



# MINNESOTA

Feb 05 – Feb 15, 2023

# TRIP REPORT



Photos: Looking out over Gunflint Lake and Steve enjoying the weather!

# Minnesota - 2023

05<sup>th</sup> Feb – 15<sup>th</sup> Feb 2023

## HIGHLIGHTS

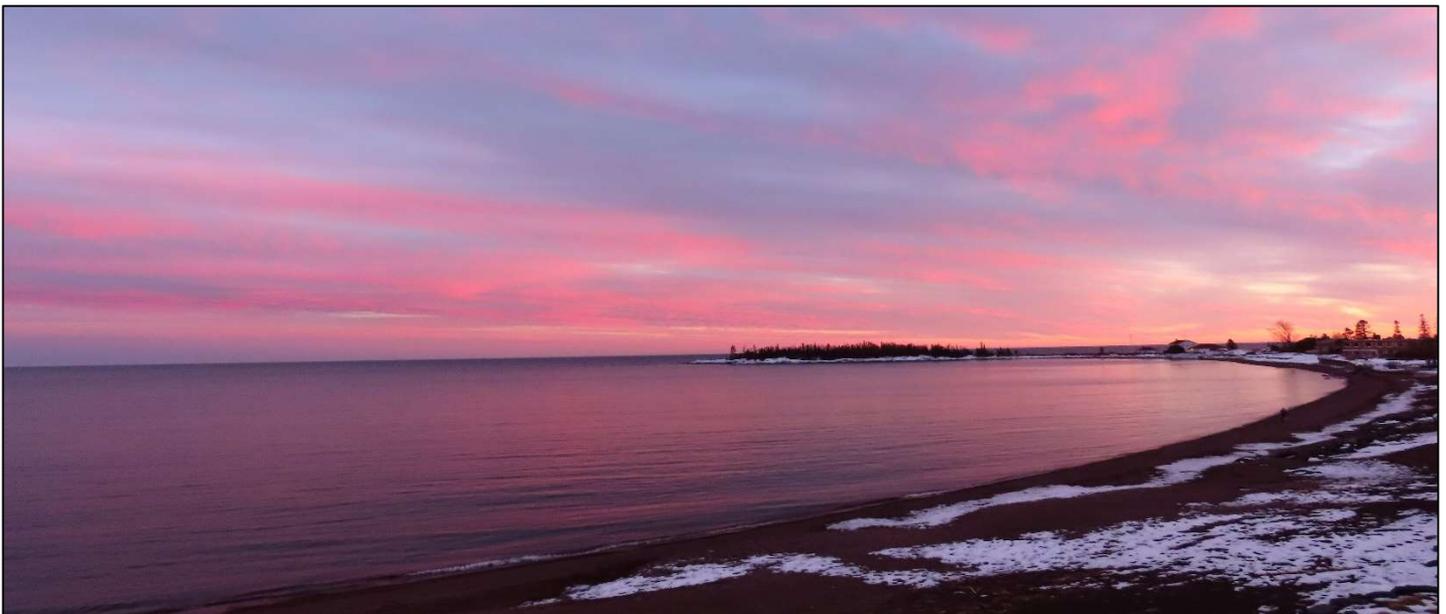
Either for rarity value, excellent views or simply a group favourite.

- Northern Hawk Owl
- Great Grey Owl
- Snowy Owl
- Northern Saw-whet Owl
- Barred Owl
- Bald Eagle
- Northern Goshawk
- Pileated Woodpecker
- Canada Jay
- Canada Lynx (3)
- Moose
- Pine Marten
- Stoat (Ermine)
- Red Squirrel
- Snow Bunting
- Pine Siskin
- Common Redpoll
- Hoary (Arctic) Redpoll
- Three-toed Woodpecker
- Spruce Grouse
- Ruffed Grouse
- Boreal Chickadee
- Pine Grosbeak
- Evening Grosbeak
- Red-breasted Nuthatch
- White-breasted Nuthatch
- Hairy Woodpecker

## SUMMARY:

It's always good to get away from the cold winter weather. So why on earth would we want to go to Minnesota in the depth of winter where temperatures regularly fall well below freezing?

One reason is that Sax Zim Bog is one of Americas top hotspots for wintering owls and in good years the numbers can be unbelievable. Another good reason is to try and see the endangered and very difficult Canada Lynx when snow gives some chance of tracking them and finding one. So, the first part of this trip is designed around Duluth and the famous Sax Zim Bog. This world-famous site attracts birders from far and wide in the hopes of seeing wintering owls, grosbeaks, grouse and some woodpeckers. We were lucky and the days spent here were between 30 – 50 Fahrenheit, so when dressed properly it was very pleasant with mostly clear blue skies adding even more beauty to the scenery here. The second section of our trip was completely different as there were few birds and our time was devoted to tracking down and seeing the rare and elusive Canada Lynx. It took time and a lot of effort but eventually we were rewarded with seeing not one, but three Lynx!! And a few other mammals!! Plus, glorious sunsets!



## Day 1 Duluth - 05<sup>th</sup> Feb

After a good night's sleep, as we had arrived late evening on the 4<sup>th</sup>, we spent a full day around Duluth. Down by the canal we were introduced to the typical freezing cold weather of this state. However, a quick look found us 228 Common Goldeneye, plus a long line of about 120 Red-breasted Mergansers. A drive around the backroads found an obliging Bald Eagle sat in a dead tree and the ever present Black-capped Chickadees. A fruiting Berry Tree held about 7 Pine Grosbeaks, most of which were females. We then went in search of a reported Snowy Owl just across the border in Wisconsin. We drove all around the area but had no luck so decided to try another Snowy Owl by Duluth airport. This time we found a heavily barred female sat on top of an airport tower. After our success with this owl, we decided to try again for the other Snowy Owl in the late afternoon, apparently when it becomes more active. We met up with a group of friendly, local birds who were also waiting for it to appear. So, we stayed here until it got close to dusk when suddenly a pure white male Snowy Owl flew in and landed close to the ground, after which it flew again but this time across to a light pole beside an Aldi superstore. We drove around and looked up at this huge white creature sat unconcerned on his regular night time hunting perch! Fabulous, two Snowy Owls in two states in one day!



## Day 2 Duluth - Sax Zim Bog - 06<sup>th</sup> Feb

This morning we took an early breakfast and then packed up and headed up to Sax Zim Bog, a favorite winter birding hotspot. It took us about an hour to get there, and we first went in search of a reported Northern Hawk Owl that was being seen fairly regularly. We found the spot, and even its regular tree, but there had been no sign today. So we moved on to an area beside the road where there were some feeders. What a spot this turned out to be, as more than 50 Evening Grosbeaks came in and showed wonderfully followed by a few Pine Grosbeaks including some



very bright pink males. We watched both Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers at close quarters, plus Black-capped Chickadees, a Red-breasted Nuthatch and then finally a single Boreal Chickadee. It was hard to tear ourselves away from this spectacle but we did and slowly moved on to the Visitor Center. Here we were soon entertained by an



American Stoat in its winter white ermine. Behind the center were more

Evening Grosbeaks plus some American Goldfinches and a Pine Siskin. We took a walk along the Gray Jay trail and at the end we got super close views of some more Pine



Grosbeaks and two Canada Jays. We then drove around some of the other tracks. A Ruffed Grouse was seen beside the road, and a group of 40



Common Redpolls flew away, while Red Squirrels seemed to be everywhere. Back at the first feeders we were delighted to see an American Marten sat in the trees, and then coming down to feed on some peanut butter that had been put out. A wonderful day and not too cold !

### Day 3 *Sax Zim Bog - 07<sup>th</sup> Feb*

This morning we had all day to re-check the bog. Firstly, we drove to an area near where the Hawk Owl had been seen a few days earlier and we spotted it a long way off on a tree top. It was about 500m from the tree much closer to the road that it apparently liked. We decided we would check back later to see if it would appear on the close tree. We revisited the feeders and got great looks at the two species of grosbeaks again, plus all the other birds we had seen yesterday. We tried a bunch of other feeders but none compared to this one. A walk on a bog boardwalk produced close Hairy Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches and some Black-capped Chickadees. Ravens were ever present and the occasional Bald Eagle would fly over. Our return to the Hawk Owl tree proved successful as it was



sat there totally unconcerned at the photographers pointing their cameras up at it. We moved on and saw a flock of Snow Buntings flying beside the road and later we checked some other back roads and found a Barred Owl posing nicely for us. We then proceeded to drive very slowly along a section of road where a Great Grey Owl would sometimes turn up. It had not been seen for nearly 2 weeks, but as luck would have it, we were in the right place at the right time when a vehicle in front of us stopped and a photographer

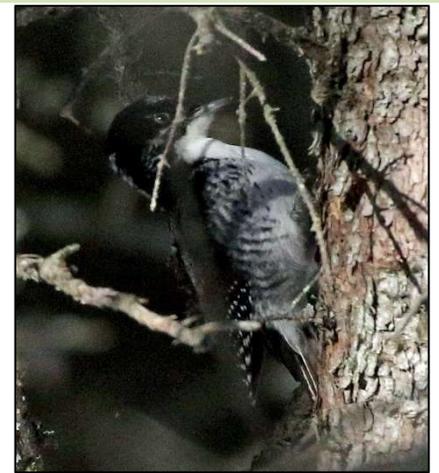


quickly jumped out. Yes, there it was the Grey Ghost a huge Great Grey Owl sat in a small tree about 75 yards away. We watched it until dusk and then set off back to our accommodation to celebrate a three owl day!



#### *Day 4 Cook County backroads - 08<sup>th</sup> Feb*

This morning we decided to try further north for a few specialties. Our first stop proved fruitless with literally nothing to be seen or heard. We drove around the back roads finding a few Black-billed Magpies, then a perched Ruffed Grouse, Bald Eagle and some Canada Jays. Thinking we had missed out on a woodpecker we were looking for we had lunch in a café where a newly found friend informed us that they knew where an American Three-toed Woodpecker had just been seen. We eventually met them at the spot and sure enough the woodpecker was showing right in front of us. Happy with this we returned to Duluth and our lakeside hotel.

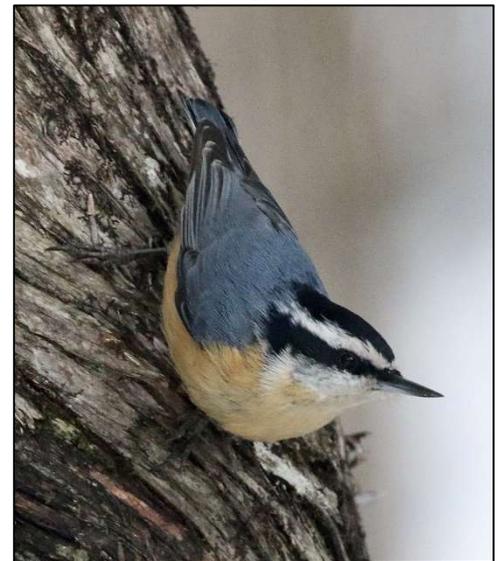


#### *Day 5 Duluth to Grand Marias - 09<sup>th</sup> Feb*

Today we set off along the icy shoreline roads of Lake Superior. We made a detour up to Greenwood Lake but really didn't see much. A group of 50 Common Redpolls was the best and among them were some frosty white Arctic (Hoary Redpolls). We eventually arrived in Grand Marias where we had some lunch and then set off to drive the Gunflint Trail. The roads were mostly snow covered but not slippery, and our journey was pretty quiet wildlife wise so we used our time to orient ourselves to the area and potential spots we would search over the following days. We were now on mammal watch and our quest was to try and see a wild Canada Lynx!

#### *Days 6-10 Gunflint Area - 10<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> Feb*

Over the next 5 days we pretty much covered the same areas of snow-covered backroads, time and time again. Early pre-dawn starts had us driving very slowly checking quiet roads and peering at every dark tree stump that looked like a cat. There was never much stirring, bar the occasional group of Pine Grosbeaks picking up grit from the roadside. Back at our lovely warm cabin we had put out some bird seed and this was attracting a group of Pine Siskins, Black-capped Chickadees and a Red-breasted Nuthatch. There were some feeders at the lodge so we checked these out a few times and added both Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers plus a bunch of Blue Jays and noisy Red Squirrels. More driving of the deserted back roads added Pileated Woodpeckers, and the



occasional Ruffed Grouse. On one of the days about 5.00 pm we came across a big bull Moose which strolled off the road and into the forest. Our daily schedule continued, but now we were out more and walking areas we had seen tracks. Plenty of Snowshoe Hare tracks were found as well as Moose, lots of canids (dog type), grouse footprints and then we found what could surely only be wolf prints. There are wolves in the area but not often seen.



Finally, we found some tracks that fitted with Lynx and they seemed pretty fresh. With our hopes up, we returned to the Lynx tracks in the evening in the hope that one might appear. No luck so on returning to the lodge this day we checked out an area a staff member had heard a Northern Saw-whet Owl the day before. It didn't take long before we had fantastic views of this tiny owl in our spotlight.

Fantastic! So here we go again on another full day of searching. We did find an obliging Spruce Grouse and at the area we had the Lynx tracks a Goshawk

flew over. A bit disheartened we left our forest lodge and headed back to the shoreline for a few days in order to check the lower sections of road and backroads. We drove hundreds of kilometres today to some wonderful scenic areas but only managed tracks that included both Lynx, Bobcat and Wolf.



## Day 11 Grande Marias - Gunflint Trail - 15<sup>th</sup> Feb

Our last day and we decided to give it one last try along the Gunflint Trail. We left well before dawn and drove to a favoured spot, although we had been here many times already and not seen anything. At about 07.30 am, Gina spotted a Lynx sat no more than 20 metres away on a track just off the road. We had fabulous views as it sat there for about 30 seconds before wandering off. We tried following it on foot but never saw it again. Photos were from the vehicle and never came out that well, but 'Hey' we just saw a beautiful Canada Lynx, our target and a lifer.

Moving on we had not gone more than 10 minutes when Gina spotted two more Lynx walking along the road edge toward us. We stopped and watched as they seemed to be on a joint hunting mission. Eventually they went over a snow bank and disappeared. Wow 3 Lynx !!! in such a short time, and after spending days and around 1,200km of searching snow and ice covered back roads. At mid-day and after only seeing a few birds including a roadside Spruce Grouse and a very obliging Ruffed Grouse we made our way back to Grande Marias.



Steve & Gina

# BIRDLIST FOR MINNESOTA 2023

A = Number of species recorded on tour

B = Number of days out of 11 recorded      C = Highest daily count

H = Heard Only    N/C = No Count    C=Common

This list is in line with IOC WORLD BIRD LIST v(13.2) and as such names may be different from some of the other field guides and taxonomy's

A	SPECIES    E = Endemic	SCIENTIFIC NAME	B	C
1	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	3	228
2	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	1	120
3	Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>	4	3
4	Spruce Grouse	<i>Canachites canadensis</i>	2	1
5	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	3	20
6	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1	1
7	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	4	2
8	Northern Saw-whet Owl	<i>Aegolius acadicus</i>	1	1
9	Northern Hawk-Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	1	1
10	Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	1	2
11	Great Grey Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>	1	1
12	American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>	1	1
13	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	10	3
14	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>	8	2
15	Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>	3	1
16	Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>	3	1
17	Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	4	4
18	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	3	15
19	Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	2	2
20	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	9	20
21	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	10	8
22	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	11	6
23	White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>	2	2
24	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	4	2
25	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	2	15
26	Evening Grosbeak	<i>Hesperiphona vespertina</i>	3	60
27	Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	8	12
28	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	3	40
29	Arctic Redpoll	<i>Acanthis hornemanni</i>	1	8
30	Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>	4	20
31	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	1	15
32	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	3	8
<b>Other sightings</b>				
1	Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>	1	3
2	American Marten	<i>Martes americana</i>	1	1
3	American Stoat	<i>Mustela richardsonii</i>	1	1
4	Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>	1	1
5	American Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	11	6



Sunrise Birding LLC  
[www.sunrisebirding.com](http://www.sunrisebirding.com)  
[gina@sunrisebirding.com](mailto:gina@sunrisebirding.com) (USA) 203-453-6724