

## MINNESOTA 3-11 JANUARY 2015

Last May I had the opportunity to go to Finland and spent one day looking at different owl species that occur there. One of them, the Great Gray Owl, only provided very partial views as it was sitting on a nest. After that I decided I wanted to see the species in full, instead of the very top of its head. I had heard of the Sax-Zim Bog in Minnesota as being one “the” places in the United States to see them. After doing some research of the bog, I found it also had a nice northern mammal list including (but not limited to) moose, timber wolf, Canadian lynx, fisher, pine marten, ermine (short tailed weasel), porcupine and American red squirrel. I booked my first ever bird focused tour with a company called Birding Ecotours that is based out of South Africa. The company has some nice owl based tours and the trip “Owls and Other Winter Birds of Minnesota” had a great price, great time frame to get away after the new year, and also listed the above mammals as possible sightings. I can highly recommend the company as they never asked me for a deposit until enough people had signed up (4), and were quick to answer any questions I had, including will there be time to also look at mammals.

Instead of doing a day by day account of what I saw, I will just concentrate on the species I did see. Of course being the northern part of the US in January the list is not long (I will touch on the weather later) and I won't rattle on about all the birds I saw (except for a little shout out to the Great Grays). I would imagine that most people on here have seen the following listed species, however a few were lifers for me (no, not the deer) and I had not seen a Minnesota trip report yet.

The majority of the trip was spent in the bog itself. My friend and I

also rented a car the day before and the day after the tour so we could concentrate more time on looking for mammals. It is an easy 30 minute drive going along Highway 53 north from Duluth. The bog is not a fully protected area, but is a mixture of state forest (the Cloquet Valley and Whiteface), private property, county land and the Zim wildlife Management area. It also has a variety of nice habitat from sedge, brush and scrub areas, and small patches of boreal and peatland forest. Some of the private properties had set up bird feeders and had signs saying “welcome birders”, while others had signs clearly stating they did not want anyone on their land. We also spent one day in and around the Superior National Forest which is located north of Duluth along the Minnesota- Canada border and the north shore of Lake Superior. It contains about 3.9 million acres of mixed pine, fir and spruce trees. We concentrated our wildlife watching there along Highway 2 leading away from Duluth.

-American Red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – these were mainly seen in and around bird feeding stations in the bog. The bird feeders along Admiral Road, around the visitor center, and Loretta's feeders which are off a small path along Kelsey Whiteface Road are pretty much guaranteed spots. We would also on occasion see them running down the sides of various roads.





-North American Porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*) – on the day before the trip ,when my friend and I were by ourselves, there was a group of 5 bird watchers standing directly across the road from the Visitor Center which is located on Owl road. One of them showed me a pic on her Iphone of a porcupine she had just seen, claiming it was in a tree 5 minutes ago, 0.5 mile from the visitor center along the Road (heading away from the center on your right). My friend and I proceeded to creep along the stretch and scan all the trees and saw nothing. We went back to the birders to see if we could get more detailed instructions, and I briefly sized up the group members to see if I could kidnap one until they produced the porcupine for me. I ended up getting conflicting info and never could find the porcupine (if it wasn't for the picture I could have used the “they don't know what a mammal is”excuse) and I wimped out on my kidnapping idea with it being so early in the trip. Luckily, two days later ,with our actual group, we found a porcupine sitting high up in a tree near the junction of Sax Road and Highway 7. I was also told by staff at the visitor center that this winter there had been frequent sightings of the species along McDavitt road.





White tail deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) -we saw them almost every day, but usually only 1-4 animals standing in or near areas of farmland in the bog. My most unusual sighting was a group of three that were standing along train tracks in downtown Duluth under the Bong bridge that connects Minnesota to Wisconsin.





Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) – this species and the gray fox are reported as frequent sightings in the bog. My sighting involved the urban variety. I saw a lone individual around 7 pm, after leaving the Whole Foods co-op on east 4<sup>th</sup> street in Duluth, walking down the road, then proceeded to walk on the sidewalk. When we pulled our car over, it sat on the sidewalk and just stared at us for close to a minute, then walked off. It was the healthiest looking urban fox I had ever seen.



American pine marten (*Martes americana*)- we saw a lone individual along Highway 2 in the Superior National Forest. It was running down the highway, then ran in front of the car. It was unfortunately my turn to be in the back of the van that day so I could not get a pic.



Ermine/short tailed weasel (*Mustela erminea*) – This is a species that I had seen frequent pictures online that people had taken in the bog. This year someone had donated deer rib cages to place near feeding stations. Four rib cages were placed next to the visitor center, and three were nailed to trees in the Loretta's feeders area. As stated previously Loretta's feeders are off Kelsey Whiteface Road about 0.5 miles east of Highway 7. The day before I got to Minnesota the bog held a Christmas bird count. The count also had one lone wolf sighting and an ermine that was munching on one of the rib cages at Loretta's feeders. I talked to many locals when I got there and many had seen the ermine along the rib cages and also running down the small path at the feeding station. We went every day, twice a day, to see if the ermine would show up. The cold prevented long waits outside (this is the only feeding station that you have to walk to so watching in the car is not an option). Finally on the last day, thirty minutes before we had to leave we walked the path one last time and found the ermine chewing away in the second rib cage on the left as you enter the path. There has been a reported second ermine at one of the rib cages next to a brush pile at the visitor center.







Great Gray Owl – (*Strix nebulosa*) -

What a magnificent mammal killer. We were able to watch owls on most mornings. The best sightings were in a small field on McDavitt road (that even created a 6 car owl jam), one on Admiral road and a very cooperative owl along Lake Nicholas Road that allowed for extended viewing, once even at 10:45 am.





A couple thoughts about my trip-

-I have never done wildlife watching in such cold temperatures before. The week we got there, that part of Minnesota underwent a severe cold spell. My first day out it was -18 degrees F, and later in the week it went down to -20. The warmest it got was 7 degrees F but only for about 2 hours. I was wearing as many shirts as possible that could fit under my jacket (7) and four pairs of pants and even with warm hats, gloves, scarf , etc I could only stay outside for a maximum of 4 minutes before I started to not feel the tips of my toes





and fingers. How those little chickadees and such just don't freeze in mid air is beyond me. I did the last day with the ermine stay outside for a total of ten minutes, but I think the excitement helped. I did find that the theory that swearing while undergoing pain does help with dealing with it. Carb loading at meals however , while delicious, does not help with maintaining core body temperatures. When I got home to Virginia it was 41 degrees F and I thought I could break out my flip flops.

-I think I saw a wolf along Highway 7 for a second. By the time we were able to turn the car around it was gone. I did talk to a local that said that some people let there dogs run loose so I could have been tricked. I also really wanted to see a lynx, but knew it was a long shot. I talked to a local Duluth guide who said the Superior National Forest was the best place to look, especially along the Gunflint Trail and some of the smaller roads off that trail. He told me his friend two days before I went there, had seen a female with a kitten right off the side of that trail and he had that morning been looking at his friend's pictures. I looked at lodges along the trail and found one, Golden Eagle Lodge, that list northern flying squirrels as night time visitors to the feeders outside the cabins. I called the lodge and the person I talked to said that they are very common in the winter and less so later times in the year. He stated sunflower seeds were the best way to lure them in.

He didn't use the word guaranteed, but said he would be surprised if over a 2-3 night stay we did not see any. I talked to many locals who also said the squirrels show up to their houses as well. Loretta's feeders had a few feeders with sunflower seeds and if I could have dealt with the bone chilling temperatures I would have checked them out at night. I would imagine the deer rib cages also get other night time visitors. My friend and I decided to put going back on our five year plan and stay at Golden Eagle Lodge for the squirrels and hopefully see a lynx in the forest. I'll report back in the next five years.