

# NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND

FEBRUARY 1-5, 2024

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*Despite its brisk 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 many 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 midwinter day's "high" temperature to remain below zero and for the low to be minus 20 or even less, an average day's temperature reaches 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.*



**February 1, Day 1: Arrival in Duluth.** Participants should plan to arrive into Duluth this afternoon and make their way to our hotel where a room will be reserved in each person's name. At the time of this writing the complementary hotel shuttle has been suspended and participants should plan on taking a taxi/Uber/Lyft to the hotel (approximately \$25). We'll meet in the hotel lobby at 4:00 p.m. for a brief orientation session and birding followed by dinner.

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. 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. An array of unique and locally-owned shops are nearby.

NIGHT: The Inn on Lake Superior, Duluth



Great Gray Owl © Brian Gibbons

**February 2-4, Days 2-4: Duluth-Superior and Northeastern Minnesota.** Within the city limits of Duluth itself



Pine Grosbeak © Brian Gibbons

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; in some years, a Varied Thrush, Red or White-winged crossbills, and a Hoary Redpoll or two may be 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 raptors overwinter in the harbor, mostly Red-tailed, 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 Iceland are usually present, along with the rarer Great Black-backed Gull.



**Northern Hawk Owl © Michael O'Brien**

On one day we typically 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, Canada 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 American 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 spruce-tamarack bogs, alder swamps, and sedge meadows. Such habitat is found in the 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 record winters. 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 in some winters a Townsend's Solitaire.



**Black-backed Woodpecker © Michael O'Brien**

NIGHTS: The Inn on Lake Superior, Duluth

**February 5, Day 5: Departure for Home.** Participants may plan to depart for home at any time today. At the time of this writing the complementary hotel shuttle has been suspended and participants should plan on taking a taxi/Uber/Lyft to the airport (approximately \$25)

**EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS:** Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 14 participants.

**TOUR LEADERS:** Erik Bruhnke and Willy Hutcheson.

**Erik Bruhnke** has had a love for birds since he was a child. He graduated from Northland College in Wisconsin with a Natural Resources degree in 2008. Erik taught field ornithology various times at Northland College. During his first six fall seasons following college, Erik worked as an interpreter at Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory in Duluth, Minnesota and was a board member of the Duluth Audubon Society. He has counted migrating raptors at the Corpus Christi HawkWatch in Texas. His avian field experiences have taken him throughout Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, North and South Dakota, Maine, Texas, and western Canada. Erik's wildlife photography has won national awards, and his writings have been featured in *Birder's Guide* via the American Birding Association, *BirdWatching*, and *Birdwatcher's Digest*. Although he loves all birds, Erik is a devoted raptor and gull nerd. He currently splits his time between the tropics of South Texas and the Northwoods of Minnesota. He loves to cook and bake in his free time.



**Hutcheson** began birding in the South Carolina Lowcountry at age six. As a teenager, he attended VENT's Camp Chiricahua for two years, where he discovered that there were indeed other adolescents in the world who shared his all-consuming obsession with birds. After obtaining one Master's Degree in Conservation Biology and another in teaching science, he began a career in education. For the last decade, he has taught Biology and Environmental Science at a boarding school in Concord, Massachusetts, where he lives with his wife and two teenage sons. In the summers, Willy escapes with his family to Great Wass Island in downeast Maine and enjoys hiking, sailing, kayaking, and birding the maritime boreal ecosystem.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$2,395** 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/s. 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 **\$525**.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at <https://ventbird.com>) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (September 4, 2023) prior to the tour departure date.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

## **CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:**

### **Cancellation by Participant:**

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$250** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

#### If participant cancels:

180 days or more before departure date

179 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

#### Participant's refund will be:

Participant's deposit minus \$250\*

No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded

No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

### **Cancellation by VENT:**

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A "**Force Majeure**" event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

**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.**

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend their **Ripcord** plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services** from your point of injury or

illness to your **hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for **trip cancellation/interruption**, primary medical expense coverage, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, **waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion**, and a “**Cancel for Any Reason**” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.\*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: <https://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird>; or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

\*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 14 days of making your tour deposit. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 14 days in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. The primary medical expense benefit is available to U.S. residents only. For this reason, non-U.S. residents will pay an adjusted premium when purchasing a comprehensive policy, which includes all of the other benefits available to U.S. residents. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

#### **Coronavirus (COVID-19):**

Concerns about COVID-19 may present uncertainty for those holding travel insurance policies or who are considering future travel and purchasing such insurance. Redpoint features a **Coronavirus FAQ page** on its website that addresses questions and concerns regarding its travel insurance and the impact of COVID-19. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of topics such as policy coverage and limitations, policy modifications, cancellation, refunds, and more.

Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ** page at the following link:

[https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid\\_19\\_faq/](https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/)

Additionally, some countries maintain COVID-19 entry requirements, including mandates to purchase travel insurance covering medical expenses due to COVID-19 illness and in case of quarantine. Ripcord’s comprehensive travel insurance plans are designed to satisfy the various country-specific travel insurance entry requirements. Those who purchase a Ripcord policy will receive a “letter of confirmation” that affirms that the policy satisfies such requirements.

**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 domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per-person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.\* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

\*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler’s consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.



**CLIMATE:** As previously described, an average high temperature in Duluth during the tour 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. Wind-chills 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. Wool works like a charm with keeping yourself warm and dry. Try merino wool if you are prone to the itchiness of traditional wool. Layering materials is a good strategy for keeping warm. 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. Disposable hand warmers were widely used in 2018 when we experienced -27° F as a natural air temperature.

**CONDITIONS:** As noted above, temperatures can be frigid; please pack accordingly. Due to the climate we will be spending an extraordinary amount of time birding and driving in the vans. Proper restroom facilities are rare in the rural north woods, often only available at breakfast and lunch cafes. Outdoor facilities (latrines or port-a-potties) are available at a few of the birding locations in Sax-Zim Bog. We often depart Duluth around 5 a.m. each morning.

**INTERNET:** Wi-Fi is available at the hotel and even some restaurants where we will dine.

**EQUIPMENT:** You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good repair, along with a belt pack or day pack (for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, 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.

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**HEALTH:** VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, 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.

**COVID-19:** We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying "Up to Date" with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. Please visit the **Coronavirus Travel Update** page of our website <https://ventbird.com/covid-19> for our official statement regarding COVID-19 and the operation of our



tours. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>.

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 (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

**SUGGESTED READING:** A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Dunn, Jon L. and Jonathan Alderfer. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. Washington, D.C. 2017.

Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (Second Edition). New York: Knopf, 2014. 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* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Duluth, MN: Gavian Guides, 2002.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, 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 exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, "**VENT**") act only as agents for the participant 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 participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on May 15, 2023, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons

for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "***Airline***") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

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