

MINNESOTA AND NORTH DAKOTA

JUNE 20-28, 2005

**LEADER:
KIM ECKERT**

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

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

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

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Leader: Kim Eckert

I've long been tired of the old joke that still amuses the tourists: Minnesota's state bird is the mosquito. But, after this tour and all the rains we've had, I have to admit there were times you couldn't see the birds for the mosquitoes. One of those times was when the proverbial forest and the trees were nowhere in sight: our second morning at Chase Lake N.W.R. in North Dakota. (Our first morning there was virtually wiped out by a mix of almost constant rainfall and steady 30+ mph winds, with gusts measured at 49 mph.) The other time the mosquitoes were about as bad as I've ever seen was on our final evening back in Minnesota, as we listened in vain for the Yellow Rails of the McGregor Marsh to start ticking. (Either they never said a word, or they couldn't be heard over the humming of too many mosquitoes.)

But bugs and bad weather are part of the territory here, and on most days the elements were favorable. Minnesota's legendary cold temperatures were certainly non-existent; if anything, it was on the warm side, with one day even having record-breaking highs in the 90s statewide. Accordingly, we mostly had no meteorological alibis if we missed any birds. (Tour leaders hate it when we can't blame our failures on the weather!) But we didn't miss much.

The now-famous Sax-Zim Bog was first on our agenda, and it didn't disappoint. The leading highlights were the two obliging Great Gray Owls still active long after sunrise. We even walked away from both of them: one because of a nearby Black-billed Cuckoo, the other due to the distraction of Black-backed Woodpeckers flying to and from a nearby nest. Elsewhere we encountered yet another distraction, as we had trouble concentrating on the male Connecticut Warbler in the shrubs just a few feet away. It seems two Long-eared Owls were also out hunting in broad daylight along the road! For this highly nocturnal species to be flying around in mid-morning in search of prey was nothing short of amazing; indeed, this was only the second time ever I had observed this.

We next augmented our list of boreal forest birds in the Lake County portion of the Superior National Forest, but more memorable was that evening's drive to Douglas County, Wisconsin. Here, an Upland Sandpiper treated us to a balancing act on a telephone wire high over the road, and just around the corner were two far out-of-range Dickcissels. Later, at dusk, an unexpected American Woodcock stood in the road in front of our van, and on the same road a Whip-poor-will seemed to call forever before eventually flying in and hovering just a few feet away.

My favorite part of this tour has always been the prairie grasslands and wetlands, and this year was no exception. Just before leaving Minnesota, we stopped by the Felton Prairie to watch Greater Prairie-Chickens foraging near their lek and to admire handsome Chestnut-collared Longspurs skylarking low over the prairie. Felton also yielded two nice bonuses: a male Le Conte's Sparrow posing just a few feet off the road, and an out-of-range Rock Wren disappearing into a rock pile with a billful of food. (This species had nested last year at this same spot, a first Minnesota breeding record.)

The best examples of vast and magnificent prairie landscapes lie west of Jamestown, North Dakota, especially around Chase Lake N.W.R. and in adjacent Kidder County. Despite losing much of our time to wind and rain, we again saw birds every bit as impressive as the countryside. Western (and Clark's) Grebes, some with young on their backs and others ritually facing off in courtship displays, brought our grebe total to six species (the only remaining grebe possibility would have to be a Least wandering 1,500 miles off-course). Among many other highlights were our excellent views of Ferruginous Hawks, a species most appropriately named *regalis*.

The two special and most challenging species in this part of North Dakota are Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrow. Both had been relatively easy to find here in the 1980s, but during the following decade both had practically vanished. In recent years, the pipit has been entirely missed by most tours, and just finding a single Baird's Sparrow has become a struggle. But this time there were two Sprague's Pipits doing their unique flight displays, with one of these eventually landing on the road less than 50 feet away! And the sparrow, though still hard to come by, did come through twice, with one heard at one of our pipit spots, and the other close by us at Chase Lake N.W.R. In fact, this latter bird was probably the same individual we had at this exact same spot in 2003 and 2004. Will it still be there in 2006?

Itinerary:

- June 20 - meet in Duluth for dinner (but no evening birding, due to the weather and a delayed participant).
- June 21 - all morning in the Sax-Zim Bog, birding especially along Owl Ave., Stickney and McDavitt Rds.; afternoon along North Shore of L. Superior to Stoney Point.
- June 22 - return to Sax-Zim, birding especially along McDavitt and Stone Lake Rds.; afternoon in the Duluth harbor area and along the St. Louis R.
- June 23 - all day in Lake County, especially Co. Rd. 2 (White Pines Wayside, Greenwood L., Sand R., and Dunka River Rd.), Hwy. 1, Finland area, Hwy. 61 (Beaver Bay to Two Harbors); evening option to Douglas Co., Wis.
- June 24 - drive to Detroit Lakes via the Rabey Tree Farm and Tamarac NWR & vicinity.
- June 25 - morning in Clay County, especially the Felton prairie area; afternoon drive to Jamestown via some Barnes County wetlands west of Valley City.
- June 26 - a stormy and windy day at Chase Lake WMA / NWR and vicinity (western Stutsman County) and Kidder County (including DeWald Slough).
- June 27 - morning return to the Chase Lake area and south of Tappen (for pipits!); afternoon drive to McGregor and a quiet evening in the McGregor Marsh.
- June 28 - final morning at McGregor Marsh & Rice Lake NWR, and return to Duluth.

Key:

B = seen/heard in boreal forest habitats east of Detroit Lakes (June 21-24 & 27-28)

Bw = seen/heard in Wisconsin (partial list, June 23)

P = seen/heard in prairie wetlands, grasslands & woodlands west of Detroit Lakes (June 25-27)

Pnd = seen/heard only in North Dakota (June 25-27)

(y) = young seen

(n) = nest seen

Species in **boldface** indicate the special highlights of the tour: i.e., sought-after specialties or unexpected rarities.

Bird List:

Canada Goose BP (y; AKA Honker!)
Trumpeter Swan B (y; Tamarac NWR)
Wood Duck B (y)
Gadwall Pnd
Mallard BP (y)
Blue-winged Teal BP
Northern Shoveler Pnd (y)
Northern Pintail Pnd
Green-winged Teal Pnd
Canvasback Pnd
Redhead Pnd
Ring-necked Duck B
Lesser Scaup Pnd
Common Goldeneye B (y)
Hooded Merganser B (y)
Common Merganser B
Red-breasted Merganser B
Ruddy Duck Pnd
Ring-necked Pheasant Pnd (y; numbers up this year)
Ruffed Grouse B (standing in the road at Rice Lake NWR!)
Greater Prairie-Chicken P (several foraging in a field near their Felton Prairie lek)
Sharp-tailed Grouse Pnd (good views of an often-elusive species at Chase Lake NWR)
Wild Turkey Pnd (wild?)
Common Loon B (y)
Pied-billed Grebe Pnd
Horned Grebe B (unexpected summering bird on L. Superior)
Red-necked Grebe BP ()
Eared Grebe Pnd (y)
Western Grebe Pnd (y; courting adults!)
Clark's Grebe Pnd (DeWald Slough; only one pair)
American White Pelican P (n)
Double-crested Cormorant BP (n)
American Bittern B (in a Sax-Zim ditch)
Great Blue Heron BP
Great Egret Pnd (these 3 egrets at their northern range limits)
Snowy Egret Pnd
Cattle Egret Pnd
Black-crowned Night-Heron Pnd
White-faced Ibis Pnd (also at its northern range limit)
Turkey Vulture B
Osprey B (n)
Bald Eagle B
Northern Harrier P
Sharp-shinned Hawk B
Broad-winged Hawk B
Swainson's Hawk Pnd ()
Red-tailed Hawk BP (n + y)
Ferruginous Hawk Pnd (two excellent looks at this handsome buteo)

American Kestrel B
 Peregrine Falcon B (downtown Duluth)
 Virginia Rail B (heard-only)
 (Sora / leader-only, heard-only)
 American Coot Pnd
 Sandhill Crane B (McGregor Marsh)
 Killdeer BP (y)
 American Avocet Pnd
 Lesser Yellowlegs Pnd (fall migrants)
 Willet Pnd
 Spotted Sandpiper BP
 Upland Sandpiper BwP
 Marbled Godwit P
 Short-billed Dowitcher Pnd (fall migrants)
 Wilson's Snipe BP
American Woodcock Bw (in the road in front of the van)
 Wilson's Phalarope Pnd
 Franklin's Gull Pnd
 Ring-billed Gull BP (y)
 California Gull Pnd (WalMart customers)
 Herring Gull B
 Caspian Tern Pnd (unexpected summering birds)
 Common Tern B
 Forster's Tern Pnd
 Black Tern BP
 Rock Pigeon BP
 Mourning Dove BP
 Black-billed Cuckoo B (one of these posing near a Great Gray!)
 Great Horned Owl Pnd
Great Gray Owl B (two long looks in Sax-Zim; we walked away from both)
Long-eared Owl B (an amazing view of two out hunting in broad daylight in Sax-Zim)
 Short-eared Owl Pnd (briefly at Chase Lake)
 Common Nighthawk Bw
Whip-poor-will Bw (hovering over our heads, eventually)
 Chimney Swift B
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird B
 Belted Kingfisher BP
 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker B
 Downy Woodpecker B
 Hairy Woodpecker B
Black-backed Woodpecker B (n + y; two adults attending one young)
 Northern Flicker BP (n)
 Pileated Woodpecker B (White Pines Wayside)
 Eastern Wood-Pewee BP
 Yellow-bellied Flycatcher B ()
 Alder Flycatcher BP
 Least Flycatcher BP
 Eastern Phoebe BP
 Great Crested Flycatcher B

Western Kingbird P (n)
 Eastern Kingbird BP (n)
 Loggerhead Shrike P (y, at Felton)
 Blue-headed Vireo B
 Yellow-throated Vireo B
 Warbling Vireo P (heard-only)
 Red-eyed Vireo B
 Gray Jay B (y)
 Blue Jay B
 Black-billed Magpie B
 American Crow BP
 Common Raven B
 Horned Lark P (y)
 Purple Martin BP (n)
 Tree Swallow BP (n)
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow B
 Bank Swallow P (n)
 Barn Swallow BP (n)
 Cliff Swallow P
 Black-capped Chickadee B
Boreal Chickadee B (posing in the sun for us at Sax-Zim)
 Red-breasted Nuthatch B
 White-breasted Nuthatch B
 Brown Creeper B
Rock Wren P (nesting again at Felton: adult carrying food into a rock pile)
 House Wren BP
 Winter Wren B (close & cooperative singing male!)
 Sedge Wren BP
 Marsh Wren BP
 Golden-crowned Kinglet B (showing off its crown!)
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet B (heard-only)
 Eastern Bluebird BP (n)
 Veery BP
 Swainson's Thrush B (heard-only)
 Hermit Thrush B (mostly heard)
 Wood Thrush B (heard-only)
 American Robin BP (n)
 Gray Catbird BP
 Brown Thrasher BwP
 European Starling BP
Sprague's Pipit Pnd (two great views, one of these of a bird landing in the road)
 Cedar Waxwing BP
 Nashville Warbler B
 Northern Parula B
 Yellow Warbler BP
 Chestnut-sided Warbler B
 Magnolia Warbler B
 Cape May Warbler B (again at Rabey Tree Farm)
 Yellow-rumped Warbler B

Black-throated Green Warbler B
 Blackburnian Warbler B
 Palm Warbler B
 Black-and-white Warbler B
 American Redstart B
 Ovenbird B
 Northern Waterthrush B
Connecticut Warbler B (very close views at Sax-Zim)
 Mourning Warbler B (ditto)
 Common Yellowthroat BP
 Canada Warbler B
 Scarlet Tanager BP (unexpected at Felton)
 Eastern Towhee Bw (heard-only)
 Chipping Sparrow BP
 Clay-colored Sparrow BP
 Vesper Sparrow P
 Lark Sparrow P (also unexpected at Felton)
 Savannah Sparrow BP
Baird's Sparrow PndBwBw (excellent views of a silent male near Chase Lake, the same bird we saw in 2003 & 2004; another heard south of Tappen)
 Grasshopper Sparrow P
Le Conte's Sparrow BP (seen twice; exceptionally close at Felton)
 Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow B (heard-only at McGregor)
 Song Sparrow BP
 Lincoln's Sparrow B
 Swamp Sparrow BP
 White-throated Sparrow B
Chestnut-collared Longspur P (always my favorite prairie bird)
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak B
 Indigo Bunting B
 Dickcissel BwP (quite unexpected in Wisconsin!)
 Bobolink BP
 Red-winged Blackbird BP
 Eastern Meadowlark Bw
 Western Meadowlark P
 Yellow-headed Blackbird P
 Brewer's Blackbird BP
 Common Grackle BP
 Brown-headed Cowbird BP (y, fed by Song Sparrow)
 Orchard Oriole P
 Baltimore Oriole B
 Purple Finch B
 House Finch B (heard-only)
 (Pine Siskin / leader-only, heard-only)
 American Goldfinch BP
 Evening Grosbeak B
 House Sparrow BP

Also seen:

White-tailed Jackrabbit

Eastern Chipmunk

Woodchuck

Richardson's Ground Squirrel (a.k.a. Flickertail)

Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel

Red Squirrel

Coyote

Red Fox

Bobcat (Rice Lake NWR in broad daylight)

White-tailed Deer

(Bison / captive herd in Jimtown)

Painted Turtle

Snapping Turtle (laying eggs along County Road 2)

Smooth Green Snake (rescued from a pheasant)