



A [Tropical Birding](#) SET DEPARTURE tour

## Minnesota in Winter II

January 13-18, 2020



*American Three-toed Woodpecker is a rare visitor to Sax-Zim Bog*

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## Trip Report

January 14

Our first full day was spent leaving Duluth in the dark. The sun rose late and in the half-light we spotted our first bird of the trip – a **Northern Shrike** teed up on a spruce, surveying for prey. By the time we arrived at the famous Sax Zim Bog, the first visitors were arriving a rustic feeding station. Widespread standbys like **Black-capped Chickadee** and **Red-breasted Nuthatch** were joined by ghostly **Canada Jays** gliding in to abscond with heaping helpings of peanut butter. Nearby a cache of sunflower seeds was under siege by a large flock of **Evening Grosbeaks**, busily chowing down on a surprisingly balmy winter day.

As we cruised to another section of bog, a large shape blasted across the road. Around the curve we spotted the hidden outline of a **Northern Goshawk** which sat long enough to put a scope on it before flying directly over our group en route to strike terror in another part of the bog.

Arriving at our next stop we set off down a small forest track into a silent stand of spruce. The soft scraping and flaking of bark led us to a gorgeous **Black-backed Woodpecker** that fed

unperturbed for a while before continuing on. Turning around we heard more tapping and shortly located an even more cooperative **American Three-toed Woodpecker** only four feet off the ground. We were already so close any further approach would have presented an opportunity to pick the bird up so we sat still and watched it work until we were ready to go warm up in the van.

After a hot meal in a local café, we set back out in search of more treasures of the north. A jet black **Rough-legged Hawk** hunted patiently along the roadside while we watched comfortably from in the van. Nearby a sluggish and clumsy pair of **Ruffed Grouse** gingerly waddled through thin alder branches nipping buds. A few hours of slowly cruising roads scanning treetops paid off when we spotted a **Northern Hawk Owl** perched like a Christmas ornament at the tip of a towering fir. The sun had come out and we took time to bask in this major target before turning back towards Duluth. An odd looking mass in a bare tree on the way turned out to be a **North American Porcupine** adding a mammal highlight to the end of an already fantastic day.



*This Canada Jay was among many hungry visitors at a feeding station in the forest.*

January 15



*Spruce Grouse are remarkably confiding, seemingly oblivious to the presence of people*

Driving north down came somewhere in the Superior National Forest. This vast tract of Boreal forest stretches all the way from the shores of Lake Superior up to the Canadian border and holds an excellent representation of far northern birds. We quickly came upon a distant and suspiciously bird-like lump in the road, the classic way to encounter a **Spruce Grouse**. This difficult to locate specialty is noticeably absent from the Sax-Zim Bog. Often called Fool Hens, Spruce Grouse are remarkably tame and this individual seemed undisturbed by our presence and

barely took the time to slowly amble to the side of an impatiently waiting vehicle.

With our main target out of the way we continued through low lying patches of Black Spruce and towering upland stands of White Pine before stopping to enjoy a chance encounter with another Northern Hawk Owl. Often in low numbers **Northern Hawk Owls** have been particularly common this winter and stumbling across one is always a treat. A short stroll along the road revealed a small flock of **Black-capped Chickadees** that contained a pair of chocolate-dipped **Boreal Chickadees**, their squeaky nasal song betraying their presence long before we saw them. In an area with such high energetic demands and little food, Boreal Chickadees often pass through quickly, barely pausing to allow a second look. Thankfully, these birds stuck around a full 15 minutes along us to look as long as we could before needing to warm up.

The middle of the day was spent cruising in search of potential finch flocks in a few nearby towns. This is one of the times where the interests of birds and birders are in opposition and an abundance of winter food has made winter finches remarkably scarce this far south this year. We struck out on most of our finch targets but did manage to locate a small flock of **Pine Siskins** gather grit from the road and a remarkably large flock of over 200 **American Goldfinches** feasting on birch seeds in the town of Ely. With the weather turning we drove north to Grand Marais in the snow, catching glimpses of the stunning lakeshore in between squalls. A break in the weather allowed for a quick check of the harbor in Grand Marais where we saw a pristine pair of **Long-tailed Ducks** swimming just off-shore. With the snow returning and the ducks fading from view we checked into our hotel for the night where we were able to enjoy a sweeping view of the lake from the comfort of a warm room.

## January 16

The morning in Grand Marais was bright, clear and sharply cold. The open water of Lake Superior was steaming in the subzero air as we cruised the roads of this cozy little town in search of hungry wintering birds.

The streets were lined with bright red Rowan berries which proved attractive to large flocks of **American Robins** and **Cedar Waxwings**. Despite much searching no Bohemian Waxwings were found among them but our searching did turn up a nice group of **Purple Finches**.



*A Northern Hawk Owl carefully searches for prey before the impending snows.*

The road to the south wound through the sprawling frosted forests. All was quiet until we came upon a large group of **Pine Siskins** gathering grit from the roadbed. Closer inspection revealed a few rosy **White-winged Crossbills** among them, more concerned with the task at hand than our presence. So many of these northern birds are remarkably tame and it is one of the great aspects of birding up here – making up for the low diversity.

Things seemed quiet so we headed to a restaurant in the small town of Finland. We had a warm hearty meal surrounded by dozens of intricately decorated moose antlers and some rather strange taxidermy before quickly booking over to Sax-Zim Bog to bird the last few hours of the afternoon. The bog was also rather quiet, holding a few of the boreal specialties we had already encountered but the only new bird was a particularly hardy **Red-tailed Hawk** that had decided to stay the winter.

### January 17

We headed back to Sax-Zim Bog for one more round of boreal birding today. Despite an ominous forecast for

an impending snow-storm the day began grey and serene. The Admiral Road feeders held a few Canada Jays and Black-capped Chickadees with an **American Tree Sparrow** providing some new flavor. Checking the other area feeding stations we saw another flock of Evening Grosbeaks and a few sauntering **Wild Turkeys**, their bare heads looking awfully cold in the winter wind. A drive through the countryside produced a few more smartly patterned **Black-billed Magpies** and a **Sharp-tailed Grouse** that remained well hidden in the cover of a nearby pine.

With the snow bearing down we cruised the roads searching for any remaining targets. Information exchanged with fellow birders confirmed our suspicions – no Great Gray Owls around and the snow was fast approaching. On our final pass we were greeted one last time by a **Northern Hawk Owl**, perched low on a utility line and searching for one more meal as the snows arrived.

With the weather turning we made our way back to Duluth to have a final meal together and go our separate ways. Despite a few key misses we racked up an impressive list of boreal species with some genuinely rare species for the area like American Three-toed Woodpecker. Exploring this remote and beautiful landscape in

the dead of winter is a wild and unpredictable experience but the rewards of this boreal wonderland make every visit a treat.



*Boreal Chickadees are often detected by their squeaky song.*



*A Ruffed Grouse keeps an eye out for predators.*



*Winter sunrises over Lake Superior can be spectacular.*

**BIRD LIST**

The taxonomy of the bird list follows eBird/Clements (available here: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/clementschecklist/download/>)

(H) indicates a species that was HEARD only.

(G) indicates a species recorded by the GUIDE ONLY.

<b>Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)</b>	
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
<b>Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)</b>	
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>
Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
<b>Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)</b>	
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
<b>Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)</b>	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus smithsonianus</i>
<b>Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)</b>	
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis atricapillus</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis borealis</i>
Rough-legged Hawk	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
<b>Strigidae (Owls)</b>	
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>
<b>Picidae (Woodpeckers)</b>	
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>
Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
<b>Laniidae (Shrikes)</b>	

Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
<b>Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)</b>	
Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
<b>Alaudidae (Larks)</b>	
Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
<b>Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)</b>	
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>
<b>Sittidae (Nuthatches)</b>	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
<b>Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)</b>	
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
<b>Sturnidae (Starlings)</b>	
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
<b>Bombycillidae (Waxwings)</b>	
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
<b>Emberizidae (New World Buntings and Sparrows)</b>	
Fox Sparrow	<i>Passerella iliaca</i>
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
American Tree Sparrow	<i>Spizelloides arborea</i>
<b>Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)</b>	
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
Purple Finch	<i>Haemorhous purpureus purpureus</i>
White-winged Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus pinus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
<b>Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)</b>	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Additional species	

<b>Red Squirrel</b>	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
<b>White-tailed Deer</b>	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
<b>North American Porcupine</b>	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>