

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



USA, MINNESOTA: Canada Lynx Quest

Sunday 19th - Monday 27th February 2017

1 Wise Birding Client

Leaders: Chris Townend with invaluable assistance from our local guide

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Canada Lynx: After 60 hours in the field, we were finally rewarded with fabulous views for over an hour on day 7 and a similar length sighting on our last morning!

Great Grey Owl: Superb views as a bird hunted in the snow at Castle Danger, just over an hour from our base in Grand Marais.

Harlequin Duck: A 1st winter male showed very well in Grand Marais harbour on our first day and again on the 26th as we returned from the Great Grey Owl site.

Bufflehead: A 1st year male posed in Grand Marais marina on the 26th.

Northern Flying Squirrel: A night visit to the Gunflint Lodge feeders on our second attempt proved worthwhile as two animals fed just metres away from us.

Pine Grosbeak: One of the many bird highlights was seeing a flock of at least 6 birds feeding in the snow just metres from us at the Gunflint Lodge.

Spruce Grouse: A pair of birds showed well at the side of the road on the 22nd.



Two of the tour highlights were this Great Grey Owl hunting in the snow and a stunning Canada Lynx that showed exceptionally well on two separate days

Tour Summary

The Superior National Forest in Minnesota has long been known as an area with a good population of Canada Lynx (sometimes referred to as Canadian Lynx). However, actually seeing the "Grey Ghost" is a big challenge and one that needs perseverance! This tour had a clear focus to maximise time in the field at a time of year when the Lynx mating season has just started, males regularly patrol territories and animals can be very vocal.

This was a private tour organised for just one client whose main target species was to see Canada Lynx. The success of this tour certainly benefited from what had been learned from the 2016 Wise Birding Tour to Minnesota (Trip Report [HERE](#)).

A change of dates later in the year, some milder weather, a bit of luck with an animal regularly visiting a deer carcass and the invaluable assistance and expert knowledge from our local guide were all key to our success.

Sunday 19th February: Temperature on arrival around -2 degrees C

We arrived into Canada's Thunder Bay airport during the early evening and transferred to our very comfortable hotel just a few minutes drive from the airport.

Monday 20th February: Daytime temp. range around 0 to +1 degrees C

We explored an area to the North-West of Thunder Bay where a Great Grey Owl had been reported in recent days. No luck with the owl but Ruffed Grouse, Blue Jay, Great Grey (Northern) Shrike and 30+ Bohemian Waxwings started the tour off well.

After crossing the US/Canada border with great ease, we travelled along the shore of Lake Superior and soon arrived at Grand Marais. The clear highlight here was a 1st winter male Harlequin Duck in the marina associating with a small group of Common Goldeneye. We then headed towards our base half way up the Gunflint Trail.

The roads were mostly free from snow though rain set in during the afternoon. Despite the unhelpful weather, we patrolled a number of roads until dusk where Lynx have frequently been seen but had no luck in the difficult conditions.

Tuesday 21st February: Daytime temp. range around -2 to +3 degrees C

We spent the early morning slowly driving the usual minor roads from pre-dawn until mid morning with little to show for our efforts. The roads were quite icy from the previous day's rain and so careful negotiation of the roads was required! We set a trail camera in position overlooking a deer carcass and this was just visible from our vehicle. We then simply had to wait and with regular monitoring we just hoped it would tempt in something of interest.

After some well earned food at the Gunflint Trail Centre, we spent the rest of the day patrolling the roads adjacent to the Gunflint Trail looking for tracks, though this proved difficult due to the lack of fresh snow. Highlights today included our first Grey Jay of the trip, lots of Red-breasted Nuthatches and American Red Squirrel.

Wednesday 22nd February: Daytime temp. range around 0 to +4 degrees C

Another day with the same routine patrolling the roads from around 06.00hrs until mid morning. A check of the trail camera revealed nothing other than a Snowshoe Hare from the early hours of the morning. Bird highlights this morning included both male and female Spruce Grouse, an adult Bald Eagle, Grey Jay and a couple of beautiful golden female Pine Grosbeaks.

A visit to Gunflint Lodge for lunch provided some more excellent birding and mammal opportunities. Here, we enjoyed exceptionally close views of at least 7 Pine Grosbeaks

including some fabulous bright males, small flocks of Pine Siskin and Common Redpoll, 4-5 Purple Finch, Red-breasted Nuthatch and an unseasonal lone American Goldfinch. Other species seen here included Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers and a number of tame Red Squirrels posing in the snow!

An afternoon session driving the roads south of here until dusk failed to produce our key target. A Red Fox was new for the trip list during an evening spotlighting session and a very light dusting of snow settled in random areas.

Thursday 23rd February: Daytime temp. range around -5 to 0 degrees C

Another pre-dawn start as we slowly patrolled the usual roads and it felt noticeably colder today. A couple of Snowshoe Hares were seen well including an animal sat in the middle of the road for a few seconds and we found some recent Wolf tracks and territory marking. A check of the trail camera in the morning revealed no new activity.

After some warm food and coffee at the Trail Centre during late morning, we decided to try another area where we knew Lynx had been visiting in recent weeks before our arrival. We toughed it out in the not too cold temperatures and spent four hours behind a natural screen with a view into the forest, but alas nothing other than Ravens, Blue Jays and Red-breasted Nuthatch.

The final couple of hours of the day were, once again, spent slowly patrolling the roads, scanning and listening for any sign of the elusive Grey Ghost!

Friday 24th February: Daytime temp. range around -5 to 0 degrees C

This morning we started earlier, departing before 5am in the hope of spending more time spotlighting. However, things changed on checking the trail camera in darkness as it revealed no less than four different Canada Lynx had visited the area! Amazingly, a female Lynx with two young passed through at around 11.30am on the 23rd Feb and what appeared to be a large male had started to feed on the deer carcass from around 00.30hrs, just five hours before we arrived! As a result, we decided to watch the carcass for the next few hours but sadly nothing visited.

After a break for some food at the Trail Centre, we returned to watch the carcass and watched for a further six hours until around 17.45hrs when we left, with very little to show for our persistence other than boredom and a stiff neck! However, we were later to find via a text message from another Lynx watcher that the animal did visit the carcass just 30 minutes after we left!!!

Saturday 25th February: Daytime temp. range around -5 to 0 degrees C

Following the gut wrenching news of our near miss yesterday, we were determined not to miss out today. Therefore we arrived at the deer carcass at 03.15hrs and checked the trail camera to be sure the cat had not returned again since the dusk sighting. A low glow from a torch gave enough light to make out any movement at the carcass and then all we could do was sit and wait! The hours passed, dawn arrived and we became more confident, but nothing. It was quite cold, but being in a vehicle made it more bearable. By mid morning boredom and delirium had set in and the odd Raven and Blue Jay were our only distraction. With every hour that passed, we knew we could not leave as it was surely one hour nearer the animal returning, wasn't it!? Then finally, after a 14 hour vigil, a pair of eyes peered at us from within the forest and there looking at us was the grey ghost, a beautiful Canada Lynx!

The Lynx appeared at 16.15hrs and we watched it feeding on the carcass for around 75 minutes. Beautiful green eyes, amazing thick black ear tufts, impressive beard, a grey pelage with brown markings and ridiculous paws! A simply amazing encounter



and it almost seemed like a dream, but we both agreed it was worth the pain and mental torture! After seeing the animal, we headed to Grand Marais for a celebratory meal and some well earned sleep at our new base on the shore of Lake Superior.

Sunday 26th February: Daytime temp. range around -5 to 0 degrees C

Following the previous day's success, we decided to take a break from cats and tried our luck for a Great Grey Owl that had been reported in recent days. It was just 70 miles SW along the shore of Lake Superior near Castle Danger. As we neared the site, it became apparent a good couple of inches of snow had settled along this part of the lake. We arrived at the last reported location of the bird just before 08.00hrs to be greeted by the unmistakable shape of a Great Grey Owl sat on a telegraph pole! This beautiful owl then proceeded to drop to a snow covered ditch as it hunted small mammals, just a few meters from our vehicle! We then spent an amazing 20-30 minutes watching this amazing bird as it hunted in the snow before vanishing into thick cover, presumably to roost for the day. This successful twitch was soon celebrated with a hearty breakfast in the nearby cafe!

Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Minnesota £75 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. Currently this amounts to almost £3,000. 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.

As we made our return journey back to Grand Marais we saw a number of White-tailed Deer and an immature Bald Eagle close to the shore of Lake Superior. Back in Grand Marais, some birding around the marina and nearby gardens produced a number of new species, the most notable being an 1st winter male Bufflehead, the Harlequin Duck still, a single Northern Cardinal and at least 7 Dark-eyed Juncos.

We then returned to the deer carcass and waited for the last three hours of the day but had no further sightings of the Lynx. However, an evening trip to Gunflint Lodge produced the hoped for Northern Flying Squirrels as two animals fed on sunflower seeds just metres from us and ended another great day.

Monday 27th February: Daytime temp. range around -17 to +3 degrees C

This morning, we just could not resist one final look at the deer carcass and it was one of those times when we had a bit of good fortune! As we arrived at the carcass in the early morning gloom, a check of the area by torchlight revealed the unmistakable bright green eye shine of a cat! The Lynx had returned. We then enjoyed some outrageously close views as this very relaxed cat spent another 1.5 hours feeding on the carcass, unperturbed by our presence and at times it seemed almost inquisitive to its appreciative onlookers. A magical morning despite the much, much colder temperature and a great way to end our time in the Superior National Forest.

En route back to Thunder Bay, a Coyote was a new mammal bonus for the tour and we arrived in good time for our afternoon flight to Toronto to connect with the UK.





**Grand Marais Harbour hosted male Harlequin Duck (above) and Bufflehead (below)
Both species were associating with Common Goldeneyes**





**2nd CY male Harlequin Duck by tour participant Andy Stanbury (above)
and Grand Marais Harbour (below)**





Bohemian Waxwings showed well near Thunder Bay





Pine Grosbeaks were seen well on a number of occasions
and allowed great photographic opportunities





**Immature Bald Eagle (above) along the shore of Lake Superior
and the Great Grey Owl hunting area (below)**





The Great Grey Owl hunting in the snow was a clear tour highlight





Grey Jays were seen most days (above) and the impressive Pileated Woodpecker showed very well at Gunflint Lodge (below)





American Red Squirrel (above) and Northern Flying Squirrel (below)





**Red-breasted Nuthatches (above) and Common Redpolls (below)
were a regular species found at feeding stations**





**Gunflint Lake, the border of Canada and the US (above)
and male Spruce Grouse (below)**





Our very first view of the Lynx (above) and the animal after having fed well (below)





The beautiful Canada Lynx showed again on our final morning





The beautiful Canada Lynx showed again on our final morning.

After having fed on the deer carcass for over an hour, the Lynx came out into the open and seemed inquisitive of our presence. It looked straight at us for a few moments and then slinked back into the forest - A moment never to forget!



More photos from this and other tours can be viewed on our Flickr site:
www.flickr.com/photos/129663578@N06/albums/72157680889710805

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WISE BIRDING HOLIDAYS: Bird and Mammal Checklist for MINNESOTA, USA & THUNDER BAY, CANADA, February 2017

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	Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>	1	A bird in gardens near Thunder Bay on the 20th and another near the Gunflint Trail on the 22nd Feb
2	Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>	2	A male and female on the early morning of the 22nd whilst patrolling the quieter roads off the Gunflint Trail looking for Lynx
3	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	3	A 2nd calendar year male showed very well with Common Goldeneye in Grand Marais Harbour on the 26th Feb
5	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	5	Up to 12 birds around Grand Marais Harbour on the 20th, 26th and 27th Feb
6	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	6	A group of three birds on Lake Superior on the 20th whilst travelling from Thunder Bay
7	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	7	Some excellent views of a 2nd calendar year male in Grand Marais Harbour on the 20th and 26th Feb
8	Arctic (American) Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	8	A number of adults and a single 1st winter bird seen around Grand Marais Harbour on three days
9	Great Grey Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>	9	Superb views of a bird hunting in the snow on the morning of the 26th near Castle Danger
10	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	10	Adult birds seen near Thunder Bay on the 20th, Gunflint Trail on the 22nd and an immature on the 26th by Lake Superior
11	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	11	Single birds at Toronto airport on the 19th and around Thunder Bay on the 20th and 27th Feb
12	Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Hylatomus pileatus</i>	12	Great views of a drumming bird at Gunflint Lodge on the 22nd Feb
13	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	13	Seen well at the Gunflint Lodge feeders on the 22nd and again in Grand Marais gardens on the 26th Feb
14	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>	14	Seen well at the Gunflint Lodge feeders on the 22nd with Downy Woodpecker also
15	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	15	A flock of 30+ birds near Thunder Bay on the 20th
16	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	16	A common species recorded most days
17	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	17	A very common species seen very well at feeders and in the forest often collecting seeds from the thawing roads
18	Northern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>	18	Single birds near Thunder Bay on the 20th and on the Gunflint Trail on the 21st Feb
19	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	19	Small numbers seen daily
20	Grey Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	20	This very obliging and beautiful species was recorded on at least four days around the Gunflint Trail area
21	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	21	Small groups around the urbane areas of Thunder Bay and Grand Marais
22	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	22	Recorded daily whilst exploring the Gunflint Trail
23	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	23	Small groups of birds near Thunder Bay on the 20th and 27th and Grand Marais on the 26th

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24	Pine Siskin	<i>Carduelis pinus</i>	24	Small flocks on feeders at the Gunflint Lodge on the 22nd and in Grand Marais on the 26th Feb
25	American Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis tristis</i>	25	Single birds at feeders in Grand Marais on the 20th and at Gunflint Lodge on the 22nd Feb
26	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	26	Small flocks on feeders at the Gunflint Lodge on the 22nd and in Grand Marais on the 26th Feb
27	Purple Finch	<i>Carpodacus purpureus</i>	27	3-4 birds at the Gunflint Lodge feeders on the 22nd and a single bird on feeders in Grand Marais on the 26th Feb
28	Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	28	Some fantastically close views at Gunflint Lodge feeders and by the Gunflint Trail with a max day count of 9 birds
29	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	29	A minimum of six birds at feeders in Grand Marais on the 26th Feb
30	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>	30	A single bird around feeders in Grand Marais on the 26th Feb
1	Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>	1	Two animals seen well on the 23rd & a single on the 24th. One also recorded on the trail camera during the early hours of the 22nd Feb
2	Northern Flying Squirrel	<i>Glaucomys sabrinus</i>	2	Some excellent views of 2 animals at the Gunflint Lodge feeders during the evening of the 26th Feb
3	American Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	3	Some great views of this attractive squirrel recorded on six days, mostly around feeding stations
4	Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	4	A couple of animals around feeders in Grand Marais on the 26th
5	Canada (Canadian) Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>	5	After 60+ hours of searching, finally an animal visited the deer carcass at 16.15hrs on the 25th Feb and was watched for 75 minutes at a range of 15-20 metres. The same animal was also seen at the carcass again from 06.11hrs - 07.45 hrs on the 27th Feb. Trail camera footage confirmed it first visited the carcass at 00.35hrs on the 24th Feb and returned on 4 more occasions with gaps of between 16 - 22 hours before feeding again. Amazingly, the trail camera also recorded a female and two youngsters visiting the carcass at 11.31hrs on the 24th Feb. None of these animals fed on the carcass, but the female scent marked the area and left with the youngsters following. Video recordings can be seen at www.wisebirding.co.uk/wise-birding-holidays-bird-mammal-videos
6	Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>	6	A single animals seen beside Lake Superior whilst travelling from Grand Marais to the Canadian border crossing on the 27th Feb
7	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	7	At least one animal seen on the Gunflint Trail whilst spotlighting on the evening of the 22nd Feb
8	Moose	<i>Alces americanus</i>	8	A single animal seen briefly whilst spotlighting during the early morning of the 21st Feb on the Gunflint Trail
9	White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	9	Seen close to the road by Lake Superior when travelling to and from Thunder Bay and when visiting the Great Grey Owl site

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