

Minnesota Winter Owling | January 26 - 30, 2025 | Trip Report | by Bryan Calk

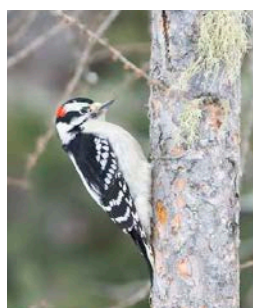


Bryan Calk and Mason Flint with Cathy, Laura, Cliff, Karl, Jonathan, Kathleen, Brenda, Vivian, Anne, and Frank



Sun., Jan. 26 Arrivals in Duluth

The evening began with a gathering around the panoramic windows of the hotel lobby, overlooking the shoreline of Lake Superior. After brief introductions and orientation, the group set out for the first dinner at a nearby casual bar and grill. On the way back, a female Snowy Owl was spotted perched on a light post right on the overpass! Fortunately, Duluth's laid-back nature allowed a quick stop to step outside in the bitter cold, long enough for everyone to share the single pair of binoculars that Cathy had thoughtfully brought along. An auspicious start to the tour!



Mon., Jan. 27 Sax-Zim Bog

The morning began with a trip to Sax-Zim Bog, an area composed of bogs (of course!), fens, pastureland, and tamaracks—famous for its owls, finches, and other northern wildlife. The first hours were spent cruising classic areas in search of the region’s most iconic species, the Great Gray Owl. As daylight strengthened, the first of these ghostly hunters appeared along the roadside. Initially conspicuous on a utility wire, it soon melted into the mixed birch-spruce forest, perching on a stump and demonstrating its remarkable camouflage. A thrilling start to the day!

At the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog Welcome Center, feeders teemed with Redpolls, Purple Finches, and Pine Siskins. The biggest surprise came when a Short-tailed Weasel emerged from a brush pile, darting playfully between hiding spots—adorable yet fierce. Red Squirrels vied for attention, equally determined to prove their charm. After warming up inside the center and exploring a few additional feeding areas, the group ventured through Winterberry Bog, encountering Black-billed Magpies, a pair of Bohemian Waxwings (rare this year!), a Northern Shrike, and a lone Wild Turkey foraging beneath the feeders.

Later in the day, a final drive through the bog revealed another Great Gray Owl hunting near the highway. While stopped to observe, Ruffed Grouse were spotted high in the birches, picking at catkins—a fantastic end to the first full day in the field.

Tues., Jan. 28 Sax-Zim Bog | Meadowlands | Two Harbors

Another early morning in the bog led to a stop at a private cabin where the owner maintains several feeders open to visiting birders. The feeders bustled with Pine Siskins, Redpolls, and Purple Finches, but the real highlight came just as the group prepared to leave—Evening Grosbeaks perched atop the birch trees. Within moments, nearly fifty of these striking finches descended, bickering over seed. The cabin’s owner emerged to share local insights and the area’s history, adding a personal touch to the visit.

Further exploration of the bog featured several inquisitive Canada Jays before we shifted our focus to agricultural fields southwest of Meadowlands in search of open-country birds. A large flock of Snow Buntings put on a dazzling aerial display against the bright blue sky before settling for scope views. Just around the corner, a Snowy Owl lay nestled into a snowbank, keeping watch with occasional glances toward the group.



After lunch, the journey continued to the Two Harbors area for an evening of owl searching. Despite less-than-ideal conditions, two more Great Gray Owls provided spectacular views. The day concluded with a hearty meal at a local barbecue joint.

Wed., Jan. 29 Aitkin County | Sax-Zim Bog

The morning's destination was Aitkin County, in search of a couple of particularly special species. In an open agricultural area with frozen rice paddies, the first prize of the day materialized—a Sharp-tailed Grouse strutting across the road, its signature tail held high. A second bird soon joined, and though both quickly disappeared, the excitement was far from over. Turning around revealed more than a dozen additional grouse perched unexpectedly on utility wires, offering extended scope and camera views!

Further north, a stop for a cooperative Pileated Woodpecker and a Rough-legged Hawk preceded the main event—scanning the tamarack treetops for the elusive Northern Hawk Owl. An hour of careful searching was nearly fruitless until, just as hopes faded, the owl flew in! Perched atop a utility pole, it allowed close views, its intricate spotting and piercing yellow eyes mesmerizing through the scope. Eventually we left it behind, still surveying its surroundings for a tasty vole.

Back in Duluth for lunch, an unexpected report sent plans into a frenzy—a Boreal Owl had been spotted in the bog. With little hesitation, meals were quickly finished, and the drive back to Sax-Zim Bog commenced. Upon arrival, the gathered crowd left no doubt that the owl was still present. Perched quietly, the tiny celebrity snoozed, occasionally preening and stretching before eventually disappearing into the woods.

But the bog had one more surprise. On the drive back, a Great Gray Owl floated down from a tree, plunged into a snowbank, and emerged with a vole clenched in its talons. In one swift gulp, the meal was gone, and the owl resumed its perch, unfazed by the spellbound onlookers just yards away. Just another day at the bog...

Thu., Jan. 30 Superior National Forest | Two Harbors | Superior

The final field excursion took the group into Lake County, with the rising sun casting golden light over Lake Superior before the journey turned north into the depths of the boreal forest. Along the way, a Red Fox made a brief yet stunning appearance, followed by yet another remarkable Great Gray Owl encounter.



The first planned stop at Greenwood Lake revealed a frozen landscape dotted with ice fishermen, the backdrop to a stunning sunrise. Further up the road, signs of past wildfires provided the ideal setting for the target bird of the day—Black-backed Woodpecker. Distant drumming hinted at its presence, but attention was quickly diverted when a Spruce Grouse was spotted feeding in a conifer, an unexpected and thrilling find! Once the grouse had been thoroughly admired, the search resumed, leading to multiple Black-backed Woodpecker sightings!

Further north, frozen lakes and rivers along the Voyager Highway presented opportunities for mammal spotting. The patience paid off with an American Mink diving in and out of a hole in the ice, pausing periodically to roll in the snow before disappearing into the forest.

Returning south, a final stop in Two Harbors included a delicious lunch with homemade pies, followed by a brief look at Agate Bay. The drive back to Duluth featured no fewer than four more Great Gray Owls hunting along the highway—an almost surreal sight. Before wrapping up the trip, a final stop in Superior, Wisconsin, provided one last owl encounter—a cooperative Snowy Owl perched in an industrial area. Time was spent enjoying this magnificent bird before heading to a well-loved local restaurant for a final dinner. Reflections on an extraordinary week filled the conversation before heartfelt goodbyes were exchanged in anticipation of departures the next morning.

A truly unforgettable journey through the winter wilderness of the Northland.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Northern Hawk Owl (BC), Purple Finch (BC), Snowy Owl (BC), Great Gray Owl (BC), Ermine (BC), Downy Woodpecker (BC), Pine Grosbeaks (Cliff Halverson - CH), Red Squirrel (BC), Redpoll (BC), Great Gray Owl (BC), Pine Siskin (BC), Ruffed Grouse (BC), Pileated Woodpecker (BC), Northern Hawk Owl (BC), Mink (CH), Snowy Owl (BC)