

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



MINNESOTA: Canada Lynx & Northern Owls

Tuesday 18th - Thursday 27th February 2020

7 Wise Birding Clients

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

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Canada Lynx: The fifth successive year recording this highly sought after cat. Nine different encounters, 5+ hours of viewing and at least 3 different animals.

Wolf: A fabulous encounter along the north shore of Lake Superior.

Great Grey Owl: A bird perched during early morning at Sax Zim Bog was a bonus!

Northern Hawk Owl: A very obliging bird posed at close range on top of a pine in the warming sunshine at Sax Zim Bog.

Snowy Owl: Good scope views of a female at Sax Zim Bog on our first full day.

Barred Owl: Exceptional daytime views at Winterberry Bog on our first full day.

Evening Grosbeak: A group of 9+ birds at Mary Lou's feeders, Sax Zim Bog.

American Three-toed & Black-backed Woodpecker: A male ATTW foraged just metres from us at Winterberry Bog as a female BBW did exactly the same nearby!

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



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

Video of the Canada Lynx sightings can be seen on the links [HERE](#) & [HERE](#)

MINNESOTA: Canada Lynx and Northern Owls

The various forest areas in and around 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 fifth 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 9 mammals including Wolf, North American Porcupine and Northern Flying Squirrel. As expected for the time of year, the bird list was small but we saw many quality species, including a number of new species not recorded on previous tours. Our visit to Sax Zim Bog was memorable with Northern Hawk Owl, Barred Owl and Snowy Owl seen very well. Other bird highlights included Evening Grosbeak, Black-backed & American Three-toed Woodpeckers!

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

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

We saw a total of 43 species of bird and recorded 10 mammals on this tour.

DAY	DATE	ITINERARY
1	Tue 18th Feb	Arrive Duluth. Overnight Duluth
2	Wed 19th Feb	All day Sax Zim Bog with local guide Clinton. Overnight Duluth Daytime temps: -35 to -14°C
3	Thur 20th Feb	Early morning Winsconsin then travel along north shore of Lake Superior to Grand Marais. Overnight Grand Marais Daytime temps: -22 to -4°C
4 - 6	Fri 21st - Sun 23rd Feb	Full days exploring the forests near Superior National Forest. Night of 23rd looking for Northern Flying Squirrel. Overnight Grand Marais Daytime temps: -16 to + 4, -14 to + 8 and -14 to + 8°C
7	Mon 24th Feb	Early morning birding Grand Marais. Afternoon spent exploring the forests near Superior National Forest. Some of group visited Gunflint Lake. Overnight Grand Marais Daytime temps: -3 to + 3°C
8	Tue 25th Feb	Early morning drive along north shore of Lake Superior for Wolf followed by another full day in the forest. Overnight Grand Marais Daytime temps: -5 to + 2°C
9	Wed 26th Feb	Full day exploring the forest. Early evening Grand Marais Harbour. Overnight Grand Marais Daytime temps: -16 to - 8°C
10	Thur 27th Feb	Return journey to Duluth airport. Daytime temps: -12 to - 4°C

TOUR SUMMARY

Days 1-2: Duluth and Sax Zim Bog

After a late evening arrival into Duluth and a chilly -16°C introduction to the outside, we loaded the vehicles and took the very short transfer to our hotel for the night. The following morning we met pre-dawn with our local guide Clinton and drove to the famous site of Sax Zim Bog where we enjoyed a full day birding this quality site. Sax-Zim Bog is a huge area, around 300 square miles in size and it has a great diversity of habitats that create prime habitat for many bog specialist birds. During the winter months, the mature bogs are an important wintering habitat for various Owl species as well as passerines like Two-barred Crossbill and Pine Grosbeak. During the summer, the mix of aspen uplands, rivers, lakes, meadows and farmland make prime breeding habitat for other bog specialists such as Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee and Connecticut Warbler. Bobcat, Pine Marten and even Fisher also rely on this important habitat.

The day could not have started better as Clinton's sharp eyes found us a Great Grey Owl which soon had everyone out of the vehicles and enduring a bone chilling -35°C! However, it was well worth the pain as we scoped this often tricky species in a poor owl winter season. It remained partially obscured, but it was a fantastic start to our day! It was a beautifully calm day with blue skies and sunshine and thanks to Clinton, who clearly knows the site like the back of his hand, it was one of those days when all the birds just fell into place! Other highlights of the day included another three species of owl including superb views of a Northern Hawk Owl, good scope views of a Snowy Owl and exceptional views of a sleepy Barred Owl sitting just metres from us all! Owls aside we also enjoyed great views of Evening Grosbeaks and Two-barred Crossbills as well as Ruffed Grouse and a very smart dark phase Rough-legged Buzzard. Mammals also appeared with a superb North American Porcupine that looked down at us from its nearby tree as its fur glistened in the sunshine. The grand finale was to be a woodpecker double whammy, with female Black-backed Woodpecker and a male American Three-toed Woodpecker foraging side by side!

Day 3: Duluth / Winsconsin - Grand Marais

This morning most of the group headed to nearby Winsconsin in the hope of finding Snowy Owls, though sadly we failed to find any on this occasion. We then headed up the north shore of Lake Superior and arrived at our very comfortable and warm base in Grand Marais where our focus then changed to Lynx!

After lunch we met with our local guide and we explored the forest areas in and around the Gunflint Trail. Then, Boom! At 3.40pm a Canada Lynx decided to walk across the road in front of us all! It casually sauntered off the road and into the forest edge, but allowed everyone a good view. It was without doubt a very lucky sighting, though nothing compared to the evening performance! At around 17.40hrs we followed (in our vehicles) what was possibly the same animal down the road for over 30 minutes! This male Lynx wandered down the road completely unconcerned by our presence as it scent marked the odd snow pile on its route and the memory was well and truly etched into everyone's mind. A fabulous and very lucky start to the tour!

Days 4 - 8: Superior National Forest Area and Grand Marais

We enjoyed some incredible daily sightings of Canada Lynx with all encounters occurring in the daytime between 10:15hrs and 17:30hrs. The vast majority of sightings were as animals fed on a carcass and we were treated to some very close views. We were also treated to the fabulous sound of calling males on at least three different occasions. As with previous trips, it seemed the majority of sightings were of male Lynx and certainly a female or young male on one occasion. Sexing is often difficult without seeing under the tail! Sightings were often prolonged as animals fed and I think it is fair to say that everyone was happy with the views!! The final sighting on the evening of the 25th was particularly memorable as a male was once again seen on the road. It walked towards one of the vehicles before finally walking across an open snow patch and disappeared in the forest calling as it departed - Simply magical! We were so lucky to have a window of warm weather again this year, making waiting so more comfortable! A full breakdown of sightings is in the annotated checklist.

Bird highlights whilst in the Lynx area included numerous sightings of both Spruce and Ruffed Grouse, Canada Jay and Blue Jay as well as Two-barred Crossbills, Cedar Waxwings and Boreal Chickadees. Pine Grosbeaks were notable by their absence this year and it was the first tour we had not seen them, though the species was very scarce throughout Minnesota this year. In contrast, Cedar Waxwing, Purple Finch and American Goldfinch were relatively common and new additions from previous tours. A couple of visits to Grand Marais Harbour added to the bird list with some good species such as Long-tailed Duck and Bufflehead and a Glaucous Gull on our last evening.

More mammal highlights during our stay included some great views by red torchlight of a feeding Northern Flying Squirrel and a superb Wolf encounter along the north shore of Lake Superior. The Wolf was incredibly close and we tracked this pale coated animal on and off for an hour. On two occasions it simply trotted past our vehicles in the beautiful morning sunlight. A definite tour highlight for sure!

Days 9 - 10: Superior National Forest - Grand Marais - Duluth

Our final day was spent exploring the forest. Sadly, it produced no other Lynx sightings, incredibly the first time since we arrived! However, we enjoyed a great day with some more good bird sightings surrounded by winter wonderland scenery. On our final morning we thanked our local guide David for all his hard work and effort which allowed us to experience so many amazing Lynx encounters. We then returned to Duluth taking lunch en route before returning to the airport where the tour concluded.



A Canada Lynx dashes across the road in front of us! Photo by Andy Stanbury



This beautiful Barred Owl posed for everyone at Winterberry Bog on our first day





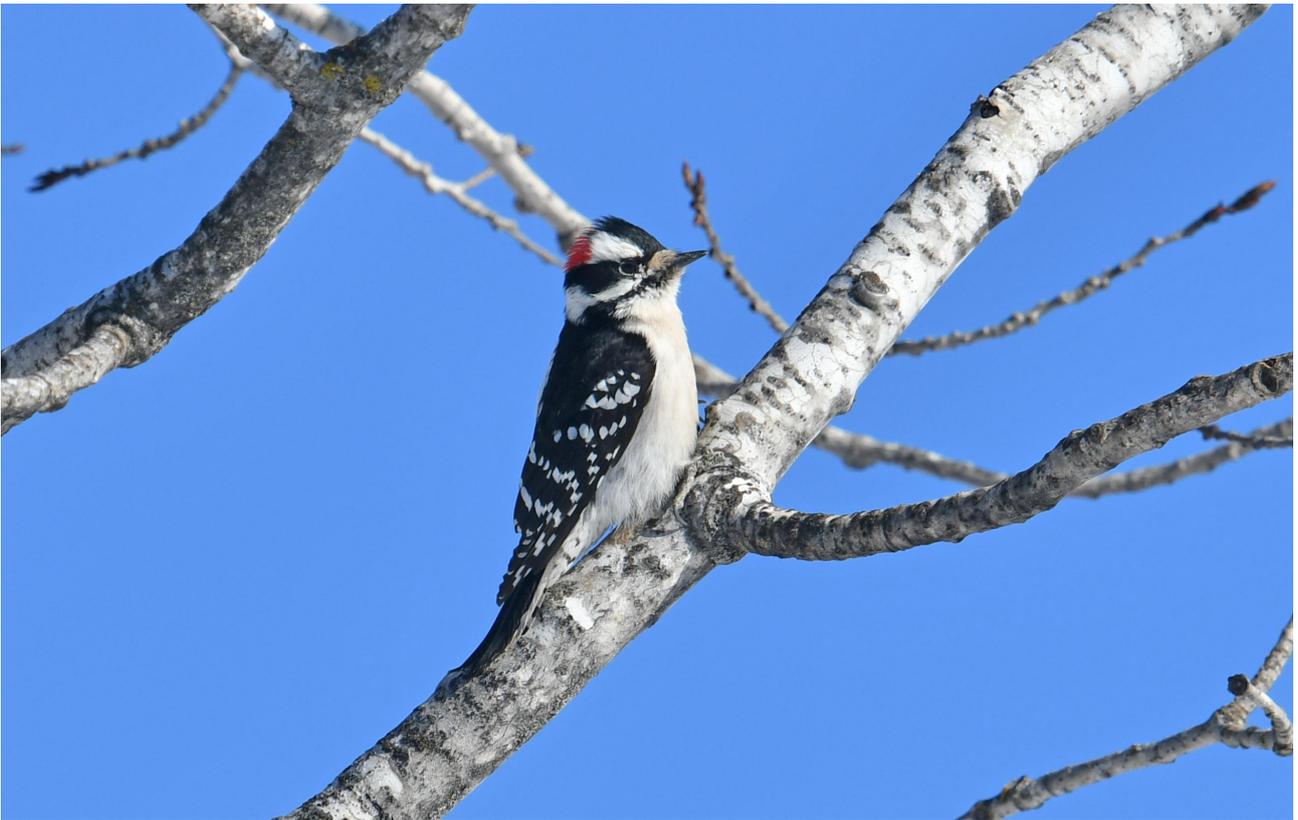
This Northern Hawk Owl (above) performed very well at Sax Zlm Bog whereas the Great Grey Owl concealed itself in the Pines (below) whilst we endured -35 °C!





At Winterberry Bog a male American Three-toed Woodpecker (above) and a female Black-backed Woodpecker (below) foraged just metres apart!





**Male Downy Woodpecker (above) and Male Hairy Woodpecker (below)
were seen very well on a number of days**





This North American Porcupine (above) at Sax Zim Bog was our only sighting whereas Red Squirrel (below) was a regularly seen species





**The beautiful and mesmerising Canada Lynx!
The animal above was seen on the 21st Feb and was the group's first
prolonged daytime encounter. The animal below was seen on the 23rd Feb.**





Grand Marais Harbour Lighthouse and Lake Superior





The Grey Ghost of the Forest!
The animal above was seen on the 23rd Feb and the animal below was a male seen on the evening of the 25th Feb. Our final Lynx sighting!





**Canada Jay (above) and Boreal Chickadee (below)
were both seen daily whilst searching for Lynx**





This male Lynx was completely unconcerned by our presence as it very casually wandered on the road!





This male Lynx was seen scent marking a boulder of snow on the 25th Feb. It may have been the same animal that we saw on our very first evening as this male was seen in the same area.





**Grouse were a regular distraction from Lynx.
Ruffed Grouse (above) and Spruce Grouse (below)
Ruffed Grouse photo by Andy Stanbury**





**Male Evening Grosbeak at Sax Zim Bog (above)
and male Two-barred Crossbill (below)**





This Canada Lynx was seen on the 23rd Feb and showed incredibly well in perfect light.





**This Canada Lynx was thought to be a female or possibly a young male but never lifted its tail to be sure! It was seen very well on the afternoon of the 24th Feb and was even watched licking its huge paws, much to the excitement of some of the group!
Photos by Andy Stanbury**





**Gunflint Lake (above) and the Canadian border out to the left.
A 2nd calendar year Glaucous Gull (below) at Grand Marais Harbour
was a nice surprise on our last evening.**





This beautiful Wolf performed exceptionally well on the morning of the 25th Feb





No words needed - Just sheer beauty!
Photo below by Andy Stanbury





One of the many impressive sunsets in the forest

More Videos of the Wolf and other species can be seen [HERE](#)

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

This is a Land Preservation Project which goes 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 CHECKLIST: Tuesday 18th - Thursday 27th February 2020

Bird Taxonomy: IOC International Ornithological Congress
 Mammal Taxonomy: IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature
 Bird Total: 43 species seen.
 Mammal Total: 10 species seen.

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#	Species Name	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	At least 12 birds seen at Sax Zim Bog at Mary Lou's bird feeders on the 19th. A first for the tour! Not recorded on previous tours
2	Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>	Some great views with sightings on four days. Day counts of 1-2 birds except at Sax Zim Bog when 5 birds were seen in total on the 19th.
3	Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>	This Spruce tree specialist was seen very well in the Superior Forest on five days with up to 5 birds seen on the 22nd and some great views of males and females.
4	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	A group of 18 birds just outside Grand Marais Harbour on the 24th was the only sighting.
5	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	A female/1st year male was seen in Grand Marais Harbour on two days.
6	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Small numbers in Grand Marais Harbour on two days.
7	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	Recorded on two days with up to 5 birds seen on the 24th on Lake Superior near Grand Marais.
8	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	Recorded on at least three days around habitation.
9	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	Single birds recorded on two days around Grand Marais.
10	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	A 2nd Calendar Year bird showed well at Grand Marais Harbour on the evening of the 26th. A first for the tour! Not recorded on previous tours.
11	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	The commonest gull species recorded on five days.
12	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	Great views were enjoyed on three days with max. day counts of 2-5 birds including a number of pristine adults.
13	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	A beautiful dark phase bird was seen in flight and briefly perched at Sax Zim Bog on the 19th.
14	Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	A female bird gave good scope views in the sunshine at Sax Zim Bog on the 19th.
15	Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>	An exceptionally tame juvenile posed just metres from us at Winterberry Bog bird feeders on the 19th. A first for the tour! Not recorded on previous tours.
16	Great Grey Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>	Thanks to our local guide Clinton, we were privileged to see this highly sought after species. We scoped a bird perched on the edge of a pine belt just south of Zim Road early on the 19th. Despite the bone chilling temperature of -35 degrees centigrade, everyone was smiling!
17	Northern Hawk-owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	Superb views of a bird at Sax Zim Bog, typically perched at the very top of a pine tree and in glorious sunshine!
18	American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>	A male gave excellent views at Winterberry Bog on the afternoon of the 19th as it foraged for food. A first for the tour! Not recorded on previous tours.
19	Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>	Great views of 2 females at Winterberry Bog on the afternoon of the 19th. The second bird gave excellent views as it foraged for food, just metres from the above species!
20	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	Recorded on two days with probably the best views at Mary Lou's bird feeders on the 19th.

21	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>	Recorded on two days with probably the best views at Mary Lou's bird feeders and Winterberry Bog on the 19th.
22	Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>	Single birds recorded around the Superior Forest on the 21st and the 26th.
23	Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>	A single bird gave good scope views at Sax Zim Bog on the 19th.
24	Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	This speciality northern Jay was recorded on six days whilst exploring the Superior Forest. Counts of up to at least four birds on most days
25	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	Recorded on six days from Sax Zim Bog to the Superior Forest with average day counts of 3-6 birds.
26	Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	Two of this distinctly separate species were seen at Sax Zim Bog near where we enjoyed views of a Northern Hawk Owl!
27	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	A common species recorded on seven days.
28	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	A common species recorded daily.
29	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	A small flock of around 15 birds were seen at the Gunflint Lodge on the 24th.
30	Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>	The first year we recorded this species on this tour and clearly a good year. Small groups of 2 - 30+ birds were seen on four days whilst exploring the Superior Forest and north shore of Lake Superior. Not recorded on previous tours.
31	Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>	After missing the species at Sax Zim Bog, everyone was very pleased to enjoy daily sightings in the Superior Forest whilst looking for Lynx. Recorded on seven days with a max. day count of 4 birds.
32	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	Recorded on at least six days and often alarm calling when a Lynx was present!
33	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	Great views and vocalisations on seven days of this super looking nuthatch.
34	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	This introduced species was recorded on four days. Seen in Winsconsin, Grand Marais and Duluth.
35	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	Small wintering numbers of 1-2 birds recorded on four days mostly around bird feeders in Grand Marais. A first for the tour! Not recorded on previous tours.
36	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	This introduced species was recorded on our first two days around Duluth.
37	Evening Grosbeak	<i>Hesperiphona vespertina</i>	Smaller numbers this year with at least 6 birds including males and females at point blank range whilst visiting Mary Lou's feeders at Sax Zim Bog on the 19th.
38	Purple Finch	<i>Haemorhous purpureus</i>	Small groups recorded on four days with a max. day count of 7 birds on the 24th. A first for the tour! Not recorded on previous tours.
39	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	A very good Crossbill year with sightings of small groups on five days.
40	Two-barred Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>	A very good Crossbill year with excellent sightings of males and females on six days from Sax Zim Bog to the Superior Forest. Of note were birds seen feeding on a dead mammal carcass on at least two occasions!
41	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>	At least 6 birds present at the Sax Zim Bog Visitor Centre feeders and at least 10 birds around the Grand Marais bird feeders on the 24th. A first for the tour! Not recorded on previous tours.
42	Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>	Small flocks seen over six days with most birds present at the Sax Zim Visitor Centre feeders.
43	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	Single birds recorded on three days at Sax Zim Bog and Grand Marais.

Mammals

1	Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>	A number of brief sightings of single animals on four days by various members of the group after unintentionally flushing animals that broke from cover!
2	North American Porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>	Fabulous views of a very obliging animals in a tree at Sax Zim Bog.
3	Northern Flying Squirrel	<i>Glaucomys sabrinus</i>	Great views by red light as an animal fed on sunflower seeds at the Gunflint Lodge on teh evening of the 23rd.
4	Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	The only sighting was of an animal at bird feeders in Grand Marais on the morning of the 24th.
5	Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	This attractive squirrel was seen well on five days and heard alarm calling when Lynx were present!
			<p>A total of nine encounters involving at least three different animals. Similar to previous tours, most animals appeared to be males. Sexing is difficult unless the cat raises its tail! Vocalisations this year were the best we have experienced. Though both sexes call, the typical barking of males was only heard rather than the more drawn out “in heat “ call of a females. 20th February encounters 1 & 2: Approx. 15.40hrs and another from 17.40 - 18.15hrs Incredibly an animal (unsexed) appeared on the road in front of our vehicles on our first afternoon! It slowly walked onto the snow bank and into the forest allowing everyone a good first view! Later the same evening at around dusk we followed a male (sexed from trail camera) in our vehicles along the road for over 30 minutes. It was seen to scent mark a large boulder of snow. 21st February encounters 3 & 4: Approx. 15.40hrs (CT & AS) and another from 16.40 - 17.20hrs Whilst the group were waiting at one site, Andy and Chris watched another site and a Lynx (unsexed) appeared and sat watching them! They quickly left to pick up the group and returned. After an anxious wait, the presumed same animal returned giving the group their first prolonged daytime encounter! 22nd February encounters 5 & 6: Approx. 10.15 - 12.25hrs and another at 16.10hrs An animal (unsexed) was watched by the whole group at site 1 for over two hours as it fed on a carcass. During the afternoon at site 2 a male was heard and seen by some of the group as it called regularly and even walked within a few metres of Chris! 23rd February encounter 7: Approx. 16.10 - 17.00hrs A wonderful encounter for half of the group as an animal fed on a carcass at site 1 in perfect light. A calling male was heard by some at site 2. 24th February encounter 8: Approx. 12.55 - 13.55hrs For those that chose not to visit Gunflint Lake, a female or young male fed at a carcass at site 2 and then sat and licked its paws clean in front of the group! 25th February encounter 9: Approx. 17.30 - 17.40hrs A very impressive grand finale as a male wandered on the road between our vehicles just before dusk and then wandered out onto open snow showing off its huge paws before it disappeared into the forest, calling as it went - Simply fantastic!</p>
6	Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>	
7	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	A simply superb encounter on the morning of the 25th along the shore road east of Grand Marais. We enjoyed incredibly close views of a pale coated animal in good condition on a number of occasions with the animal trotting right beside our vehicle during the first view! We tracked the animal on and off for around 60 minutes of which around 10 minutes the animal was in view.
8	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Single animals seen early morning in darkness on two days whilst driving to the Lynx sites.
9	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	A small mammal seen by Chris and Simon that dashed in front of the vehicle seemed to fit this species during late afternoon on the 22nd in the Superior Forest.

10 White-tailed Deer

Odocoileus virginianus

This very attractive deer species was recorded on five days mostly along the Lake Superior shore with up to 30+ animals seen on our return journey to Duluth on the final day.

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