

NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND I

JANUARY 12 – 16, 2008

LEADER: KIM ECKERT

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Leader: Kim Eckert

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Tour Summary

Considering that the high in Duluth this time of year is in the upper teens and the low is just a bit below zero, participants on our first Northern Minnesota Winter Weekend tour had it pretty easy. After all, four of our five days saw highs above normal, with one of these soaring all the way up to 24! And, sure, the low on one of the days dropped to -7, but this was just a few degrees short of the average. I admit, the wind on one of the mornings made even me feel uncomfortable, though this was nothing compared to what our second group had to face a week later. Cloudy skies predominated with a dusting of light snow on some days, but it was not enough to prevent Duluth from setting an all-time January record for lack of snow: less than 3 inches fell all month (the average is close to 20).

So, there were to be no meteorological excuses I could fall back on if there was something we could not find. There were indeed some hoped-for birds which failed to materialize for us (and just about everyone else), but these were easily outweighed by what we did see. As for the owls (isn't it always the owls they ask about first?), who wouldn't be impressed by a Snowy Owl seen that very first afternoon just a few minutes after everyone had arrived at the airport? Of course, it would have been nice to linger longer than we did in its presence, but unfortunately this owl chose to hunt right across the street from a federal prison camp and its unfriendly security guards.

Not satisfied with a Snowy? Well, how about topping that off the next morning with a Northern Hawk Owl in the now-famous Sax-Zim Bog? This highly sought winter specialty of the taiga chose to cooperate by hunting right along a little-used public road with wide shoulders—and not a single jailhouse for miles around. This was preceded that morning by a diurnal-minded Barred Owl, normally a nocturnal species not usually found on this tour.

And the hits just kept on coming elsewhere in the Sax-Zim Bog. Most significant among these were the American Three-toed and three Black-backed woodpeckers we saw, which had been showing up all over northern Minnesota, with the three-toeds quite uncharacteristically comprising the majority of sightings. A normal winter might see one or two three-toed records all season, but this year's total has been closer to 20 or so. Elsewhere in the Bog, a classically pale male Hoary Redpoll at its favorite feeder proved no challenge at all to identify, while in a town just a few miles away an elusive Bohemian Waxwing flock chose to cooperate for us.

Other highlights included both a Boreal Chickadee and Varied Thrush at the same Duluth feeder, a Townsend's Solitaire posing in a crabapple tree in a park not far away, and a quite out-of-season Harris's Sparrow in a Two Harbors yard—wintering some 500 miles north of where it should have been.

Conspicuous by their absence from our list were the crossbills, of which neither species was being seen with any consistency anywhere. And—you guessed it—everyone's favorite owl chose to almost completely disappear by mid-January after several scattered reports earlier in the winter. Indeed, not a single Great Gray was to be reported by anyone during the last half of January.

Itinerary

January 12 / All 7 participants arrive in time for a quick view of a Snowy Owl by the airport (and Federal Prison Farm!); dinner at Blackwoods. (weather: high 24, low 19, light snow, light NNW winds)

January 13 / Birding in Duluth at Brighton Beach, the Varied Thrush/Boreal Chickadee feeder, and the harbor area; late morning, lunch, and afternoon in the Sax-Zim Bog (especially for redpolls, waxwings, and a hawk owl); dinner at Timberlodge. (weather: high 20, low 15, cloudy, moderate NNW winds)

January 14 / Morning in Aitkin County around Tamarack, Aitkin, and Lawler; lunch in Moose Lake, and afternoon return to Duluth-Superior (at the landfill, harbor area, and the Leif Erickson Park solitaire), and owl-less return to Sax-Zim at dusk; dinner at Pickwick. (weather: high 15, low -2, cloudy, moderate NNW winds)

January 15 / Quick recheck of Duluth harbor area, return to Sax-Zim (for woodpeckers – finally!), Floodwood (lunch), Hedbom Forest Rd and other back roads in Aitkin County en route to Aitkin (for another Snowy Owl), and dusk along Co Rd 18 / Pietz Rd (for a consolation horned owl); dinner in McGregor at the Fireside. (weather: high 19, low -7, light snow, moderate SSE winds)

January 16 / Most have time for a final morning at the landfill, Stoney Point / Knife River, and Two Harbors (for a Harris's Sparrow); departure for home. (weather: high 22, low 4, light snow, moderate W winds)

Bird List

Mallard
Common Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Ruffed Grouse
Bald Eagle
Red-tailed Hawk

Herring Gull
Glaucous Gull
Rock Pigeon
Great Horned Owl
Snowy Owl
Northern Hawk Owl
Barred Owl
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
American Three-toed Woodpecker
Black-backed Woodpecker
Pileated Woodpecker
Northern Shrike
Gray Jay
Blue Jay
Black-billed Magpie (seen by Sue only)
American Crow
Common Raven
Black-capped Chickadee
Boreal Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Townsend's Solitaire
Varied Thrush
European Starling
Bohemian Waxwing
Dark-eyed Junco
Harris's Sparrow
Snow Bunting
Northern Cardinal
Pine Grosbeak
Common Redpoll
Hoary Redpoll
Evening Grosbeak
House Sparrow

Seen on this tour but missed on the second: Red-tailed Hawk, Black-billed Magpie, Bohemian Waxwing.

Missed on this tour but seen on the second: Bufflehead, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Merlin, Lapland Longspur.