

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



USA, MINNESOTA: Winter Birds and Mammals

Saturday 16th - Saturday 23rd January 2016

Tour Participants: Dave Jackson, Irene Jackson and Andy Stanbury

Leaders: Chris Townend and local guides David Johnson and Clinton Nienhaus

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Wolf: Two beautiful animals seen very well on the Gunflint Trail for around 15 minutes and a third animal briefly the following day were all voted as the mammal highlight.

Snowy Owl: A wonderful female/immature was seen very well as it peered down from its slightly uncanny urban perch in downtown Superior!

Ivory Gull: A 1st winter bird performed to its small crowd of onlookers at Canal Park, Duluth where this rarity had been present for at least three weeks prior to our visit.

American Marten: A superb animal gave stunning views in the top of small tree and was admired for a few minutes despite the severely cold temperatures!

Pine Grosbeak: One of the many bird highlights was seeing a flock of at least 15 birds feeding in the snow just metres from us at the Gunflint Lodge.

Gyr Falcon: The last bird of the trip and well worth the wait as an immature female gave great views both in flight and perched.

Canadian Lynx: A brief sighting as an animal crossed the road at night and frustratingly for everyone was only seen by one of the group.



Two of the tour highlights were this Snowy Owl at Superior and one of three Wolves seen on the Gunflint Trail

Saturday 16th January

We arrived into a very cold and snowy Minneapolis airport in the early afternoon after a direct flight from Amsterdam. We arrived a little later than scheduled and after another wait whilst one of us was re-united with one of our bags that went missing, we finally headed off to collect our 4x4 vehicle. Once packed and with the seat warmers very much on(!) we headed north on the 4 hour drive to Grand Marais, a small town located beside mighty Lake Superior which was to be our base for the next six nights. We arrived at our guesthouse in the evening (later than planned due to our delays) and were welcomed by our host Jay and a lovely warm fire before everyone headed off to bed for a good night's rest.

Sunday 17th January

A superb breakfast consisting of various cereals, fresh fruit and numerous home cooked treats with endless amounts of coffee and fruit juice set us up for the cold morning ahead! At around 7am we met our local guide David and then headed out towards the Gunflint Trail road. Historically, this road was once just a footpath for people travelling from inland lakes to Lake Superior but it now serves as a road to the various lodges, lakes and hiking trails of this wonderful wilderness.

As we travelled along the quiet roads we found ourselves surrounded by snow covered pine trees and a classic winter wonderland scenery. We headed towards an area that our local guide David had been monitoring for a number of weeks prior to our visit and where he had regularly been recording Canadian Lynx on camera in recent days. It was a bone chilling -28 degrees centigrade outside, but we all managed to brave it and took a short walk to a purpose built screen that overlooked a feeding area where a Lynx had been visiting. We then simply watched and waited. A Great Horned Owl was a nice surprise as we arrived at the site whilst Downy Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadees and the odd Grey Jay kept us company to take our minds of the cold! Unsurprisingly, this challenging environment was fairly lifeless and due to the extreme cold temperatures, we were only able to sustain our watch for a short time, but did well given the conditions! After an hour or so we thawed out in our vehicle and then patrolled the deserted roads for any birds and mammal tracks. A Moose was the definite highlight of the morning as we watched this elegant animal on the road ahead of us, before it ran off towards the snow covered forest. Later in the morning, a second session at the feeding area was rewarded with some fabulous views of an American Marten as it sat in a nearby tree and peered down at us for a few minutes. Irene sensibly remained in the warm of our parked vehicle and did really well to see a Fisher cross the road in front of her! All in all, a great morning for mammals!

We enjoyed lunch at a nearby diner on the main Gunflint Trail where some bird feeders produced good views of Common Redpolls, Black-capped Chickadees and Grey Jays. We then returned to our viewing screen and spent another hour braving the cold. Nothing new was seen, but a Snowshoe Hare briefly shot across the road during one of our thawing out sessions in the vehicle and Irene also added Red Squirrel to our growing mammal list. We watched an amazing sunset and waited until dark before slowly driving the roads again for any mammal activity, but all was quiet. We returned to Grand Marais for a great evening meal and some live folk music.

Monday 18th January

Today took a similar form to the previous day, as once again we met for a fabulous American breakfast at 06.30hrs and then met David before heading off to check the forest for our hoped for target mammal! Andy, Dave and Chris managed about 1.5 hours at the viewing area and Irene kept watch on the road from the vehicle.

Again, the temperature was a fairly brutal -27 degrees centigrade and it felt even colder with the slight breeze! Highlights from the viewing area were the same Great Horned Owl and a Northern Goshawk that flew low overhead.

We visited a different diner at lunch, but unfortunately there were no bird feeders, so lunchtime birding was quiet. We then returned for a good afternoon session of slowly patrolling the roads for mammals. Things seemed very quiet, but we persisted all the same as we knew we were in the key Canadian Lynx hotspot! As dusk approached, another Moose gave some excellent views on the road as it stood its ground before slowly disappearing into the forest. A second animal a few kilometres up the road was a sign that animal activity was beginning to liven up. Then at around 17.30hrs Chris alerted everyone to look on the road ahead, but sadly it was all too quick for most to see! A Canadian Lynx had appeared from the left side of the road and very quickly crossed the road in a matter of seconds as it revealed its strong back legs and rear end before it was gone! Frustration all round, but a sure sign that the grey ghost of the forest was here! Despite waiting very quietly, the animal sadly never re-appeared. Another circuit of the roads revealed nothing so we returned to Grand Marais for dinner.

Tuesday 19th January

We started earlier today as everyone was eager to get back to the hotspot area after yesterday's Lynx sighting. Again, we returned with David and stopped briefly where the Canadian Lynx had crossed the road and we found Lynx tracks at the very same spot - although frustrating, it felt like we might just be getting closer!

It was still a very cold -26 degrees centigrade but the sky was clear and the sun was out, giving the impression it was warmer! We visited the viewing area again and checked our trail cameras but they revealed no Lynx activity and it seemed some cameras had been struggling to work in the excessively cold temperatures!

We all decided to drive around a little more today and make an effort to search for tracks. Exploring another road we came across some fresh Canadian Lynx prints in the snow that showed two animals walking together! They had clearly walked the road for a short while before heading off across an open area into the forest. It was very exciting knowing we were clearly in the presence of Canadian Lynx, but we just needed some luck to find them! The sun persisted during the morning raising temperatures to a new all time high for the trip, a balmy -13 degrees centigrade!

We headed out towards the Gunflint Lodge for lunch and had one of the best days for birding. En route a Pileated Woodpecker flew over the road and some time at the bird feeders revealed a number of new species. Here, we saw both Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Blue Jay, a lone White-throated Sparrow an odd looking leucistic Rusty-coloured Blackbird and the now expected Black-capped Chickadees. However, it was the Pine Grosbeaks that were the highlight as we watched at least 6 birds including some stunning pink males! A Red Squirrel also gave the best views so far as an animal busily fed on sunflower seeds. Our lunch was pretty impressive too as we enjoyed views across Gunflint Lake looking towards Canada.

After lunch we carried out our now well versed routine of checking the viewing area combined with some patrolling the roads in the now, slightly milder conditions. Mammal highlights this afternoon included another brief sighting of a Snowshoe Hare an American Marten that crossed the road and a female Moose that stood and posed in the fading light. We then did some spotlighting until around 8pm but we were not rewarded for our efforts!

Wednesday 20th January

We set out early again today and patrolled the road where we had found the fresh Lynx prints from the previous day. Sadly, no Lynx sightings but a female Spruce Grouse gave very close views from our vehicle as it stood in the snow during the early morning gloom. On the mammal front, we were excited to find some fresh Wolf prints. Temperatures today hovered around -14 to -16 degrees centigrade.

Later in the morning we visited two other viewing areas that David had prepared for us. These two sites had also recorded Canadian Lynx in recent weeks, but not as regularly or as recently as the site we were focusing most of our time. It was great to wander off into the snow covered forest and experience the depth of the snow and to see the sites that the Grey Ghost of the forest had clearly visited. Once again we took time to check the camera traps at our main hotspot site, but there was nothing new.

We headed off for an earlier lunch today and it turned out to be a good move! As we travelled along the Gunflint Trail road towards our lunch stop, we came over the brow of a hill and there on the road in front of us were two Wolves! We slowed down and followed them for a short while as we appreciated their beautiful thick winter fur, a dark coated animal and a contrasting light coated animal. They continued on the road but were forced off by another passing vehicle and we thought that was the end of our sighting. We slowly encroached to a gap in the forest where they seemed to have retreated and were amazed to see both animals stood just 20 meters away, both staring back at us! After a little while, they returned to the road and we watched them for a further ten minutes until they finally returned into the forest. Needless to say, it was smiles all round and we enjoyed one of our best lunches complete with bread pudding, ice cream and pumpkin sauce to celebrate the Wolves!

We returned to our usual area and slowly patrolled the roads for the afternoon, though nothing beat our Wolf sighting. A superb bull Moose showed well at dusk and a couple of Pine Grosbeaks were the bird highlights. Once again, despite our best spotlighting efforts long into the night we were rewarded with very little.

Thursday 21st January

Another day with the same routine but an even earlier start as we met for an 05.30hrs breakfast to try and maximise our chances of finding Canadian Lynx. We checked the trail cameras again today to find that a Fisher had been visiting the main viewing area during the early hours of the morning. We then spent the morning patrolling the roads again and despite no Lynx sightings, it was still a great day as the highlight once again was another Wolf. This time we watched it from the comfort of our diner whilst drinking coffee! It was another light coated animal but different to the one from the previous day.

A visit to Gunflint Lodge for lunch gave some more excellent birding opportunities as we had exceptionally close views of at least 15 Pine Grosbeaks including fabulous bright males and equally impressive golden females/immature birds. Other species were similar to the last visit with more good views of Black-capped Chickadees, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, White-throated Sparrow, the leucitic Rusty-coloured Blackbird and the tame Red Squirrels.

Our spotlighting efforts into the night were probably the quietest of the trip as we even failed to find a Moose, but we were determined not to give up, and tomorrow was another day!

Friday 22nd January

Today we headed south for the more birding focused part of the tour, but not before one final visit to our Canadian Lynx hotspot! We left at 05.30hrs for a couple of loops of the key tracks and roads. En route to the site a large "Cat" (Bobcat or Canadian Lynx) dashed across the road but just too damn quick and too far ahead of the headlights for identification, but certainly a large cat! We waited a while, but untypical for the time of the morning there was some other traffic on the road and we could not remain stationary for long. Frustratingly, it was another near miss for everyone. After driving the usual circuit, we had to leave as the sun began to rise and then quickly checked another area much closer to town where a Bobcat had been recently reported, but sadly time was upon us! We returned to our guest house for one final superb breakfast and then headed South West towards Sax Zim Bog and the town of Cotton. It was about a 2.5 hour drive along almost deserted roads and by late morning we met local birder Clinton, who was to be our guide for the next 24 hours. We swapped vehicles and then headed off for our target species that Clinton had already staked out for us!

Our first stop was beside some feeders that produced the first of our target species. Here, around 20+ Evening Grosbeaks performed in beautiful sunshine and in a temperature that seemed quite pleasant compared to our first few days! Also at the feeders was a lone Mourning Dove and we saw our first Northern Shrike of the trip en route also. We then headed towards the city of Duluth where we hoped to find a couple of scarce Arctic species that had been frequenting the area in recent weeks, namely Ivory Gull and Gyr Falcon. Duluth was about an hour's drive and en route we saw our first stunning adult Bald Eagle and a new mammal; a White-tailed Deer.

In Duluth, we arrived at an industrial area beside Superior Bay where one of an incredible three Gyr Falcons had been lingering. We spent some time searching with no luck and with the news that the Ivory Gull was showing just a couple of miles away, it seemed rude to not go and see it! Within a few minutes, we were soon watching a beautiful first winter Ivory Gull and we joined the small crowd of onlookers as this beautiful arctic gull performed within a few metres of us all. The bird had become quite a local attraction being only the 12th record for Minnesota and such a wonderfully confiding bird too. Other birds here included Bald Eagle, Arctic (American) Herring Gull, American Black Duck and Goldeneye. To end the day, we headed to the nearby town of Superior in the adjacent state of Wisconsin where we watched a stunning female/immature Snowy Owl. It perhaps wasn't the most scenic of places as it sat perched on a street light by a busy road beside an Aldi car park, but this is normal behaviour for this regular wintering population. Clearly, breeding in the remote high arctic calls for a contrast during the winter months and birds head for the city!

Saturday 23rd January

This morning we headed out just before first light in the hope of connecting with a Sax Zim Bog speciality, the Great Grey Owl. It was quite windy and not the best conditions for "owling" and despite looking very hard checking various regular haunts we had to accept the wind had beaten us. However, all was not lost as the morning highlight turned out to be a mammal! A North American Porcupine gave some very close views as it peered at us from its treetop safe haven. We then visited a nearby Sharp-tailed Grouse lek where we were entertained by some "dancing" birds before they flew off to the snow covered fields where we had some incredibly close views.

A visit to one of the many Sax Zim Bog feeders produced the hoped for Boreal Chickadee amongst the commoner Black-capped Chickadees as well as both Red-breasted Nuthatch and a single White-breasted Nuthatch. A brief stop at the newly

opened Sax Zim Bog Visitor Centre gave some time to look at the feeders as an impressive Common Redpoll flock busily fed on the various seed types provided.

We then received the news that we had hoped for as one of the Gyr Falcons was showing well at the Duluth industrial area, so needless to say that is where we headed! We arrived to find a small group of birders that were sadly not watching the bird as it had disappeared! We decided to spread out and check a few other places as we overlooked the frozen Superior Bay and a few people ice fishing. We were on quite a tight schedule as we needed to be sure that we were back in Minneapolis in good time for our evening flight back to the UK. After about half an hour we still hadn't seen the bird and decided to give it another 15 minutes and then in the eleventh hour, and as if by magic, there was the Gyr Falcon! It gave some great flight views as it glided around in the blue sky and then even allowed some great perched views in the scope. A superb bird and a great way to finish the tour! We thanked Clinton for all his help and then headed towards Minneapolis. En route a Red-tailed Hawk was a new addition to the trip list and Andy saw another Snowy Owl in flight as we neared the airport before we checked in and this great new tour ended.

Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Minnesota £100 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund. This will be used to support a conservation project in the future, yet to be determined.

For the last three years Wise Birding Holidays has been supporting a number of small conservation projects. However, we now believe that to make a bigger difference to conservation it seems best to pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will be used to support one single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. At present this amounts to just over £1,000. Some tours will continue to donate money to help some of the smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from such smaller donations. Please visit our [Conservation News](#) and [Latest News](#) links to find out more.





This American Marten showed very well on our first full day





Pine Grosbeaks were certainly one of the bird highlights of this tour





Moose (above) and Red Squirrel (below) were seen well on a number of occasions





Female Spruce Grouse (above) and Grey Jay (below)





These two Wolves were one of the trip highlights as we watched them for about 15 minutes en route to our lunch stop





Our first view of the Wolves (above) and one of the quiet roads we patrolled regularly for mammals (below)





Wolf print (above) and Canadian Lynx prints (below)





Common Redpolls were seen daily at feeding areas





Adult Bald Eagle(above) and female Evening Grosbeak (below)





Black-capped Chickadee (above) and Boreal Chickadee (below)





**Sharp-tailed Grouse showed exceptionally well
in a wonderful snow covered landscape**





**American Black Ducks (above) and 1st year Arctic
(American) Herring Gull (below)**





This 1st winter Ivory Gull in Duluth was a long staying rarity and showed down to a couple of metres!





This immature Gyr Falcon showed well on our last day around Duluth





North American Porcupine, Sax Zim Bog (above)
and female/imm. Snowy Owl, Superior (below)





Ice Fishing on Superior Bay

More photos from this and other tours can be viewed on our Flickr site:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/129663578@N06/albums>

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WISE BIRDING HOLIDAYS: Bird and Mammal Checklist for MINNESOTA, USA January 2016

This bird checklist follows the nomenclature and classification from HBW Alive, del Hoyo, J, Elliott, A et al

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Species Notes
1	Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>	1	A female in the snow on the early morning of the 20th showed very well near the Gunflint Trail road
2	Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>	2	A total of five birds near Sax Zim Bog on the 23rd gave superb views in the snow and we also saw some display behaviour
3	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	3	A group of 20+ birds were present at the Canal Park, Duluth
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	4	Small flocks recorded on the 22nd and 23rd around Superior Bay area in association with Black Ducks
5	American Black Duck	<i>Anas rubripes</i>	5	Small flocks recorded on the 22nd and 23rd around Superior Bay area in association with Mallard
6	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	6	Recorded around Duluth on the 22nd and 23rd
7	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>	7	A single bird at feeders near Sax Zim Bog on the 22nd
8	Ivory Gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>	8	A superb 1st winter bird showed within a few metres of us at the Canal Park, Duluth on the 22nd
9	Arctic Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	9	Six adults and a 1st year on the 22nd and three adults and a 1st year on the 23rd all around Duluth/Superior Bay area
10	Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	10	A female/imm bird (wing-tagged) showed fabulously well near Superior airport on the evening of the 22nd. Andy also saw a bird whilst travelling on the afternoon of the 23rd as we approached Minneapolis airport.
11	Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>	11	A single bird was seen on the 17th and 18th near the Gunflint Trail road
12	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	12	A single bird showed well in flight on the morning of the 18th near the Gunflint Trail
13	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	13	Adult birds were seen very well both perched and in flight near Sax Zim Bog and Duluth on the 22nd and 23rd. Max. counts of two birds on each day.
14	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	14	A single bird was seen from the vehicle whilst travelling to Minneapolis airport on the afternoon of the 23rd
15	Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Hylatomus pileatus</i>	15	Singles were seen in flight on the Gunflint Trail on the 19th and 21st and two birds were seen nr Sax Zim Bog on the 23rd
16	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	16	A common species seen well on six days often at feeding stations near Gunflint and Sax Zim Bog
17	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>	17	A common species seen well on four days often at feeding stations near Gunflint and Sax Zim Bog

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18	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	18	A superb immature female performed well around Superior Bay area on the 23rd and was a great end to the trip
19	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	19	A common species recorded every day mostly around feeding stations
20	Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>	20	A single bird showed well with Black-capped Chickadees and Nuthatches at a feeding station at Sax Zim Bog on the 23rd
21	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	21	Recorded only at the feeding stations at Gunflint Lodge and Sax Zim Bog
22	White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>	22	A single bird, uncommon for the area, was seen at one of the Sax Zim Bog feeding stations on the 23rd
23	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	23	Seen exclusively around the Sax Zim Bog area on the 22nd and 23rd with a max. count of at least two on the 23rd
24	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	24	Odd birds recorded around feeders at Gunflint Lodge and Sax Zim Bog on four days
25	Grey Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	25	This very obliging and beautiful species was recorded on five days around the Gunflint Trail area
26	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	26	Flocks of birds around the Sax Zim Bog area on the 22nd and 23rd
27	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	27	Recorded daily in low numbers
28	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	28	A small number were seen near feeders in the Sax Zim Bog area on the 22nd
29	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	29	Some nice flocks recorded on five days mostly around feeders with max. counts of 50+ at the Sax Zim Bog Centre
30	Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	30	Some fantastically close views at Gunflint Lodge feeders and by the Gunflint Trail road made up of males, females and immature birds. Recorded on five days with a max. count of 24 birds on the 21st
31	Evening Grosbeak	<i>Hesperiphona vespertina</i>	31	A feeding group of 20+ birds showed well at feeders in the Sax Zim Bog area on the 22nd
32	White-throated Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>	32	A single bird was present at Gunflint Lodge on the 19th and 21st
33	Rusty Blackbird	<i>Euphagus carolinus</i>	33	A partially leucistic bird was present at the feeders at Gunflint Lodge

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#	MAMMALS		#	
1	Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>	1	Single animals recorded on the 17th and 19th by various members of the group
2	North American Porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>	2	A wonderful view of an animal in a tree at Sax Zim Bog on our last morning
3	Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	3	Some great views of this attractive squirrel recorded on five days, mostly around feeding stations
4	Canadian Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>	4	An animal was seen crossing the road near the Gunflint Trail at around 17.30 hrs on the 18th, but frustratingly it was seen only by Chris and the next day we found the tracks of that animal. On the 19th, we also found fresh tracks in a different area that showed at least two animals together.
5	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	5	Fabulous views of a dark and a light coated animal on the afternoon of the 20th on the Gunflint Trail and another animal seen from a the comfort of a diner window on the Gunflint Trail whilst sipping coffee on the late morning of the 21st!
6	American Marten	<i>Martes americana</i>	6	Excellent views of this attractive mustelid on the morning of the 17th in a tree and again on the 19th both nr Gunflint Trail
7	Fisher	<i>Martes pennanti</i>	7	Irene did very well to see this tricky to see mustelid as it crossed the road in front of her whilst in the vehicle on the 17th
8	Moose	<i>Alces americanus</i>	8	Recorded on four days near the Gunflint Trail. Singles on the 17th & 19th, two on the 18th & an impressive bull on the 20th
9	White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	9	Recorded only around the Sax Zim Bog area with two on the 22nd and a single on the 23rd

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