

NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND

FEBRUARY 1-5, 2018



Great Gray Owl © Brian Gibbons

**LEADERS: BRIAN GIBBONS & ERIK BRUHNKE
LIST COMPILED BY: BRIAN GIBBONS**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

Meeting our first afternoon in Duluth, we had no idea it would be the warmest temperature of the trip, a toasty 11° F. The next morning we would be shivering at -18° with a Black-backed Woodpecker in our sights. The remote Superior National Forest in Lake County would chill us most deeply at -27°; who knows what the windchill was! But it was all well worth it. With a good owl year and a few others, we had an excellent trip through the North Woods with amazing scenery, great food, and some wonderful birds.



North Woods in the snow © Brian Gibbons

On our first afternoon we worked our way up the scenic North Shore of Lake Superior as the evening progressed quickly, with the sun sinking behind the tallest spruce trees, before we found our first frozen gem: a beautiful Great Gray Owl, Tom's lifer, on the post of a giant sign for Tom's Logging Camp and Trading Post. Auspicious to say the least. With less than an hour and a half of birding, we scored again as the darkness gained on us: a quick sighting for some of us of a hunting Boreal Owl. We then basked in our quick successes and enjoyed an excellent dinner at the New Scenic Café. We weren't done yet! We added a Snowy Owl after dinner, lit up by Sodium vapor lights just west of our hotel.



Red Squirrel © Brian Gibbons

Our first morning in Sax-Zim Bog started at the Wilbert Café, with a hearty breakfast (we would need it). As we exited to the frigid air, we were delighted to see a sun pillar emanating from the southeast sky. Our first stop had us scoping a female Black-backed Woodpecker at -18° with trees popping from the extreme temperature. Near Meadowlands we found the Sharp-tailed



Northern Hawk Owl in Sax-Zim Bog © Brian Gibbons

Grouse right under a bird feeder. After dining, they moved out into the field to half-heartedly initiate their lek displays. At the Sax-Zim Bog Welcome Center the feeders were abuzz with Redpolls, including a couple of pale Hoarys. Black-capped Chickadees, Gray Jay, and Hairy Woodpeckers were also working over the buffet. Along McDavitt Road in the heart of the bog, Mike pulled off an amazing spot of the Northern Hawk Owl; three layers deep, the Hawk Owl was teed up but buried amongst the spruce trees. After we struggled to find a window through the trees to attain scope views for everyone, it obliged by flying to an open snag, and we enjoyed excellent scope views! The most ambitious feeder set-up was at MaryLou's where the usuals were gorging. A little color was added by nearly 40 Evening Grosbeaks feasting on sunflower seeds and squabbling over the prime feeder locations. All

this before lunch! The afternoon proved to be less eventful, but it couldn't have been a better day.



Great Gray Owl in the snow © Brian Gibbons

The next day was a little warmer and quite snowy. It snowed on us nearly every minute of the day save for a half-hour in the afternoon. This added to the aura of the North Woods as we birded our way up the north shore. Quickly we found our first Boreal Owl of the day; just the fact that I have to say “first” means this was an exceptional winter for Boreal Owls. We scoped this hearty little beast before we moved on into the woods where we found the first of several Great Gray Owls for the morning. We had good scope views of one and great binocular views of another that sat on a snowy spruce bow, watching as a lady and her dog collected her mail just 20 yards away! Blown away by our luck in finding all four Northern owls in our first two days, we were seeking other goodies. Kim Eckert, a retired VENT guide, suggested we head down West



Boreal Owl near Split Rock Light © Brian Gibbons

Knife River Road on our way to lunch, so we did. Bohemian Waxwings, a hoped-for target, were there, nearly 200 of them—another great find, as this winter the waxwings had been quite sparse. Again, all this before lunch. A couple more Great Grays in the afternoon padded our numbers, and our second Boreal of the day, in near dark conditions, topped off another fantastic day in this snowy landscape.

Our final day started early in frigid, bone-chilling, joint-seizing cold! It was -27° as we cruised the back roads for Spruce Grouse, which would never show despite the false alarm of a lone Ruffed Grouse feeding on buds near the road. This day

was mostly about winter landscapes, as the birds did not report for duty. One exception was a fine pair of Red Crossbills as we neared Isabella. We had a delightful lunch at the family-owned Stony River Café where Blue Jays and Gray Jays livened up the parking lot on this slow bird day. Our afternoon return to Duluth was via the scenic Highway 61 down the North Shore. Erik had the intel as we left lunch, and sure enough an hour later, just past the Split Rock Lighthouse, a gorgeous little Boreal sat for us, listening and looking for its next meal, its head whipping around when it heard a rustle under the snow. Excellent scope views and hundreds of photos were captured. This little creature saved a long birding day with ease and capped off an exceptional weekend of winter birding, but it wasn't our final bird. That title belongs to the

Snowy Owl Erik spotted flying in off Lake Superior to take a perch on an ice-encrusted railing near Duluth.



Superior National Forest at twenty below © Brian Gibbons

Until our next birding adventure, wherever in the world that might be...hopefully someplace warmer!

Brian and Erik

ITINERARY

1 February 2018 – Afternoon birding up the North Shore, dinner New Scenic Cafe

2 February 2018 – Sax-Zim Bog all day, Breakfast and lunch at Wilbert Café, Dinner At Sara's Table

3 February 2018 – North Shore all day, lunch at Blackwoods in Two Harbors, Dinner JJ Astor

4 February 2018 – Superior National Forest and Lake County all day, lunch at Stoney Creek Cafe, return to Duluth via North Shore, Dinner Bellisio's

BIRDS

Waterfowl	Anatidae	
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Two Harbors and North Shore
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	Duluth from the hotel
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	North Shore Lake Superior
Pheasants, Grouse and Allies	Phasianidae	
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>	NE of Duluth & Superior National Forest
Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>	Sax-Zim Bog (SZ)
Pigeons and Doves	Columbidae	
Rock Pigeon (I)	<i>Columba livia</i>	Towns
Gulls, Terns and Skimmers	Laridae	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Lake Superior
Hawks, Eagles and Kites	Accipitridae	
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	North Shore Lake Superior & SZ
Owls	Strigidae	
Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	Duluth & Lake Superior shore
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	SZ & St Louis County
Great Gray Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>	St Louis County, several locations!
Boreal Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>	4 sightings! North Shore
Woodpeckers	Picidae	
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>	SZ
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>	SZ & Lake County
Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>	SZ & Stoney Point
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>	SZ, glimpsed by a couple folks
Shrikes	Laniidae	
Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	SZ several sightings
Crows, Jays and Magpies	Corvidae	
Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	SZ & St Louis County
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	SZ & St Louis County
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	SZ high and flying away
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	Common
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Common
Chickadees and Tits	Paridae	

Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	SZ & St Louis County
Nuthatches	Sittidae	
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>	SZ, only seen by a few folks
Starlings	Sturnidae	
European Starling (I)	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	SZ
Waxwings	Bombycillidae	
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	West Knife River Rd, 200 birds!
Old World Sparrows	Passeridae	
House Sparrow (I)	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	SZ, odd location
Siskins, Crossbills and Allies	Fringillidae	
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	NE of Duluth
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	Near Isabella, MN
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	Common at feeders SZ
Hoary Redpoll	<i>Acanthis hornemanni</i>	A few at feeders SZ
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>	MaryLou's feeders in SZ
Cardinals and Allies	Cardinalidae	
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>	North Shore, rare in winter

MAMMALS

Squirrels & Allies	Sciuridae	
Eastern Gray Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	North Shore, 1 black individual
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	Common at feeders SZ
Rabbits & Hares	Leporidae	
Eastern Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	One in Duluth, seen by a couple folks
Deer	Cervidae	
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	A few sightings