

Boreal Winter Birding – Duluth, Minnesota

January 9 - 13, 2019

\$ 760.00 for Single

\$600.00 for Double

Max 12 ppl



Enjoy the wonders of Boreal birds with expert Duluth guide Kim Eckert, and GCBO's Executive Director, Martin Hagne. Think Great Gray Owl! Bring warm clothes... it will be chilly, but the birds are worth it! Kim knows every spot for the best chance to see them.

We will bird for three full days, visiting places like the famed Sax-Zim Bog area. Possible species include Great Gray Owl, Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, Northern Hawk-Owl, Ruffed Grouse, Evening Grosbeak, Northern Shrike, Black-billed Magpie, White-winged Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, Gray Jay, Common Redpoll, Hoary Redpoll, and more!

Fly into Minneapolis- Saint Paul and we will drive up to Duluth. Or chose to fly into Duluth and we'll pick you up. This trip includes local transportation, hotel, breakfast at hotel, shuttle from and to airport, entry fees to parks, and guide services. It does NOT include airfare, lunch or dinners, alcoholic drinks, tips and other personal expenses.

NORTHERN MINNESOTA WINTER WEEKEND

Despite its frigid 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 around half 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 good 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 rarities as Gyrfalcon, Boreal Owl, and American Three-toed Woodpecker are other hoped-for possibilities.

While it would not be unusual for a mid-winter day's "high" temperature to remain below zero and for the low to be minus 20 or even lower, an average day's temperatures reach 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 vehicles.

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. Kim Eckert, one of your tour's leaders, has lived in Duluth since 1977 (winters included), is thoroughly familiar with the challenges of birding in wintry conditions, and he is in frequent contact with other area birders and fully aware of what has been seen in the area.

TRIP ITINERARY

January 9, Day 1: Arrival in Duluth.

Tour participants should plan to arrive in Duluth today, either by flying there (DLH) via the Minneapolis - St. Paul airport (MSP) or by flying to the Minneapolis - St. Paul airport (MSP) and traveling with us by Van to Duluth. (More on the travel options on a later date.) We will meet at 6:30 p.m. for dinner and a brief orientation session in the hotel lobby. For those participants unable to arrive by 6:30 p.m., a message will be left for you with instructions for the next morning.

For those with transportation who arrive early enough in the day, 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. (And, if all the participants manage to arrive by early afternoon, we may move the meeting time ahead in order to look for owls together as a group before dinner—either Snowys in the harbor or perhaps even a Great Gray or Northern Hawk-Owl on the outskirts of town.)

January 10-11-12, Days 2-3-4: Duluth-Superior and Northeastern Minnesota.

Within the city limits of Duluth itself 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 Grosbeaks, and Common Redpolls can often be expected; in most years, a Varied Thrush, some Red or White-winged crossbills, and a Hoary Redpoll or two are also 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 hawks also overwinter in the harbor, mostly Red-taileds, 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 Icelanders are usually present, along with an occasional Great Black-backed Gull.

On one day we normally 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, Gray 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 Pine 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 tamarack bogs, alder swamps, and sedge meadows. Such habitat is found in the so-called 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 several recent winters, with some lucky birders able to see a dozen or more on a given day. 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 C.B.C.! While searching for these owls, we also have a chance to see Sharp-tailed Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Rough-legged Hawk, 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 Townsend's Solitaire.

January 13, Day 5: Departure for Home.

Participants may plan to depart for home at any time today. However, it might be advisable to schedule your flight for the afternoon, which will then provide those with later departures one last morning to look again for any birds not yet seen on the tour.

CLIMATE

As previously described, an average high temperature in Duluth during January 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.

Windchills 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 infrequent, 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. 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.

TOUR LEADERS

Kim Eckert

With 55 years of birding experience throughout the U.S. and Canada, Kim has now been guiding birders for 40 of those years. He leads trips locally and internationally, and for major birding festivals. He has authored four editions of *A Birder's Guide to Minnesota*, and has written numerous articles, notes, and seasonal reports for the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union journal, *The Loon*, and other publications such as *Birding* and *North American Birds*. Kim has also operated the Minnesota Birding Weekends program of birding tours since 1986, has been a member for three decades of Minnesota's Records Committee,

and for 20 years he served as Naturalist at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve in Duluth. A Minnesota resident since the 1960s, he has resided in Duluth since 1977—winters included.

Martin Hagne

Martin Hagne was born and raised on the Swedish west coast, where his grandfather instilled a love for nature at an early age. He moved to the United States, and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, in 1979 and turned his focus towards wildlife viewing and conservation concerns. Martin serves as the Executive Director of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory in Lake Jackson, TX. Previously he served as the Executive Director of the Valley Nature Center in Weslaco, Texas, a non-profit environmental education facility, for 13 years. He has also worked as a Field Biologist doing baseline studies for many years, including avian (bird), reptile and amphibian, mammal, threatened and endangered species, and habitat studies. Martin's has served on several national, state, regional and local environmental appointments, committees, and boards. He also leads birding field trips both in the U.S. and foreign locations. Birding, nature viewing, native plants, conservation issues and environmental education are great passions for Martin.

Photos by John P Richardson



POSSIBLE BIRD LIST

I. Strong Probability

Strong probability of being seen; would probably be missed only in the event of bad luck, bad weather, or an unusually slow season:

Ruffed Grouse
Bald Eagle
Glaucous Gull
Great Gray Owl
Northern Hawk Owl
Pileated Woodpecker
Northern Shrike
Gray Jay
Black-billed Magpie
Common Raven
Boreal Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Pine Grosbeak
Common Redpoll
Evening Grosbeak

II. Good Chance

Good chance of being seen; our chances of seeing any of these are probably better than 50-50, but most take special effort to find and we will likely miss some of them:

American Black Duck
Sharp-tailed Grouse
Northern Goshawk
Rough-legged Hawk
Iceland Gull
Snowy Owl
Black-backed Woodpecker
Bohemian Waxwing
Snow Bunting
White-winged Crossbill
Red Crossbill
Hoary Redpoll

III. Possibilities

Possibilities which will probably be difficult to find, primarily because sightings tend to be few in number or non-existent; chances are less than 50-50, but it is possible we will find a few of these:

Harlequin Duck
Long-tailed Duck
Spruce Grouse
Gyr Falcon

Barred Owl
Boreal Owl
American Three-toed Woodpecker
Varied Thrush

FIELD CHECKLIST (sequence of species to be updated)

Canada Goose	Boreal Chickadee
American Black Duck	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Mallard	White-breasted Nuthatch
Harlequin Duck	Brown Creeper
Long-tailed Duck	Golden-crowned Kinglet
Bufflehead	Townsend's Solitaire
Common Goldeneye	American Robin
Common Merganser	Varied Thrush
Red-breasted Merganser	European Starling
Ruffed Grouse	Bohemian Waxwing
Spruce Grouse	Cedar Waxwing
Sharp-tailed Grouse	White-throated Sparrow
Bald Eagle	Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Goshawk	Snow Bunting
Red-tailed Hawk	Northern Cardinal
Rough-legged Hawk	Pine Grosbeak
Merlin	Purple Finch
Gyr Falcon	House Finch
Peregrine Falcon	Red Crossbill
Herring Gull	White-winged Crossbill
Thayer's Gull	Common Redpoll
Iceland Gull	Hoary Redpoll
Glaucous Gull	Pine Siskin
Rock Pigeon	American Goldfinch
Mourning Dove	Evening Grosbeak
Great Horned Owl	House Sparrow
Snowy Owl	
Northern Hawk Owl	
Barred Owl	
Great Gray Owl	
Boreal Owl	
Northern Saw-whet Owl	
Downy Woodpecker	
Hairy Woodpecker	
American Three-toed Woodpecker	
Black-backed Woodpecker	
Pileated Woodpecker	
Northern Shrike	
Gray Jay	
Blue Jay	
Black-billed Magpie	
American Crow	
Common Raven	
Black-capped Chickadee	