

# **NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND 1**

**JANUARY 14 -18, 2006**

**LEADER:  
KIM ECKERT**

**COMPILED BY:  
KIM ECKERT**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.  
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003  
AUSTIN, TX 78746  
[WWW.VENTBIRD.COM](http://WWW.VENTBIRD.COM)**

**TOUR REPORT**  
**NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND I**  
**January 14-18, 2006**

**By Kim Eckert**

So, just how many Great Gray Owls could we expect to see on our 2006 winter tours of Northern Minnesota? After all, on one of last year's trips we saw no fewer than 98 of them, with 78 individuals on just one day. (We also turned up 14 Northern Hawk Owls on that tour.) However, these numbers paled in comparison with the 200+ Great Grays counted per day by a couple of birding parties in February, and with the total of 5,200+ individuals compiled statewide during the season!

On this year's tour we saw one **Great Gray Owl**, which was actually a success—one more than I thought we'd see. Consider that numbers this season were close to normal, and most birders had been going out and finding none, so it was a pleasant surprise to find and watch one Great Gray hunting along a Lake County roadside just after dawn.

And, no, we didn't see 14 **Northern Hawk Owls** like last year, but we did see two of them, more than we find on most of these winter tours. Both of these small but fierce-looking owls were somewhat expected, since they had been present at their respective locations for days, even weeks. That's the nice thing about this interesting species: when present, they hunt by day, are usually out in the open and visible, and typically stay put in the same place for several days.

The **Snowy Owl** is practically a given on this tour (although this species was virtually absent in the Duluth area last winter), and we saw three on this tour. The first of these was just about the first bird of the tour, hunting along a busy street near the Superior airport.

Perhaps the tour's highlight, though, was not an owl. It took two drives over to Ashland, Wisconsin, but on our last tour day a handsome adult gray-morph **Gyr Falcon** was finally seen perched on the iron ore docks. This individual had been sporadically present here for two winters, and it failed to appear during our first try, although we did see one of our Snowy Owls there as a consolation. We also performed what may have been an all-time VENT first: to adequately check the ore dock, I drove the van out on the rock-solid bay ice (which was also supporting dozens of other ice-fishing vehicles at the time)!

With a modest trip list of 45 species (in some winters we see only 30 or so), this tour is definitely one which concentrates more on quality than quantity. Among these quality highlights were a group of six **Sharp-tailed Grouse** in a rural Aitkin County yard (with one of these coming down to the feeders, something I'd never heard of this species doing!), both **Iceland and Glaucous gulls** on the last day, **Northern Shrikes** and **Snow Buntings** in the Sax-Zim Bog, a **Boreal Chickadee** interrupting a **Gray Jay** hand-feeding session, a **Bohemian Waxwing** flock in Ely, and those winter finches—including an unexpected flock of **White-winged Crossbills**, which had been practically non-existent all month.

There were also some non-avian highlights. A **pine marten** ran towards the van along a Superior National Forest roadside, disappeared into the brush, and reemerged with a mouse in its mouth. A brilliant “snow pillar” greeted us on our last day as the sun rose above Lake Superior. But most amazing of all was the weather; it was the warmest January ever in Duluth and throughout Minnesota overall! Temperatures on all but one of our five tour days were well above the normal (= high +17 / low -2). The warmest January ever in Duluth had been over 60 years ago, but January 2006 in Duluth was a full two degrees warmer than the old record: more than eight degrees above the average.

## **Itinerary**

January 14 / Everyone arrives in time for a brief late-afternoon drive through Superior (for a female Snowy Owl near their airport and an unexpected Merlin). Weather: high 24, low 14, cloudy, moderate E winds.

January 15 / All day in the Sax-Zim Bog (especially for a Northern Hawk Owl and unexpected White-winged Crossbills). Weather: high 33, low 26, partly cloudy, moderate/strong SE winds.

January 16 / Morning in Aitkin County, near the towns of Tamarack (Sharp-tailed Grouse plus more sightings of Snowy and N. Hawk owls) and Palisade (but no waxwings); afternoon drive to Ashland, Wis. (another Snowy Owl, but no Gyr). Weather: high 31, low 24, cloudy/light snow, light E winds.

January 17 / Morning in Lake County along Co. Rd. 2 (for a Great Gray Owl), Hwy. 1 (brief Red Crossbills), and Spruce Road (Boreal Chickadee), en route to lunch in Ely (and for Bohemian Waxwings); afternoon return to Duluth. Weather: high 24, low 6, partly cloudy, moderate NW winds.

January 18 / Everyone has time to recheck Canal Park (Glaucous Gull) and return to Ashland (where the Gyrfalcon is waiting for us); return to Duluth airport via the Superior landfill (for a fly-over Iceland Gull – with apologies to Polly and Martha, who had driven home from Ashland). Weather: high 17, low 4, clear, moderate NW winds.

## **Bird List**

Canada Goose  
American Black Duck  
(Gadwall / leader-only; unexpected in winter)  
Mallard  
Common Goldeneye  
Common Merganser  
Red-breasted Merganser  
**Sharp-tailed Grouse** (6 in a yard north of Tamarack)  
Bald Eagle

Rough-legged Hawk (especially in Sax-Zim)  
Merlin (seen twice; rare in winter)  
**Gyr Falcon** (on the second try in Ashland)  
Herring Gull  
**Iceland Gull** (Superior landfill fly-by)  
Glaucous Gull (Canal Park and the landfill)  
Rock Pigeon  
**Snowy Owl** (3 of them: Superior, near Tamarack, and Ashland)  
**Northern Hawk Owl** (2 seen: the best view in Sax-Zim; also one near Tamarack)  
**Great Gray Owl** (hunting at dawn along Lake Co. Rd. 2)  
(Downy Woodpecker / leader-only)  
Hairy Woodpecker  
Pileated Woodpecker  
Northern Shrike (Sax-Zim)  
Gray Jay (hand-fed on the Spruce Rd.)  
Blue Jay  
American Crow  
Common Raven  
Black-capped Chickadee  
Boreal Chickadee (Spruce Rd.)  
Red-breasted Nuthatch  
White-breasted Nuthatch  
European Starling  
Bohemian Waxwing (flock of 50 in Ely)  
Dark-eyed Junco  
Snow Bunting (Sax-Zim flock)  
Northern Cardinal (heard-only)  
Common Grackle (unexpected in Palisade)  
Pine Grosbeak  
Purple Finch  
House Finch  
Red Crossbill (two brief views on Hwy. 1)  
**White-winged Crossbill** (quite unexpected in Sax-Zim)  
Common Redpoll  
Pine Siskin  
American Goldfinch  
Evening Grosbeak  
House Sparrow

Seen on this tour but not on the second: Red-breasted Merganser, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Merlin, White-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Cardinal, Common Grackle, House Finch, Red Crossbill, White-winged Crossbill.

Missed on this tour but seen on the second: Ring-necked Duck, Long-tailed Duck, Hooded Merganser, Ruffed Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Downy Woodpecker, Black-backed Woodpecker, Black-billed Magpie, American Robin.

Also seen:

**Pine Marten** (along Lake Co. Rd. 2 with a mouse)

Red Squirrel

Eastern Cottontail

White-tailed Deer