

**FIELD REPORT**

**NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND  
FEBRUARY 2–6, 2023**



*Evening Grosbeak © Erik Bruhnke*

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Our Northern Minnesota Winter Weekend tour was filled with many exciting moments among a vast winter wonderland. The cold snap at the start of the tour was no match for the fun we had throughout the tour, starting with our initial jaunt of birding on the opening evening.

Before our welcoming dinner, we headed to the neighboring town of Superior, Wisconsin to look for Snowy Owls. The edges of the snow glowed deep-blue, and the sky was becoming more orange by the minute. With a little persistence and scanning, we came across a stunning immature male Snowy Owl. His many striking white accents were appreciated well through the scope! It was incredible to watch him flying low across the snowy fields, as well as perched atop a nearby roof. Snowy Owls really are one with the snowy landscape! Following this exciting birding experience in the brisk wind chill, we headed back to Duluth for our welcoming dinner.



*Snowy Owl © Erik Bruhnke*



*Our first sunrise at Sax-Zim Bog © Erik Bruhnke*

Throughout the next two days we birded the extensive and renowned Sax-Zim Bog. The brief cold snap started off our first morning at -30°F; thankfully, the following mornings and days were considerably warmer! The greatly varied habitat throughout the Bog is home to many amazing birds and more. One of the first birds we saw upon entering the Bog was the Ruffed Grouse. It was lots of fun to study and appreciate these birds' behavior. They carefully plucked catkins from the Aspen branches. After some Zen moments with these well-insulated birds, we continued on into the Bog. The next bird we came across was a Northern Hawk Owl



*Northern Hawk Owl © Erik Bruhnke*

perched atop a tree overlooking a vast snowy field. The owl's unique football-shaped body was seen through binoculars, and its dapper markings were appreciated even more through the scopes. All of this was taking place among a vibrant sunrise. It was a special treat to not only see this owl on our first morning of birding, but to see this individual several times later as well! Just up the road we found a North American Porcupine feeding among a cluster of tamarack trees. There was much life to savor, and the day was just beginning!



*Pine Grosbeak © Erik Bruhnke*

While meandering among many of the hotspots in the Bog, we enjoyed up-close moments of both gorgeous Evening Grosbeaks and stunning Pine Grosbeaks. Both of these species are gluttons for sunflower seeds. They were seen well at the various birdfeeding stations and also flying around the wild areas. With a little patience at the Admiral Road birdfeeders, we got to see a Boreal Chickadee come in and feed among the flurry of Black-capped Chickadees. The Boreal Chickadee is a dapper habitat specialist of the spruce forests. We first heard the wheezy calls of this species before it showed itself. While this charming bird fed in front of us, Pine Grosbeaks descended into the treetops. It was magical!

Our second day visit to Sax-Zim Bog brought forth some great experiences including Bohemian Waxwings at daybreak and Snow Buntings feeding over a field. The Bohemian Waxwings were seen perched atop a large tree shortly after we entered the Bog. Their plumage was so beautiful through the scopes. In the mid-morning we found Snow Buntings that were busy feeding among a partially snow-free field (a few areas were void of snow where manure was spread). Hardy Common Redpolls from the

far north were seen roaming around both days in the Bog. Patrolling the fields for smaller songbirds were Northern Shrikes, seen on both days of birding the Bog. The winter birds found throughout Sax-Zim Bog are hardy and stunning! Between our morning and afternoon stretches of birding the Bog, we dined at the local Wilbert Café for some delicious and hearty cuisine, complemented with homemade pie.



*Evening Grosbeak © Erik Bruhnke*

One of the additional treats of our second day up in the Bog was visiting the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog Welcome Center. The Welcome Center is the headquarters for the educational outreach and conservation efforts of this non-profit organization. We always make a point of visiting the Welcome Center to learn about and support their efforts, in addition to enjoying the many birdfeeders nearby. During our visit we saw many birds at their feeders including some Pine Siskins and American Goldfinches among the feeding frenzy of Evening Grosbeaks.

An unusual and unexpected few-day absence of Great Gray Owls was unfortunately taking place right at the time of our tour. It's hard to say what caused them to not be detected by so many visiting birders (including our group). It's likely that they were lying low among their year-round territories. We put in valiant effort in all the likely places at the right times; sometimes these challenges happen. Birding is like a treasure hunt.

On the last full day of our tour we headed up into the Superior National Forest. The vast and old forests were simply gorgeous, especially after the overnight snowfall that took place. While up in the Superior National Forest, we scored a nice scope view of a cooperative male Black-backed Woodpecker. He was seen flaking bark off of a pine tree, one of many trees affected by a significant forest fire back in 2021. Throughout the afternoon hours we birded our way down the stunning, ice-accented North Shore of Lake Superior. Common Goldeneyes and Red-breasted Mergansers were seen offshore from the town of Two Harbors. In town we found three Dark-eyed Juncos, which are a relatively uncommon bird for the mid-winter months throughout the northern tier of the state. One of our last birding spots of the afternoon was back in Duluth, where we viewed the edge of Hawk Ridge. This hawkwatching site is one of the premier fall hawkwatches in the country, and the surrounding area is good for looking for birds year-round. While overlooking the snowy hill and beautiful watery horizon of silver and blue, we



*Black-backed Woodpecker © Erik Bruhnke*

enjoyed the spectacle of a Ruffed Grouse feeding in nearby trees. The last birds of the tour were some sharp-looking Common Goldeneyes, seen displaying proudly on the water around Canal Park.



*Wrapping up the tour with some birding around the Canal Park Lift Bridge © Erik Bruhnke*

Every Winter Minnesota tour is a thrill, as we bundle up to savor the flora and fauna of this incredible part of the Upper Midwest. The great birding and winter scenery is complemented with great food every day. It was wonderful to lead this tour with Willy Hutcheson and to bird with everyone in our group. I can't wait for next year's Northern Minnesota Winter Weekend tour!

<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>	
<b>Waterfowl</b>	<b>Anatidae</b>	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	Three seen as a distant flyby from Canal Park
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Seen as flyovers, from the Hawk Ridge pull-off
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Several seen in Agate Bay in Two Harbors, and also a larger gathering of them at Canal Park
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	Six distant birds seen in Burlington Bay
<b>Pheasants, Grouse &amp; Allies</b>	<b>Phasianidae</b>	
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>	Seen in Sax-Zim Bog and also enjoyed in great mid-afternoon lighting from Hawk Ridge
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	Seen along various roadside areas in Sax-Zim Bog
<b>Pigeons and Doves</b>	<b>Columbidae</b>	
Rock Pigeon (I)	<i>Columba livia</i>	Sax-Zim Bog, Meadowlands, several areas throughout Two Harbors, and Canal Park
<b>Gulls, Terns &amp; Skimmers</b>	<b>Laridae</b>	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Seen in Agate Bay
<b>Hawks, Eagles &amp; Kites</b>	<b>Accipitridae</b>	
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	Seen every day of the tour
<b>Owls</b>	<b>Strigidae</b>	
Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	Seen on the opening evening of the tour, at the Richard I. Bong Memorial Airport
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	One individual, seen several times in Sax-Zim Bog! A thrill to see this species.
<b>Woodpeckers</b>	<b>Picidae</b>	
Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>	A rare treat for the tour, seen up in the Superior National Forest
Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>	Seen well in the Superior National Forest
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	Seen every full day of the tour, enjoyed in both wild areas and at birdfeeding locations
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates villosus</i>	Most common woodpecker of the tour, seen every full day of the tour. Observed in both wild areas and at feeding locations
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>	Seen every full day of the tour
<b>Shrikes</b>	<b>Laniidae</b>	

Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>	Observed both days at Sax-Zim Bog
<b>Crows, Jays &amp; Magpies</b>	<b>Corvidae</b>	
Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	Seen at the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog Welcome Center and up in the Superior National Forest. Always a delight to see!
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	Observed every full day of the tour, both at feeding areas and in wild areas
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	Observed every day. Common
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Seen every full day of the tour, fairly common among larger woodlands
<b>Tits, Chickadees, &amp; Titmice</b>	<b>Paridae</b>	
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	A common sight every full day of birding, well appreciated on the tour.
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>	Seen at the Admiral Road birdfeeders. A little patience goes a long way with this beautiful species!
<b>Waxwings</b>	<b>Bombycillidae</b>	
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	We located a flock of about 100 at first light in Sax-Zim Bog
<b>Nuthatches</b>	<b>Sittidae</b>	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	Uncommon but regular sight every full day of birding
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>	Seen at the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog Welcome Center and at Fringed Gentian Bog
<b>Starlings</b>	<b>Sturnidae</b>	
European Starling (I)	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Observed every day of the tour
<b>Old World Sparrows</b>	<b>Passeridae</b>	
House Sparrow (I)	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Seen around Canal Park and in Sax-Zim bog
<b>Finches, Euphonias &amp; Allies</b>	<b>Fringillidae</b>	
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>	It was an outstanding winter to see them. Seen up-close and well both days in Sax-Zim Bog
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	A great winter to see them. Observed each full day, among wild areas and at various feeders
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	Several flocks seen, in Sax-Zim Bog and in the Superior National Forest. Relatively uncommon compared to some winters.
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>	A few individuals seen at the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog Welcome Center
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>	Seen in Sax-Zim Bog and up in the Superior National Forest

<b>Longspurs &amp; Snow Buntings</b>	<b>Calcariidae</b>	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	Seen well just outside of Meadowlands
<b>New World Sparrows</b>	<b>Passerellidae</b>	
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	An uncommon winter sight. We found a group of three in Two Harbors.
<b>MAMMALS</b>		
<b>Squirrels, Prairie Dogs &amp; Marmots</b>		
<b>Sciuridae</b>		
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	Seen every full day of birding. Common mammal among pine forests
<b>Porcupines</b>	<b>Erethizontidae</b>	
North American Porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>	We found one in a tamarack tree in Sax-Zim bog
<b>Rabbits &amp; Hares</b>	<b>Leporidae</b>	
Eastern Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	Seen around our hotel grounds
<b>Deer</b>	<b>Cervidae</b>	
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	Sax-Zim Bog and along the North Shore