

Boreal Winter Birding – Duluth, Minnesota

February 8 - 13, 2024

\$1,775.00 for Single

\$1,595.00 for Double

Max 12 ppl



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

We will bird for four full days, visiting places like the famed Sax-Zim Bog, Superior National Forest, and Two Harbors. Possible species include Great Gray Owl, Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, Northern Hawk-Owl, Ruffed Grouse, Evening Grosbeak, Northern Shrike, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Black-billed Magpie, White-winged Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, Canada (Gray) Jay, Common Redpoll, and more!

Fly into Minneapolis- Saint Paul and we will drive up to Duluth. 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 BIRDING

Despite its frigid reputation, Duluth has long been an attractive winter site for visiting birders. Although an average January/February 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 Owl and Northern Hawk Owl, Black-backed Woodpecker, White-winged and Red 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. Depending on weather much might be from the comfort of the vans, with brief outside forays. Please note that we DO spend quite a bit traveling between sites, and some trips may be up to an hour and half or so. We leave early all days, breakfast around 5:45am, and loaded in vans by 6:15am.

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. Frank Nicoletti, our main tour leader, has lived in Duluth for many years (winters included), and 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 daily.

We will have two vans for comfort between us, for the 12 people including the guides. We will use radios to communicate between vans.

TRIP ITINERARY

Tuesday, February 8 - Day 1: Arrival in Duluth.

Tour participants should plan to arrive in Minneapolis - St. Paul airport (MSP) today no later than 2:00pm. We will then travel with our vans for about 2.5 hrs to Duluth, however, we will stop along the way to birds, so that will take longer. We will eat dinner along the way north, and go over trip itinerary, introductions, questions, etc.

February 9, 10, 11, 12 - Days 2-3-4-5: Duluth-Superior and Northeastern Minnesota.

These four days may see schedule changes due to weather, and the birds.

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 some years more rarer "city birds" such as Varied Thrush, Red or White-winged crossbills, Hoary Redpoll, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, or others may also 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 hawks may also overwinter in the harbor, mostly Red-tailed, but in some recent years Rough-legged, 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 at least 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, Canada Jay, Boreal Chickadee, and winter finches are also 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 45 minutes 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 some winters, with some lucky birders able to see a dozen or more on a given day. While searching for these owls, we also have a chance to see Northern Goshawk, 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.

Monday, February 13 - Day 6: Departure for Home.

Book your flights for 3:00pm (or later) in the afternoon. That way we can bird the Duluth or Minneapolis area for any birds not yet seen on the tour for a few hours before we hit the road for the Minneapolis - St. Paul airport (MSP).

CLIMATE

As previously described, an average high temperature in Duluth during January/February 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 much of our birding will be from the warmth of the van, there will be short walks outside, so be sure to pack the warmest clothing you can find. Bring thermal underwear, heavy sweaters, and a heavy warm coat, and you'll find the best strategy is to dress in several 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. **A more detailed list will be sent out closer to the trip.**

TOUR LEADERS

Frank Nicoletti

Frank Nicoletti grew up in New York State along the Hudson River where he started watching raptors at 11. His passion for raptors and birds fueled him to work at various locations including Cape May and Sandy Hook NJ, Braddock Bay NY and in Israel. From 1984 until 1996 he traveled and conducted various raptor projects. He arrived in Duluth in 1991 to count raptors and the Northern Goshawk invasion which he conducted until 2005. He moved permanently to Duluth in 1996, and conducted the first spring count of raptors migrating north in Minnesota. Frank continues to study raptors and has been concentrating on boreal forest owls and managing raptor banding sites. He has published a number of papers on birds and has helped with many authors working on books and articles. He lives just north of Duluth with his wife, Kate. Frank has been the Banding Director since 2011. He started the Hawk Ridge Spring Count (West Skyline Hawk Count) in 1997 and continues as the spring count director.

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

Year vary a lot as far as abundance of species. This is somewhat of an average, but is obviously is not a guarantee, and will change.

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