts accumulated on rural roads as the day wore on, challenging navigation and birding. We managed to see the expected species while checking North Yoki Road, Warren Nelson Bog, various feeders, and the Visitor Center - Common Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak, Evening Grosbeak, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Blue Jay, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Black-capped Chickadees, Bald Eagle, and Common Raven.



After lunch at the Wilbert Cafe - really the only choice within many miles - we ventured to the Winterberry Bog. The feeders at the entrance were full of Black-capped Chickadees and Common Redpolls along with appearances from a Pine Siskin and Red-breasted Nuthatch. Alex guided us on a winding trail through a dense conifer woods. Birds were quiet, which was just as well, as we concentrated on walking atop the tamped-down snow, not falling into 2-foot deep holes! Back at the cars, Alex and Chris provided afternoon entertainment with a spontaneous "regional snow-diving competition" jumping head-first into deep snow banks!



Still bubbling with laughter, we headed to another section of the bog to re-focus on target birds. Alas, snow drifts had piled high on a wind-swept open road, and managed to turn my big all-wheel drive into an unseen roadside ditch. We shoveled, pushed, and stuffed branches under tires, but the icy surface gave no traction for the giant vehicle. Leaving Alex to wait for the tow truck, we spent the last 2 hours of the day looking for Great Gray Owl. We found Snow Buntings on railroad tracks and White-winged Crossbills, but no big owl.

This evening at the "Lucky 13" restaurant, we enjoyed good food, delicious beer, and plenty of laughs. From howling winds and frigid temps, to snow-diving and getting stuck in a snow ditch, we relished such a storied day in Sax-Zim Bog!

Day 5 / Feb 25 - Sax-Zim Bog

This morning dawned cold, clear, and quiet. We departed our hotel early, with few words exchanged, knowing this was our final chance to find the elusive Great Gray Owl. We smiled at the brilliant sunrise that flashed double sun dogs. Our vehicle registered minus-16 degrees in the bog, and snow sparkled in the picturesque landscape. While scanning for Great Gray on Route 7, Kathy spotted a Northern Goshawk perched in silhouette against the rising sun. The bird flew across the road and landed again. Scope views revealed it to be a beautiful adult, all gray with a black eyebrow - a rare and wonderful treat!



We chose our route carefully, mindful of snow drifts that hadn't been plowed off wide open roads. The Northern Hawk Owl continued at its favorite perch on McDavitt Road and also seen in flight. On North Yoki Road, we saw a pair of Canada Jays, and finally found a male Black-backed Woodpecker pecking intently on a stand of half-dead trees. Snow Buntings continued looking for grit on the railroad tracks. Finally, it was time to return back to Duluth. A quick stop at Canal Park, overlooking the frozen Lake Superior, produced a lone female Common Goldeneye huddling in a patch of open water, and a flock of flyover Common Mergansers.



Our winter boreal birding trip ended after exciting adventures, wonderful new friends, and 39 bird species. Mammal sightings included White-tailed Deer, Red Fox, Red Squirrel, and American Marten. Thanks to everyone who joined in the fun!