

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



MINNESOTA: Canada Lynx & Northern Owls

Sunday 24th February - Tuesday 5th March 2019

7 Wise Birding Clients

Leaders: Chris Townend / Andy Stanbury, Clinton Nienhaus & local guide

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Canada Lynx: The fourth successive year seeing this highly sought after cat. Eight different encounters, 2+ hours viewing and at least 4 different animals.

Wolf: The grand finale of the tour was watching an animal on the frozen Lake Superior early on our last morning.

Snowy Owl: Superb views of a male at Sax Zim Bog on our first full day.

Northern Hawk Owl: An obliging bird on top of a dead tree in the early evening sunshine allowed some great scope views at Sax Zim Bog.

Evening Grosbeak: A flock of 30+ birds at Mary Lou's feeders, Sax Zim Bog.

Pine Grosbeak: Numerous small flocks seen very well throughout the tour.

Northern Flying Squirrel: At least one animal feeding on the bird feeders at night allowed some good views in red torchlight.



Canada Lynx and Snowy Owl were just two of the tour highlights

Video of one of the Canada Lynx sightings can be seen here: vimeo.com/325412233

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 "Ghost of the Forest" 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 the fourth year in a row that Wise Birding Holidays have been successful in seeing Canada Lynx in Minnesota. Similar to last year, this tour was exceptional for the quality of Lynx sightings and the length of time spent watching Lynx! In addition to Lynx, we saw another 6 mammals including Wolf and Northern Flying Squirrel. Fisher was also recorded regularly but sadly only on our trail cameras!

As expected for the time of year, the bird list was small but we saw many quality species. Our visit to Sax Zim Bog was memorable with both Northern Hawk Owl and Snowy Owl seen very well. Other bird highlights included Bald Eagle, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Pine Grosbeak and Evening Grosbeak!

The success of this tour certainly benefited from what has been learned from the previous three tours (Trip Reports [HERE](#)).

More importantly, the invaluable assistance and expert knowledge from our local guide is always crucial to success.

Sunday 24th February: Arrival

Despite delays from snowstorms, the group finally arrived into a very quiet airport at Duluth. Luckily our hotel was only five minutes drive away.

Mon 25th February: Sax Zim Bog Daytime temp. -24 to -15 degrees C

This morning we had a slightly later start due to the delayed arrival of the flight. We met our local guide Clinton and then took the 50 minute drive to Sax Zim Bog where we spent the day birding different hotspot areas. It was a lovely bright day and we saw some great birds thanks to Clinton's expert knowledge of the area. Everyone soon acclimatised to the chilly temperatures too!

Highlights today included a group of Sharp-tailed Grouse, a superb flock of Evening Grosbeaks, beautiful Pine Grosbeaks, large flocks of Common Redpolls and a single Arctic Redpoll thanks to Mike's sharp eye! However, it was the owls that were the stand out highlight with a superb male Snowy Owl that peered down at us from a telegraph pole and a Northern Hawk Owl at the top of a dead tree in the perfect golden light of early evening.

Tues 26th February: Duluth - Grand Marais - Gunflint Trail

Daytime temp. -20 to -12 degrees C

This morning after breakfast we left Duluth and headed NE along the shore of Lake Superior towards the town of Grand Marais. A stop en route at Two Harbours produced a feeding flock of Pine Grosbeaks but no sign of any Bohemian Waxwings so we continued to a welcome coffee stop at Tettegouche State Park. We arrived at the scenic town of Grand Marais in time for lunch and then checked in to our accommodation and met our local guide, David.

We spent the afternoon exploring the roads with David around the Gunflint Trail looking for the Ghost of the Forest. After checking just a few places, incredibly we hit the jackpot on our first afternoon!! There, feeding on a carcass was a Canada Lynx! A few anxious moments passed until everyone had walked to the site and seen the animal well, but it soon became apparent the animal was relaxed in our presence. We then spent 70 minutes watching this superb animal and the pressure was off! Although there was more to come!

Weds 27th February: Gunflint Trail Daytime temp. -16 to -9 degrees C

A full day spent around the Gunflint Trail and associated back roads. No Lynx sighting today, highlighted just how exceptionally lucky we had been the previous day! Birds included Black-capped Chickadee, Grey Jay and Blue Jay.

Thurs 28th February: Gunflint Trail Daytime temp. -20 to -4 degrees C

Another full day around the Gunflint Trail and associated back roads and a great success with our second Lynx sighting of the trip. This time it was Andy and Peter that got lucky and the animal stayed long enough for the rest of the group to enjoy the views too, as it dozed in the early afternoon sunshine! Other highlights included finding our first Wolf tracks and an evening visit to the Gunflint Lodge produced excellent views of Northern Flying Squirrel.

Fri 1st March: Gunflint Trail Daytime temp. -20 to -4 degrees C

Another day on our now familiar local patch produced yet another Lynx sighting and this time, two animals together! We checked a number of sites during the morning and found more Wolf tracks as well as Lynx tracks. Then just as we were heading towards our lunch stop a Lynx-like shape was seen by Chris whilst, driving. It was standing in the forest but then vanished! Patience was the key, as always, and after a swift turning of both vehicles, we soon enjoyed a wonderful sighting as a mother with yearling both came out from the forest and then crossed the road in front of us - Simply magic!

Sat 2nd March: Lake Superior - Gunflint Trail Daytime temp. -15 to -11

An earlier start this morning as we checked the road to Grand Portage for any roadside deer carcasses that sometimes attract Eagles and Wolves! No sightings today, but the sunrise over the lake was impressive. We then checked the bird feeders in Grand Marais where Eastern Grey Squirrel was a new species. We spent the afternoon exploring the forests around Gunflint Trail. No Lynx sightings, but a Great Horned Owl flying at dusk was seen by some.

Sun 3rd March: Gunflint Lodge - Gunflint Trail

Daytime temp. -26 to -17 degrees C

An early visit to Gunflint Lodge and a much colder morning! We spent some time looking across Gunflint Lake towards Canada and absorbed the impressive winter wonderland. A White-breasted Nuthatch was a new species at the feeders along with great views of more Pine Grosbeaks and Common Redpolls.

A return to the Lynx hotspot revealed more Wolf tracks and though we felt we were getting closer to seeing, a Wolf we had to make do with "just" another Lynx sighting! Helen spotted a Lynx slinking off through the edge of the forest during the mid morning, but luckily, a return visit to the area later in the day revealed the animal was still present. Here, we enjoyed views for a good 10 minutes before it disappeared out of view and that was the clear highlight!

Mon 4th March: Gunflint Trail Daytime temp. -28 to -13 degrees C

Another very cold start to the day and our last full day exploring the forest. Despite the incredible views we had already experienced, everyone was still greedy for just one more Lynx sighting! As it turned out, we ended on a high with no less than three different sightings! First was a large male that looked very impressive all fluffed up in the cold weather as it wandered through a clearing by Chris's vehicle. Later, an animal was heard calling and thanks to Andy's ever watchful eye, the same male appeared on the road allowing everyone to enjoy views as it strutted down the middle of the road! A final sighting in the afternoon was to be our final sighting of the trip and we decided to leave it feeding in peace. A truly brilliant day with very memorable sightings!

Tuesday 5th March: Lake Superior - Duluth

Daytime temp. -18 to -2 degrees C

Today we gave one last try for Wolf. We headed out before dawn along Lake Superior and tried an area close to the lake shore where all of a sudden, there in the headlights was a large canid running across the road! Only a few of the group saw the animal and despite the brief views, it seemed reasonable a Wolf was the most likely candidate and on checking the tracks, there was no doubt!

Once again, perseverance paid off as we patrolled the area for a further hour but with no further sightings. However, a final check along the shore and bingo, there was a Wolf bounding across the snow! Everyone watched as it headed across the snow and up into the forest. It was seen again briefly in the forest, but time was ticking and we had to return to our accommodation for some last minute packing. By mid morning we bid David farewell and took a slow drive back along the shore of Lake Superior with a "Brunch" stop en route.

We arrived at Duluth airport for our mid afternoon flight back to the UK where the tour concluded.



Sharp-tailed Grouse (above) performed well at Sax Zim Bog, as did Common Redpolls (below)





The stunning Evening Grosbeak. Male (above) and Female (below)





The Owls at Sax Zim Bog certainly did not disappoint with Northern Hawk Owl (above) and a male Snowy Owl (below)





There were numerous opportunities to see Pine Grosbeaks
Male (above) and Female (below)





Our first Canada Lynx encounter was pretty special!





This second animal was simply dozing in the sunshine and then stood up and walked towards us!





The Superior Forest in the snow is simply stunning
and we found fresh Wold tracks nearby





This Canada Lynx was inquisitive of us and then lost interest and simply dozed in the sunshine!





Canada Lynx tracks (above) and the numerous quiet roads where Lynx and Wolves can sometimes be found (below)





The group watching Lynx (above) and a Lynx watching us! (below)





Canada Lynx on the road

Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Minnesota a donation of **£180 (\$250)** was donated to **Sax Zim Bog Acres for Owls Project**.

This is a Land Preservation Project which go directly to bog land purchase within the Sax-Zim Bog Important Bird Area (IBA). The mix of spongy peat land and spruce forest that make up the Sax-Zim Bog in northern Minnesota is one of the most important birding sites in North America. You can find out more about Sax Zim Bog on the following link: www.saxzim.org

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MINNESOTA: Wise Birding Holidays Bird and Mammal Checklist for 24th Feb - 5th March 2019
This bird checklist follows the nomenclature and classification from HBW and BirdLife International Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World and the associated online resource HBW Alive.

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Species Notes
1	Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	1	A group of 14 birds whilst exploring the Sax Zim Bog area.
2	Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>	2	Excellent views of a group of 10 birds at Sax Zim Bog, some of which were performing dancing displays.
3	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	3	Two birds on Lake Superior on the 2nd March.
4	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	4	Recorded around Duluth on two days.
5	Arctic Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	5	Recorded on two days around the shores of Lake Superior.
6	Northern Hawk-owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	6	A perched bird around the Sax Zim Bog complex in lovely early evening light on the 26th Feb.
7	Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	7	An impressive male gave exceptional views as it sat on top of a pylon and looked down at us near Sax Zim Bog on the 26th Feb.
8	Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>	8	A single bird was seen at dusk whilst returning to Grand Marais on the 2nd.
9	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	9	Some great views with birds recorded on three days. A single bird near Sax Zim Bog on the 25th and then 2 birds whilst travelling from Duluth to Grand Marais on the 26th. Finally, 2 immature birds over Lake Superior on the 2nd.
10	Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Hylatomus pileatus</i>	10	Single birds recorded on three days whilst exploring the Gunflint Trail.
11	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	11	Single birds on two days with the best views at Sax Zim Bog in close proximity to its larger cousin the Hairy Woodpecker.
12	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>	12	Recorded on three days during the tour with sightings on both the Gunflint Trail and Sax Zim Bog.
13	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	13	A very common species recorded daily.
14	Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>	14	A single bird briefly at the Admiral Road feeders, Sax Zim Bog on the 25th.
15	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	15	Great views of this smart nuthatch recorded on three days. Noticeably less sightings this year due to the colder temperatures.
16	Northern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>	16	A single bird at Sax Zim Bog on the 25th. Previously lumped with Great Grey Shrike <i>L. excubitor</i> but is now considered a full species under HBW taxonomy.
17	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	17	A very common, but nonetheless beautiful species recorded daily.
18	Grey Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	18	A speciality of the region and seen very well and recorded daily. It is split into three subspecies: Northern Grey Jay (<i>canadensis</i>) which we recorded on the tour. The other subspecies are "Rockies" Grey Jay (<i>capitalis</i>) and "Pacific" Grey Jay (<i>obscurus</i>)
19	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	19	Small numbers recorded on three days with sightings from Duluth to Grand Marais.
20	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	20	Counts of 1-3 birds recorded daily from the Gunflint Trail and Sax Zim Bog.
21	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	21	This introduced species was recorded at Two Harbours on the 26th and then 7 birds on the 2nd near Grand Portage.
22	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	22	Another introduced species recorded on the 26th near Two Harbours.
23	Pine Siskin	<i>Carduelis minus</i>	23	Small groups seen at Sax Zim Bog and Two Harbours.
24	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	24	Small flocks recorded on five days around the Gunflint Trail and Sax Zim Bog, mostly at bird feeders. Max. count of 50+ birds at Sax Zim Bog.
25	Arctic Redpoll	<i>Carduelis hornemanni</i>	25	A single bird in a flock of around 20+ Common Redpolls was well picked out by Mike at the Admiral Road feeders, Sax Zim Bog on the 25th Feb.

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Species Notes
26	Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	26	Great views of males & females. Counts of between a 12 - 20 birds over three days with birds seen at the Sax Zim Bog Visitor Centre feeders, Two Harbours and the Gunflint Lodge feeders.
27	Two-barred Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>	27	A single bird was seen briefly in the road by Chris and Clinton whilst exploring Sax Zim Bog. This relates to the White-winged subspecies <i>leucoptera</i> .
28	Evening Grosbeak	<i>Hesperiphona vespertina</i>	28	Excellent views of males and females at Mary Lou’s feeders at Sax Zim Bog on the 25th Feb with a max. count of 35+ birds.
#	MAMMALS		#	
1	Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>	1	The only sighting was of a single animal on the 28th on the Gunflint Trail, though also recorded on the Trail Cameras at night. Unsurprisingly, when in their white winter coats they are very difficult to see in the snow!
2	Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	2	The only sighting was of an animal at bird feeders in Grand Marais on the 2nd.
3	American Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	3	This smart looking squirrel was seen well on four days with counts of 1-3 mostly around the bird feeding stations at Sax Zim Bog and Gunflint Lodge.
4	Northern Flying Squirrel	<i>Glaucomys sabrinus</i>	4	At least one animal watched at the Gunflint Lodge bird feeders on the 28th Feb just before 9pm. Seen very well in red torchlight at close range.
5	Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>	5	Similar to last year, we enjoyed incredible views of at least four different cats with a combined viewing time of over two hours! Sighting 1: Unsexed Seen on the afternoon of the 26th Feb feeding on a carcass from 15.50 - 17.00hrs and we left the animal in situ. Sighting 2: Male Watched in the forest feeding and resting in the sunshine from 13.30hrs - 14.10 hrs on the afternoon of 28th Feb. Sighting 3: Female with Yearling Female only, seen close to road and then both animals crossed the road in front of us at 11.40hrs on 1st March Sightings 4 & 5: Male Presumed same animal as sighting 2. Briefly by Helen only at 11.30hrs and again by all from 12.30 - 12.40hrs on 3rd March. Sightings 6 & 7: Male Seen in the forest feeding by some of group at 10.05hrs and heard calling. Later seen by all walking road at 11.05hrs on 4th March. Sighting 8: Unsexed Possibly the same animal as sightings 2, 4 & 5 seen feeding close to road for 5 minutes from 15.15hrs on 4th March. Left in situ.
6	Grey Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	6	A single animal on Lake Superior on our final morning. First seen in the gloom crossing the road at 06.30hrs by some of the group. Later, at 07.45hrs the same animal or another was seen by everyone as it crossed the frozen lake and headed into a wooded area. It was seen again briefly in the wood.
7	Fisher	<i>Martes pennanti</i>	7	Despite trying very hard, it was another frustrating miss this year with animals recorded on trail cameras only, but the most regular occurrence of any trip. At least two different animals were recorded on at least five days with sightings at random times. Examples being; 17.25hrs, 19.40hrs, 02.00hrs, 04.00hrs and 07.00hrs! Video of one of the animals can be viewed here: https://vimeo.com/324963743
8	White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	8	Small numbers recorded on at least five days, mostly close to the main Lake Superior road and at Sax Zim Bog. Peak count of 11 animals on the 4th March.

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