

Minnesota Winter Owling | February 2 - 7, 2025

Trip Report | by Bryan Calk



Bryan Calk and Vernie Aikins with Marcia, Tracy, Chris, Mary, Kathleen, Don, Bonnie, Margo, Shelli, Brenda, and Tina



Sun., Feb. 2 Welcome to Duluth

The evening began with a warm gathering around the cozy couches of the hotel lobby, with the snowy shores of Lake Superior outside. After a brief orientation and introductions, the group ventured out for our first dinner at a local Italian favorite.

Mon., Feb. 3 Aitkin County Exploring

Our first adventure took us west of Duluth to Aitkin County, known for its diverse habitats, including upland woodlands, bogs, and agricultural areas. Arriving just after dawn, we began scanning the snow-covered fields



and brushy edges for our first target: the Sharp-tailed Grouse. After some patient searching, punctuated by distractions from Redpolls and Northern Shrikes, we were rewarded when one grouse landed atop a dead spruce, offering clear views through the scope.

Next, we ventured north, stopping in upland habitats where we enjoyed views of Pileated and Red-bellied Woodpeckers. Our next destination was a patchwork of spruce-Tamarack bogs and frozen marshes. After an hour of searching, we decided to check a nearby birch forest, where we encountered our first owl of the trip. A magnificent Great Gray Owl first hunted along the road, then disappeared into the forest, showcasing its remarkable ability to vanish like a true phantom of the north.

A break for lunch at a local cafe warmed us up before heading back out. As fate would have it, our next prize awaited as we arrived: a glorious Northern Hawk Owl. We watched in awe as it moved from perch to perch, hunting for prey. After several attempts, it finally captured a rodent and took it to a perch to feast.

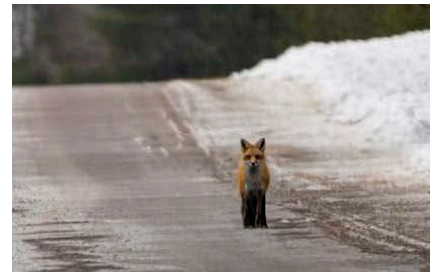
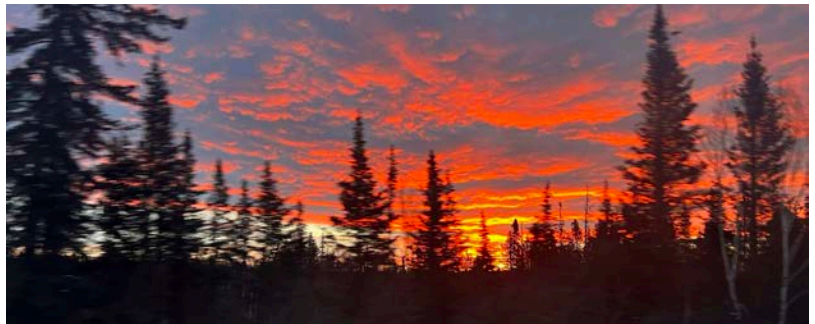
We continued into Superior, Wisconsin, where we took advantage of the last light of day to track down one more fantastic bird—a Snowy Owl. A young male was preparing for its evening hunt, flying from pole to rooftop, offering incredible views. As we cruised around, we found two more Snowy Owls, including a young female whose plumage showed off just how variable these birds are.

Dinner was just a short walk away, followed by a species rundown and a recap meeting before turning in for the night.

Tue., Feb. 4 Sax-Zim Bog

The day was dedicated to exploring Sax-Zim Bog. As the light began to break, we encountered our first Great Gray Owl of the day, a warm welcome to this famous location. Despite the morning chill—fifteen below zero—the owl was on the hunt. After observing it for a while, it flew right past our van, offering a fleeting yet unforgettable view.

We explored the bog, stopping at various feeding stations and seeking refuge at the cozy welcome center to warm up. Along the way, we were treated to a parade of winter birdlife, including the striking Pine Grosbeak, whose vivid pink and yellow plumage stands out against the snowy backdrop. These beautiful birds are known



for their fondness for berries, and their soft, melodious calls add a pleasant soundtrack to the still, cold air. We also spotted the Evening Grosbeak at a local resident's feeders, another reminder of the great community of wildlife lovers here. In the trees, White-winged Crossbills were busy using their uniquely crossed beaks to pry open spruce cones in search of seeds, while a Boreal Chickadee flitted through the branches to dine on some peanut butter. A few Ruffed Grouse darted through the underbrush, their cryptic plumage helping them blend into the wintry surroundings. We even caught a glimpse of some lingering American Tree Sparrows, tough little birds that usually stick out harsh winters just a little further south. The feeders were alive with the familiar sounds of Redpolls, Purple Finches, and Black-capped Chickadees, their cheerful calls echoing through the stillness. After a hearty lunch at Wilbert Cafe, we spent the afternoon cruising the back roads of the bog, where our persistence paid off with one final treat—a magnificent Great Gray Owl. This elusive predator, the largest of the northern owls, gave us impressive, up-close views as it perched silently, its ghostly presence a fitting end to the day.

Wed., Feb. 5 Lake County | Two Harbors

The day began with a spectacular sunrise as we headed toward Superior National Forest. The vast boreal forest, with its burn scars and frozen landscapes, provided a perfect backdrop for wildlife spotting. Our persistence paid off when, while observing a feeding station, we heard the distinctive drumming of a Black-backed Woodpecker in the forest. We quickly followed the sound and glimpsed the bird flying across the path, then heard it again, drumming from a distant snag.

After checking some burn areas, we found another Black-backed Woodpecker, this one foraging just feet off the ground and a few yards off the road! Its technique of flaking bark to reveal juicy grubs was fascinating to watch. On the way south, we spotted an adorable Red Fox, which paused to observe us before darting into the forest.

After lunch at a local spot in Castle Danger, we ventured around Two Harbors, where we encountered three Great Gray Owls near the shore. The backdrop of a shipping port and lighthouse made for an iconic Minnesota scene, perfect for photos.



Thu., Feb. 6: Final Day of Birding

Our last full day began with a fresh blanket of snow and another beautiful sunrise. We spent the morning scanning for owls and came across a Snowshoe Hare burrowing around a fallen log in the snow. In Two Harbors, we spotted more Great Grays and searched through stands of cedars and spruce, finding extremely tame roosted Ruffed Grouse and some fluffy White-tailed Deer. Back in Canal Park, we braved the winter weather to scan the masses of Common Goldeneye and admired the Aerial Lift Bridge, a symbol of the area's iron industry. Duluth's rich history as a vital port city, shaped by its booming iron ore industry and connection to Lake Superior, fascinated us. We thoroughly enjoyed learning about the city's vibrant culture, where a blend of old industrial roots and artistic innovation creates a truly unique atmosphere.

Lunch at Sir Benedict's Tavern on the Lake offered a cozy refuge with a great view of the lake and unique menu options. Our last birding stop took us to Superior, Wisconsin, where we found a beautifully marked young female Snowy Owl. A final stop at Park Point revealed the stunning sight of crystalline blue ice sheets piled against the beach, showcasing the power and beauty of Lake Superior. On our way back to the hotel, we encountered one more Great Gray Owl to cap off a remarkable week of birding.

Fri., Feb. 7 Departures

We said our final goodbyes to Minnesota, Lake Superior, and the new friends we made during this unforgettable trip.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Great Gray Owl (Tina Penny - TP), Bald Eagle (Vernie Aikins - VA), Black-backed Woodpecker (BC), Northern Hawk Owl (BC), Scenic (VA), Redpoll (BC), Great Gray Owl (BC), Sunset (Marcia Nedland - MN), Red Fox (BC), White-tailed Deer (VA), Snowy Owl (VA), Group (BC), Snowshoe Hare (BC), Great Gray Owl (BC)