

NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND I

JANUARY 12 - 16, 2008

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Despite its frigid reputation, Duluth has long been an attractive winter site for visiting birders. Although an average January trip list may include only 40 species or so, it is not unusual for around half of these to be life birds for someone in the group. Ruffed Grouse, Snowy Owl, Northern Shrike, Boreal Chickadee, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine and Evening grosbeaks, and Common Redpoll can be expected even on a relatively uneventful weekend. Typically, there is also a fair chance to see Spruce and Sharp-tailed grouse, Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls, Black-backed Woodpecker, both crossbills, and Hoary Redpoll. Though not to be expected most years, such regularly occurring rarities as Gyrfalcon, Boreal Owl, and American Three-toed Woodpecker are other hoped-for possibilities.

While it would not be unusual for a mid-winter day's "high" temperature to remain below zero and for the low to be minus 20 or even less, an average day's temperatures reach the upper teens. With sunshine and minimal winds, such conditions are actually reasonably pleasant. Note that even the coldest days are tolerable, since virtually all of our birding is along roadsides, either within or near the warmth of our van.

This unique tour offers not just the possibility of seeing northern owls, grouse, winter finches, and other boreal specialties, but also the memorable experience of spending a few days exploring remote bogs and vast coniferous forests during the depths of winter. Kim Eckert, your tour leader, has lived in Duluth since 1977 (winters included), is thoroughly familiar with the challenges of birding in wintry conditions, and he is in frequent contact with other area birders and fully aware of what has been seen in the area.

January 12, Day 1: Arrival in Duluth. Tour participants should plan to arrive in Duluth today, where a room will be reserved in your name at our hotel. We will meet at 6:00 p.m. for dinner and a brief orientation session (see your Departure Memo for the meeting place). For those participants unable to arrive by 6:00 p.m., a message will be left for you with instructions for the next morning.

Those who arrive early enough in the day may want to scan the lake behind the hotel in case there are any ducks or gulls of interest, or walk through the residential area near the hotel to look for Bohemian Waxwings or winter finches which sometimes frequent this neighborhood. For those with transportation, a drive through the Duluth-Superior harbor area might turn up a Snowy Owl roosting on the bay ice or hunting around the grain elevators. (And, if all the participants manage to arrive by early afternoon, we may move the meeting time ahead in order to look for owls together as a group before dinner—either Snowys in the harbor or perhaps even a Great Gray in the Sax-Zim Bog.)

NIGHT: Best Western Edgewater, Duluth

January 13-15, Days 2-4: Duluth-Superior and Northeastern Minnesota. Within the city limits of Duluth itself and Superior, Wisconsin, Duluth's neighbor across the bay, one may find many of the specialties we seek without having to venture into more remote areas. At feeders and mountain ash trees in residential areas, Bohemian Waxwings, Pine and Evening grosbeaks, and Common Redpolls can often be expected; and in most years a Varied Thrush, Red or White-winged crossbills, and a Hoary Redpoll or two are also present in or around Duluth itself.

Meanwhile, waste grain around the grain elevators in the Duluth-Superior harbor area creates, in effect, a giant feeding station, one which attracts small mammals and Rock Pigeons. These, in turn, attract raptors. A Snowy Owl or two typically winter here, and even in unproductive years at least one of these can usually be found somewhere. A few hawks also overwinter in the harbor, mostly Red-taileds, but in some recent years a Peregrine or even a Gyrfalcon has settled in for the season, subsisting on pigeons.

Over at the landfill in Superior, if the weather has not been too severe, a good concentration of gulls normally survives the winter. Among the predominant Herring Gulls, at least a few Glaucous and Thayer's are usually present, along with an occasional Iceland or Great Black-backed gull.

On one day we normally head north out of town into the vast boreal forests of spruce, balsam fir, and pine in the Superior National Forest. The best and most accessible examples of this habitat lie northeast of Duluth along Lake County Road 2 and Minnesota Highway 1. Spruce Grouse are sometimes spotted at dawn along these roadsides as they scratch for salt and grit. In some winters, flocks of a dozen or more individuals of this highly elusive grouse have been seen. Ruffed Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker (plus the rarer American Three-toed), Common Raven, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, and winter finches are also regularly-seen residents in these same forests. It is also possible to spot Moose, Porcupine, and Snowshoe Hare as we bird here, and with a lot of luck we might even glimpse a Gray Wolf or Pine Marten.

But always at the top of visiting birders' expectations are the Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls. The best place to search for these is the more open countryside of tamarack bogs, alder swamps, and sedge meadows. Such habitat is found in the so-called Sax-Zim Bog area, just northwest of Duluth, and in northern Aitkin County, a bit farther west. While these two owls occur every winter in northern Minnesota, it is not a certainty that both will be seen on a given weekend if it is a poor owl winter. On the other hand, over 100 individual Great Grays have been recorded during several recent winters, with some lucky birders able to see a dozen or more on a given day. In fact, an amazing total of 70 Great Gray Owls was tallied on the 2004 Sax-Zim Bog Christmas Bird Count, while an equally incredible 42 Northern Hawk Owls were counted on this same Christmas Bird Count! While searching for these owls, we also have a chance to see Sharp-tailed Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Rough-legged Hawk, an additional Snowy Owl, Northern Shrike, Black-billed Magpie, and Snow Bunting.

Though a permanent resident in Northern Minnesota, the Boreal Owl is not to be expected on a given winter weekend, although we can always hope it's an invasion year for this species or that someone calls to report one roosting in their yard. More likely possibilities to be looked for during our weekend, time permitting, might include Harlequin or Long-tailed duck, Bald Eagle, Barred Owl, and Townsend's Solitaire.

NIGHT: Best Western Edgewater, Duluth

January 16, Day 5: Departure for Home. Participants may plan to depart for home at any time today. However, it might be advisable to schedule your flight for the afternoon, which will then provide those with later departures one last morning to look again for any birds not yet seen on the tour.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

TOUR LEADER: Kim Eckert

Kim Eckert, with over 40 years of birding experience throughout the U.S. and Canada, has now been guiding birders or teaching bird identification classes for more than 25 of those years. Since the 1980s, he has annually led VENT tours to Newfoundland, Churchill, various locations in the Great Lakes and Great Plains, and to Texas—a favorite and frequent winter destination. He has authored four editions of *A Birder’s Guide to Minnesota*, and has written numerous articles, notes, and seasonal reports for the Minnesota Ornithologists’ Union journal, *The Loon*, and other publications such as *Birding* and *North American Birds*. Kim also operates the Minnesota Birding Weekends program of birding tours, has been a member for three decades of Minnesota’s Records Committee, and for 20 years he served as Naturalist at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve in Duluth. A Minnesota resident since the 1960s, he has resided in Duluth since 1977—winters included.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$1150** per person in double occupancy from Duluth, Minnesota. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 4, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leader. It does not include transportation from your home to Duluth and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$200**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$300** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 90 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less **\$125** per person is refundable. If cancellation is made between 90 and 70 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 70 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself.***

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
90 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$125.
Between 90 and 70 days before departure	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded.
Fewer than 70 days before departure date	No refund available.

TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE: Application forms for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. We **strongly recommend** that you purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering. Contact the VENT office prior to registration for details.**

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

CLIMATE: As previously described, an average high temperature in Duluth during mid-January is in the upper teens, with the normal low a few degrees below zero. Unless it's windy, most participants should be able to handle such days without too much difficulty. However, cold fronts with brisk winds are also possible, and days with lows in the minus 20s or even lower and "highs" remaining below zero do occur. Windchills in the minus 30s and minus 40s are similarly not unusual. While Northern Minnesota does get its share of snow, storms serious enough to preclude birding activity are rare, with even the back roads promptly and efficiently plowed.

CLOTHING: Although almost all our birding will be from the warmth of the van, be sure to pack the warmest clothing you can find. Bring thermal underwear, heavy sweaters, and a warm coat, and you'll find the best strategy is to dress in layers. Of course, bring a warm hat and scarf or neck gaiter to cover the ears and neck. Fingers and toes will be the most vulnerable to the cold. Mittens generally work better than gloves, and insulated boots and warm socks are a must—those with felt liners are especially recommended. Since our hotel has an indoor pool, some may wish to bring a swimsuit.

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (877) FYI-TRIP. You can check the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

EQUIPMENT: Besides your binoculars, bring a day pack for carrying books, sunscreen, etc. As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, medications, and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag. Your leader will have a spotting scope; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. An alarm clock is also essential.

SUGGESTED READING: Our website at www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from the store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You might also want to visit such other online stores as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com, or www.buteobooks.com, which specializes in ornithology books.

Dunn, Jon L. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (4th or 5th edition). Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2002 or 2006.

Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Knopf, 2000. For those who prefer the smaller Sibley regional guides (2003), note that the Eastern Sibley covers Minnesota.

Eckert, Kim. *A Birder's Guide to Minnesota* (4th edition). Duluth, MN: Gavian Guides, 2002.

Janssen, Robert B. *Birds in Minnesota*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

TIPPING: As noted in our itineraries, tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you excep-

tional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on February 26, 2007 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.