

MINNESOTA & NORTH DAKOTA

JUNE 2 – 10, 2008

LEADERS: KIM ECKERT & BRIAN GIBBONS

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Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

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Leaders: Kim Eckert & Brian Gibbons

Tour Summary:

Consider that it rained during part of every tour day but one, that high winds hampered our birding on half the days, that temperatures mostly ran 10 to 20 degrees below normal, and that we were often preoccupied with too many mosquitoes and wood ticks. Given such conditions, I think it safe to assume we'd be forgiven if we missed some key birds or if our species total was below average. Surprisingly, though, we hardly missed a single sought-after specialty, and our final list somehow ended up with a record 205 species!

So, what happened? I'm not entirely sure, though our lofty list was due in part to the adverse weather. Here and elsewhere in the Midwest it had been mostly wet and cold for weeks, and it stayed that way into June—indeed, it seemed more like April at times! Consequently, we found Vs of northbound geese (about two months late), a Rough-legged Hawk (normally gone by May 1), several shorebirds (usually up on the tundra by now), and some modest waves of migrant warblers and other passerines (also typically on territory by late May).

With several migrants still around, plus the expected breeding birds, our total list reached an unprecedented 205—amazingly, only one of these was heard-only; there were also two additional leader-only birds. Looking back over this tour's 25-year history, I could find only four trips with 200 species (204 maximum), but all of these were back when the tour lasted a day longer. (In 2002, we tallied 212 species, but this included a southern Minnesota swing: excluding the 17 species seen there but not elsewhere along the normal route, there were “only” 195 birds.)

But it takes more than migrants to break records, and there were very few expected summer residents missing from the list. More importantly, hardly any of these were of the highly-sought variety: about the only ones conspicuous by their absence were Clark's Grebe (though an apparent Clark's x Western grebe was on a nest), American Three-toed Woodpecker (but not really a “miss” since it's rare to absent in summer), Black-throated Blue Warbler (a long hike in the rain would have been needed), and both crossbills (but no recent reports of either species near our route).

At the start, though, it certainly didn't look like this would be our best Minnesota-North Dakota tour ever. A post-dinner search on Day 1 in the Sax-Zim Bog where Great Grays had been recently reported came up empty, and we saw very little save for a glimpse of a woodcock flushed off a side road by a gray wolf. Our return to the Bog the next morning again was mostly disappointing: not only were there no owls, but very few songbirds were vocalizing in the cold, overcast, and windy conditions. (The day was brightened, though, by a Sharp-tailed Grouse standing in the road by its lek.) And returning to Duluth that afternoon, the weather was even

worse as we turned up a few migrants at Park Point: light rain, strong winds off Lake Superior, and temperatures only in the 40s.

The next day's weather in Duluth was just as miserable, but we drove far from the lake up into the Superior National Forest: it was still cool, perhaps, but not nearly as windy, and we greatly improved on our list of boreal forest species. An obliging pair of Boreal Chickadees greeted us at our first stop, our first Black-backed Woodpecker drummed on a pine next to the road, and a whole bunch of cooperative warblers showed up: 18 species, including Golden-winged, Blackburnian, Mourning, and Canada.

Day 4 found us back at Sax-Zim, and this time the famous Bog did not disappoint. Along a single quarter-mile stretch of road (the same road which had been so empty two days before), a Great Gray Owl finally emerged and was out hunting for an hour or so into the late morning, three Connecticut Warblers sang (with one seen well by all), and pairs of Black-backed Woodpeckers flew back and forth over the road. And before we left the area and headed west, another road yielded our first Le Conte's Sparrow and our only Philadelphia Vireo.

Heavy rains and strong winds caught up to us out in western Minnesota, but they eventually let up at the Felton Prairie for us to find soggy prairie-chickens, our first handsome Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and a totally surprising woodcock attending a chick. Farther west into North Dakota on Day 6, we finally had our first and only rain-free day, but it was still windy and we failed to find this tour's two quintessential prairie specialties: the declining Baird's Sparrow and the local Sprague's Pipit. As consolation, though, a pair of Gray Partridge appeared (but quickly disappeared), a close Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow teed up, Ferruginous Hawks flew by, and we found a nesting pair of Piping Plovers.

But a return visit the next morning to Kidder County was not only calm, but this time a Baird's sang and a few Sprague's displayed where we missed them the previous afternoon. Finally, with these two target birds in hand, it was time to return to Minnesota on Day 8, where there was still one more *Ammodramus* sparrow—our fifth!—to be seen, as a tip led us to a Henslow's Sparrow singing well north of its southeastern Minnesota range. Another tip led us on some back roads that final afternoon to elevate our trip list to an even 200, highlighted by an unexpected Black-billed Cuckoo.

But there were a few more birds (and mosquitoes) to add to the list before returning to Duluth, and #201 just before midnight was nothing short of amazing: not only did a Yellow Rail flutter by us in the dark as we stood high and dry on a dirt road in the McGregor Marsh—but it flew back and, for reasons unknown, decided to land on the road next to our feet!

Itinerary:

June 2 - Meet in Duluth for an early dinner and unsuccessful evening owl search (we found lots of mosquitoes, though!) along Arkola and Stickney roads in the Sax-Zim Bog (St. Louis County).

June 3 - Morning return to Sax-Zim (in high winds – keeping the mosquitoes away – and cold temperatures), especially along Arkola, Stickney, McDavitt, and Admiral roads; afternoon search for migrants at Park Point in Duluth (in light rain, strong NE winds off Lake Superior, and temperatures in the mid-40s!).

June 4 - All day in Lake County, mostly in the Superior National Forest: especially Co. Rd. 2, Langley River Rd., Jordan Rd., Greenwood Lake and Sand River areas, SNF visitors center, Trapper's Lake, and Finland area. (Still cold but winds not bad; intermittent to steady rains from late morning on.)

June 5 - Successful morning return to the Sax-Zim Bog (winds and temperatures not as bad this time), especially along Co. Rd. 7, and the Sax, McDavitt (!), Zim, and Stone Lake roads; afternoon drive (partly in steady rain) to Detroit Lakes via the Boy River marsh and the Walker sewage ponds (Cass County).

June 6 - Morning birding in the Felton Prairie and Hitterdahl areas in Clay County delayed by heavy rains and strong gusty winds; afternoon drive (still windy but no rain) to Jamestown via some Barnes County wetlands west of Valley City.

June 7 - All morning at Chase Lake NWR and vicinity (Stutsman County); afternoon drive after a Pettibone picnic lunch (!) to Tuttle, and return to I-94 via Horsehead Lake and vicinity (Kidder County). (Our only entirely rain-free day, but still windy.)

June 8 - Successful return to school section SE of Tuttle (!: light winds and rain-free until late morning); then Dead Buffalo Lake, McPhail WMA, Tappen WMA, and Dawson areas (Kidder County); evening option (after a rainy and windy afternoon) to two Jamestown sewage ponds.

June 9 - Return to Minnesota via Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center road; then Rothsay WMA (Wilkin County), some Cass County back roads, and McGregor's Yellow Rail marsh in Aitkin County (!). (Moderate winds, only occasional rain showers, but cold and lots of mosquitoes in the evening.)

June 10 - Morning return (still rainy at times but not too windy) to Duluth via some Aitkin County back roads NE of McGregor, especially the Hedbom Forest Road (where we had the worst mosquitoes of the trip).

Bird List:

Mb = seen/heard in Minnesota boreal forest habitats (east of Detroit Lakes June 2-5 / east of Fergus Falls June 9-10)

Mp = seen/heard in Minnesota prairie habitats (west of Detroit Lakes June 6 / west of Fergus Falls June 9)

ND = seen/heard in North Dakota (June 6-9)

Snow Goose ND (late-lingering migrants)
Cackling Goose ND (also very late migrants!)
Canada Goose MbMpND (a.k.a. Honkers)
Trumpeter Swan Mb (in Cass and Aitkin Co's)
Wood Duck MbMpND
Gadwall ND

American Wigeon ND
Mallard MbMpND
Blue-winged Teal MbMpND
Northern Shoveler ND
Northern Pintail ND
Green-winged Teal ND
Canvasback MpND
Redhead MbMpND
Ring-necked Duck Mb
Lesser Scaup MbND
Bufflehead ND
Common Goldeneye Mb
Hooded Merganser MbND
Ruddy Duck ND
Gray Partridge ND (sneaky birds seen by some)
Ring-necked Pheasant MpND (almost abundant)
Ruffed Grouse Mb (heard in Sax-Zim; a fly-by in Cass Co.)
Sharp-tailed Grouse MbND (best views in Sax-Zim)
Greater Prairie-Chicken Mp (several at their soggy leks at Felton)
Wild Turkey Mp
Common Loon MbMp
Pied-billed Grebe ND
Horned Grebe ND (Tappen WMA only)
Red-necked Grebe MbND (best at Tappen WMA; also on our Cass Co. loop)
Eared Grebe ND
Western Grebe ND (plus an apparent Clark's hybrid on a Barnes Co. nest!)
American White Pelican MbMpND
Double-crested Cormorant MbMpND
American Bittern MbND (especially entertaining at the Boy River)
Great Blue Heron MbMp
Great Egret MbND
Snowy Egret ND
Green Heron MbMpND
Black-crowned Night-Heron ND
Turkey Vulture Mb
Osprey MbND
Bald Eagle MbMp
Northern Harrier MbMpND
Cooper's Hawk MbMpND
Broad-winged Hawk Mb
Swainson's Hawk ND (including a vocal pair by their nest)
Red-tailed Hawk MbMpND
Ferruginous Hawk ND (including a nest with young)
Rough-legged Hawk Mb (quite unexpected and out-of-season at Sax-Zim)
American Kestrel MbMpND
[Merlin (leader-only)]
Peregrine Falcon Mp (unexpected adult at Felton!)

Yellow Rail Mb (standing in the road! – like us, perhaps, not wanting to get wet?)
Virginia Rail ND
Sora MbND
American Coot MpND
Sandhill Crane Mb (Sax-Zim and Cass Co.)
Piping Plover ND (apparent nesting pair at Horsehead Lake)
Killdeer MbMpND
American Avocet ND (more than usual)
Spotted Sandpiper MbMpND
Willet ND
Upland Sandpiper MpND
Marbled Godwit MpND (including an angry mob at Felton guarding young!)
Sanderling ND (surprising numbers; this and the following 7 species were all late migrants)
Semipalmated Sandpiper ND
Least Sandpiper ND
White-rumped Sandpiper ND (lots of them)
Baird's Sandpiper ND (surprisingly late)
Dunlin Mb (Park Point in Duluth)
Stilt Sandpiper ND
Short-billed Dowitcher ND
Wilson's Snipe MbMpND
American Woodcock MbMp (flushed by a wolf at Sax-Zim?; with a baby at Felton!)
Wilson's Phalarope MpND (= 18 shorebird species)
Franklin's Gull ND
Ring-billed Gull MbMpND
California Gull ND
Herring Gull Mb
Caspian Tern MbND (lingering non-breeders)
Black Tern MbMpND
Common Tern MbND
Forster's Tern ND
Rock Pigeon MbMpND
Mourning Dove MbMpND
Black-billed Cuckoo Mb (on our Cass Co. loop: nice spotting, Ann!)
Great Horned Owl Mp (pair near a nest at Rothsay WMA)
Barred Owl Mb (a nice surprise on our last morning)
Great Gray Owl Mb (on our third try: hunting along McDavitt Rd. into late morning!)
Short-eared Owl ND (seen by those in Brian's vehicle near Chase Lake)
Common Nighthawk MbND
Chimney Swift MbMpND
Ruby-throated Hummingbird MbMp
Belted Kingfisher MbMp
Red-headed Woodpecker Mb (on our Cass Co. loop)
Red-bellied Woodpecker Mb
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker Mb
Downy Woodpecker MbMpND
Hairy Woodpecker Mb
Black-backed Woodpecker Mb (at 3 locations: Sax-Zim, Sand River, and Hedbom Rd.)

Northern Flicker MbMpND
Pileated Woodpecker Mb
Olive-sided Flycatcher MbND (late migrants at Sax-Zim and in Stutsman Co.)
Eastern Wood-Pewee MbMp
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher Mb (best view on Lake Co. Rd. 2)
Alder Flycatcher MbND (some singing on territory, some still migrating)
Willow Flycatcher MpND
Least Flycatcher MbMpND
Eastern Phoebe Mb
Great Crested Flycatcher Mb
Western Kingbird MpND
Eastern Kingbird MbMpND
Yellow-throated Vireo Mb
Blue-headed Vireo Mb
Warbling Vireo MpND
Philadelphia Vireo Mb (unexpected migrant on Stone Lake Rd.)
Red-eyed Vireo MbMpND
Gray Jay Mb
Blue Jay MbMpND
Black-billed Magpie Mb (only briefly in Sax-Zim)
American Crow MbMpND
Common Raven Mb
Horned Lark MpND
Purple Martin MbMpND
Tree Swallow MbMpND
Northern Rough-winged Swallow Mp
Bank Swallow MpND
Barn Swallow MbMpND
Cliff Swallow MbMpND
Black-capped Chickadee MbND
Boreal Chickadee Mb (best view of a pair on Langley River Rd.; also in Sax-Zim)
Red-breasted Nuthatch Mb
White-breasted Nuthatch Mb
House Wren MbMpND
Winter Wren Mb (our sole heard-only species!)
Sedge Wren MbMpND
Marsh Wren MbND
Golden-crowned Kinglet Mb
Ruby-crowned Kinglet Mb
Eastern Bluebird MbMpND
Veery MbMp
Swainson's Thrush Mb
Hermit Thrush Mb
American Robin MbMpND
Gray Catbird MbMpND
Brown Thrasher MpND
European Starling MbMpND

Sprague's Pipit ND (several on our second try near Tuttle!)
 Cedar Waxwing MbND
 Golden-winged Warbler Mb (best view in Aitkin Co.)
 Nashville Warbler Mb
 Northern Parula Mb
 Yellow Warbler MbMpND
 Chestnut-sided Warbler Mb
 Magnolia Warbler Mb
Cape May Warbler Mb (unexpected male in Sax-Zim and a Lake Co. migrant)
 Yellow-rumped Warbler Mb
 Black-throated Green Warbler Mb
 Blackburnian Warbler Mb
 Pine Warbler Mb
 Black-and-white Warbler Mb
 American Redstart MbMp
 Ovenbird Mb
 Northern Waterthrush MbMp
Connecticut Warbler Mb (a singing male in Sax-Zim followed us back to the road!)
 Mourning Warbler Mb (best views on Langley River Rd.)
 Common Yellowthroat MbMpND
 Wilson's Warbler Mb
 Canada Warbler Mb (= 20 warbler species)
 Scarlet Tanager Mb
 Eastern Towhee Mb (on our Cass Co. loop)
 Chipping Sparrow MbMpND
 Clay-colored Sparrow MbMpND
 [Field Sparrow (leader-only, heard-only)]
 Vesper Sparrow MpND
 Lark Sparrow ND
 Savannah Sparrow MbMpND
Baird's Sparrow ND (cooperative singing male on our second try near Tuttle!)
 Grasshopper Sparrow MpND
Henslow's Sparrow Mp (singing male at Rothsay WMA, thanks to a tip from Parker!)
 Le Conte's Sparrow MbMpND (closest looks at Rothsay)
 Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow MbND (close views at Chicago Lake; also heard at McGregor)
 Song Sparrow MbMpND
 Lincoln's Sparrow Mb
 Swamp Sparrow MbND
 White-throated Sparrow Mb
 Dark-eyed Junco Mb (very late Park Point migrant)
Chestnut-collared Longspur MpND (best views of this best-looking prairie bird at Felton)
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak MbMp
 Indigo Bunting Mb
 Dickcissel Mp (only seen at Felton)
 Bobolink MbMpND
 Red-winged Blackbird MbMpND
 Eastern Meadowlark Mb
 Western Meadowlark MpND

Yellow-headed Blackbird MbMpND
Brewer's Blackbird MbMpND
Common Grackle MbMpND
Brown-headed Cowbird MbMpND
Orchard Oriole MpND
Baltimore Oriole MbMp
Purple Finch Mb
House Finch MbMpND
Pine Siskin Mb (at the airport, finally)
American Goldfinch MbMpND
House Sparrow MbMpND

Also seen/heard:

Moose (Lake Co. Rd. 2)
White-tailed Deer
Gray Wolf (chasing a woodcock in Sax-Zim)
Red Fox (at a Stone Lake Rd. bird feeder!)
Mink
Muskrat
Snowshoe Hare
White-tailed Jackrabbit
Eastern Cottontail
Gray Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Richardson's Ground Squirrel (a.k.a. Flickertail)
Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel (a.k.a. Minnesota Gopher)

Painted Turtle
Plains Garter Snake
Boreal Chorus Frog
Gray Treefrog
Spring Peeper
American Toad