

NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND

JANUARY 28 – FEBRUARY 1, 2009

LEADER: KIM ECKERT

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

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Leader: Kim Eckert

Tour Summary:

This may very well be the only tour on VENT's schedule in which the weather report draws as much curiosity as the bird list. There is good reason for this, given that those on a past tour once birded the Sax-Zim Bog as the temperature hit 48 below, and we saw that day in Duluth warm up to a "high" of only minus 21—and that was without any wind-chill factor! (That was also the day back in 1996 when Minnesota's all-time low was recorded north of Duluth in the town of Tower: 60 degrees below zero.)

It wasn't quite that cold this year, though we were out birding in the Superior National Forest on Day 3 in temperatures that bottomed out at minus 26, a colder reading than any of the participants had ever experienced. But the morning was beautiful in its own way, since it was sunny, there was no wind, and there were some pretty cool birds to see.

A male **Spruce Grouse** quite unexpectedly and miraculously posed for us for at least 10 minutes on Highway 1, and not a single vehicle went by to scare it off the road. (And this was after we found some scattered feathers from a recently road-killed Spruce Grouse.) Shortly thereafter, an **American Three-toed Woodpecker**, which had not been reported for a month, drummed away on some snags along another road where we fed our first **Gray Jays**. **Pine Grosbeaks** and both **White-winged and Red crossbills** were also present that morning, and a concerted search finally located a few **Bohemian Waxwings** in nearby Ely, about the only place where this erratic specialty was being seen this winter.

As noteworthy as minus 26 degrees is, the weather on the afternoon of Day 4 was even more remarkable. The day began west of Duluth in Aitkin County with a scarcity of hoped-for Sharp-tailed Grouse (and too many snowmobiles), but nice consolations were our only **Evening Grosbeaks** at a nearby bird feeder and some roadside **Snow Buntings**. After lunch back in Duluth, we headed over the bridge to Superior where we found **Glaucous Gulls** at the landfill (to complement an earlier adult **Thayer's** in Knife River) and our second **Snowy Owl** on the bay ice (our first Snowy had been on Day 2 before dawn near the Duluth airport). But just as interesting was the high temperature that afternoon: 44 degrees *above* zero—that is, some 25 degrees above normal, and 70 degrees warmer than the previous day!

Day 4 ended back in the Two Harbors area northeast of Duluth, where a timely phone call provided us with our *second* staked-out **Boreal Owl** of the tour. We had also been in Two Harbors about a half hour before sunset on Day 2 when another phone call reported a Boreal Owl back in Duluth. A frantic drive got us to this owl on time as dusk fell, but this one on Day 4 provided us with longer and more leisurely views. By the way, two Boreal Owls is two more than usual for this tour. None are seen in a typical winter, but this January several were randomly

appearing, usually hunting mice by someone's bird feeders, and it was a matter of luck if you got their phone call in time.

Speaking of owls, we were able to see no fewer than *five* **Northern Hawk Owls** (a grand total of one is more normal). We repeatedly saw the first one on Day 1 just a mile from the airport as arriving tour participants were picked up, three were in the Sax-Zim Bog (where we spent at least some time on three of our five days), and the other was a distant, non-staked-out bird near Two Harbors.

And speaking of Sax-Zim, Minnesota's most famous bog was as productive as always, and well worth three separate visits. Three handsome and refreshingly obvious male **Hoary Redpolls** appeared at some seasonal roadside bird feeders set up by area residents, and normally reclusive **Boreal Chickadees** cooperatively appeared at suet at these feeders. Sax-Zim also produced our only **Ruffed Grouse**, **Black-backed Woodpeckers**, and **Black-billed Magpies**, along with some additional Northern Shrikes, Gray Jays, Snow Buntings, and Pine Grosbeaks.

Yes, we did miss a few birds of note that were around. But there were fewer such misses than normal, and it was at least some consolation that the most obvious of these (a certain big gray owl) was also eluding virtually all the other birders who were out that week. Accordingly, given all those other owls, grouse, woodpeckers, and the rest, this was certainly one of our most successful winter tours ever—and not even the coldest.

Itinerary:

January 28 - Between three afternoon trips to the airport to meet tour participants, there is time to see a N. Hawk Owl a mile from the terminal and to briefly look (unsuccessfully) for a Snowy Owl near the airport runway. Dinner at Blackwoods.

January 29 - Return to the airport for another (successful) Snowy Owl search, and rest of morning in the Sax-Zim Bog, especially along McDavitt (N. Hawk Owl and Black-backed Woodpecker), Admiral (Boreal Chickadee and Hoary Redpoll), and Sax (another N. Hawk Owl) roads; return to Duluth for lunch, Canal Park, drive to Two Harbors (via a Thayer's Gull in Knife River), and a mad dash back to Duluth to see our first staked-out Boreal Owl before dark. Dinner at Pickwick.

January 30 - Pre-dawn departure for Lake Co. Rd. 2 (White-winged Crossbills and a pile of road-killed Spruce Grouse feathers), Highway 1 (Red Crossbills and a live Spruce Grouse), Spruce Rd. (Am. Three-toed Woodpecker), and Ely (lunch and Bohemian Waxwings); afternoon return via an Embarrass feeder to Sax-Zim Bog (N. Shrike but no Great Grays). Dinner at Blackwoods.

January 31 - Morning drive to Aitkin Co. (Evening Grosbeaks at Orjala's feeders but no Sharp-tailed Grouse near Tamarack); return to Duluth/Superior for lunch, Glaucous Gulls at the landfill, another Snowy Owl at Barker's Island, Canal Park, and late afternoon drive to the Two Harbors area (another staked-out Boreal Owl on Valley Rd., another N. Hawk Owl on Stanley Rd., but no Great Grays). Dinner at Lake Avenue Cafe.

February 1 - Pre-dawn return to Sax-Zim Bog: especially Co. Rd. 47, Owl Ave. (Ruffed Grouse and Hoary Redpoll), Arkola Rd. (another Boreal Chickadee and Hoary Redpoll), Stickney Rd., McDavitt

Rd. (another N. Hawk Owl but still no Great Grays); late-morning return to Duluth and departure for home.

Bird List:

American Black Duck

Mallard

Common Goldeneye

Common Merganser

Red-breasted Merganser

Ruffed Grouse

Spruce Grouse

Bald Eagle

Herring Gull

Thayer's Gull

Glaucous Gull

Rock Pigeon

Snowy Owl

Northern Hawk Owl

Boreal Owl

Downy Woodpecker

Hairy Woodpecker

American Three-toed Woodpecker

Black-backed Woodpecker

Pileated Woodpecker

Northern Shrike

Gray Jay

Blue Jay

Black-billed Magpie

American Crow

Common Raven

Black-capped Chickadee

Boreal Chickadee

Red-breasted Nuthatch

White-breasted Nuthatch

American Robin

European Starling

Bohemian Waxwing

Snow Bunting

Pine Grosbeak

Red Crossbill

White-winged Crossbill

Common Redpoll

Hoary Redpoll

Pine Siskin

Evening Grosbeak

House Sparrow