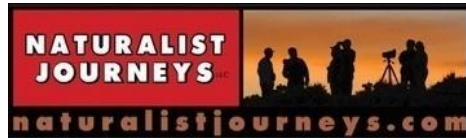


Minnesota: Winter Owling February 1 – 6, 2026 | Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Mollie Brown and Bryan Calk with Ellen, Zoltan, Jim, Lyndi, Bruce, Patty, Brian, Gayle, Coleman, and Dana





Sunday, Feb. 1 Arrival in Duluth

Arrivals came together with a welcome orientation and dinner at a local Italian spot in Duluth. It was an easy, relaxed start to the tour and a chance for introductions and getting to know one another. A few participants who arrived early managed some birding beforehand, turning up good numbers of ducks and catching an exciting bonus when Peregrine Falcons streaked through town chasing pigeons, a fast-paced urban moment that set the tone for the days ahead.

Monday, Feb. 2 Sax-Zim Bog

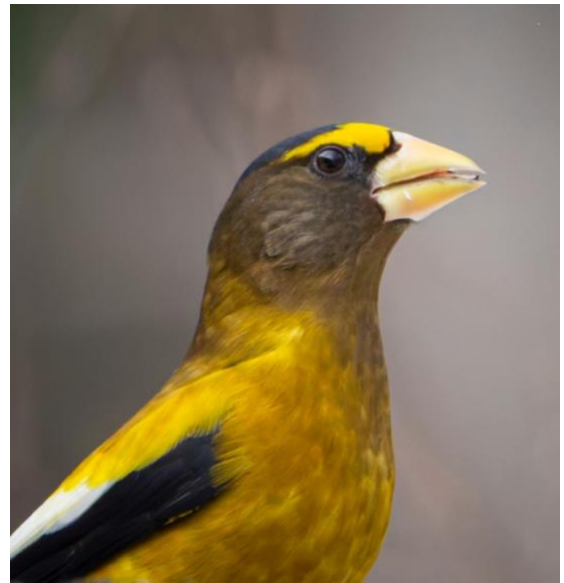
The first full day began north of Duluth in open agricultural country, a winter landscape of fields, hedgerows, and scattered birch. Breakfast belonged to a group of Sharp-tailed Grouse feeding on birch catkins, hopping and fluttering into the trees and methodically pecking away. The birds were cooperative and offered excellent scope views, an engaging look at a species more often associated with dancing grounds than treetops.

From there we continued north into Sax-Zim Bog, working the area from north to south. The first notable sighting wasn't a bird but a Porcupine curled up in a tree, fast asleep and completely unfazed. At nearby feeders, a Boreal Chickadee dropped in, giving close looks, followed by a Northern Shrike perched roadside and remarkably tolerant, holding still long enough for extended views that highlighted its clean lines and subtle tones.

We stopped at the welcome center to warm up, browse the shop, and watch the feeders from indoors. Redpolls cycled through steadily, and a striking group of Evening Grosbeaks lingered, allowing prolonged viewing from just a few feet away. Lunch followed at the Wilbert Cafe, a classic rural Minnesota diner and a perfect mid-day pause.

After lunch we explored a quiet side road along the south edge of the bog. A Northern Hawk Owl was already in view when we arrived, and everyone got on it just in time to watch it swallow a vole it had recently caught. The owl then perched calmly to digest before lifting off and flying directly toward us, landing in a roadside perch that delivered exceptional close-range views.

Next came the Winterberry Bog. After time at the feeders, we walked the boardwalk through classic bog habitat, spruce and tamarack surrounding us. While moving slowly and scanning, we came across a Barred Owl hunting



deep within the trees, weaving through the spruce with quiet purpose. Pine Grosbeaks were present as well, high in the treetops, their soft calls drifting through the still air.

Late in the afternoon we shifted to open fields near the edge of the bog. Almost immediately we picked up a Short-eared Owl perched low, which soon lifted off and began actively hunting over the field, coursing back and forth in the fading light. As daylight slipped away, we cruised back toward town for dinner and a full checklist session, closing out a day packed with classic northern Minnesota winter highlights.



Tuesday, Feb. 3

Superior National Forest | North Shore

The following morning took us north from Two Harbors along Highway 2 into the Superior National Forest. A clear sunrise over Lake Superior set the tone, pale light reflecting off shards of shoreline ice and open water. With fresh snow and calm conditions, the landscape felt especially quiet. As we pulled away from the lake, the scenery shifted into a mosaic of peatland habitats, open bogs with stunted Black Spruce, sedge-dominated fens threaded with frozen seepages, patches of Aspen and Paper Birch uplands, and darker stretches of mature conifer forest beneath clear blue skies.

We stopped often to walk and explore. At Greenwood Lake, frozen solid and glowing in the morning light, we walked out onto the ice to take in the wide-open view and get a stronger sense of place. Nearby pockets of open water drew our attention, and at one stop a Rusty Blackbird, uncommon for the season, dropped in briefly to drink. Pine Grosbeaks appeared throughout the morning, including a group gritting along the roadside, picking at sand and salt while calling softly to one another.



By late morning we reached a burn area shaped by recent fire, defined by standing snags, open sunlight, and early regrowth. This is prime habitat for Black-backed Woodpeckers, a species closely tied to burned forests where beetle larvae thrive beneath the bark. We worked the area slowly, pausing often to listen for tapping. Eventually the sharp, deliberate sounds led us to multiple birds, offering excellent views as they worked close to eye level. Watching them feed was a lesson in specialization, scaling bark with powerful blows and probing deep for larvae.

Not long after, movement along the roadside caught our attention when Canada Jays appeared, curious and unbothered by our presence. A handful of bird seed turned the stop into something special, with the jays coming in close and even feeding by hand, bold and inquisitive in a way that felt uniquely northern.

Lunch followed at the Rustic Inn Cafe in Castle Danger, with warm food, strong coffee, and excellent local fare, capped off with pie. Afterward we stopped at Betty's Pies in Two Harbors to watch the feeders. Boreal Chickadees came in well, along with Red-breasted Nuthatches moving quickly between trunks and feeder edges.

The afternoon was spent cruising around Two Harbors as the light softened. We positioned ourselves along the North Shore for sunset, watching color spread across the sky and reflect off fractured plates of lake ice. Blues, pinks, and golds shimmered across the frozen surface, a powerful reminder of Lake Superior's scale. Dinner, checklist, and a discussion of the next day's plans followed before turning in for the night.

Wednesday, Feb. 4

Sax-Zim Bog | Brimson

The next morning brought us back into Sax-Zim Bog under overcast skies, calm and quiet. We cruised familiar roads, scanning edges and openings as the bog slowly woke up. At Admiral Road feeders, Meadow Voles and Red-backed Voles surfaced from snow tunnels to grab fallen seed. Boreal Chickadees dropped in regularly, followed by Pine Grosbeaks of all plumages, males glowing softly against the muted winter palette. Canada Jays, woodpeckers, and the usual supporting cast rounded out a productive stop.

Word soon came of White-winged Crossbills gritting on a nearby road, an uncommon species this year. Plans changed quickly and we diverted. When we arrived, the birds were initially feeding high in the trees before dropping down to the road to take grit and sip meltwater. The views were exceptional, with males and females at close range and plenty of time to study their behavior.



At the Yellow-bellied Bog feeders, Redpolls and Pine Grosbeaks cycled through steadily while a Bald Eagle soared overhead. Several White-tailed Deer were also out on the snow, some standing in the open, others walking quietly along packed tracks. Lunch once again brought us back to the Wilbert Cafe.

After lunch we returned to the Brimson burn area, spreading out along the road and into the woods, tromping through snow and following every faint pecking sound. The effort paid off in a big way. Between all of us, we found well over a dozen Black-backed Woodpeckers in the area, an incredible concentration that allowed time to simply watch them work and move through their fire-shaped world. Snowshoe Hare tracks crisscrossed the snow beneath the trees, and the broader peatland landscape added to the feeling of immersion.

The afternoon turned into a slow, winding drive through Minnesota back roads, open fields giving way to forests of birch and spruce. The scenery felt serene and unhurried, inviting quiet reflection even as eyes stayed trained on the landscape.

Near Two Harbors we stopped again when a Barred Owl was found hunting along the roadside. We watched it drop into the snow, emerge with a vole, and calmly consume it before trying again. A second dive missed, talons plunging into snow before the owl flopped briefly and lifted silently back into the trees. We followed its movements until it faded into the evening.

Another stop near the mouth of the Lester River brought hundreds of Mallards and scattered Common Goldeneye in open water, a fitting contrast to the frozen landscapes explored earlier in the day. By nightfall we were back at the hotel, then out to a local grill for dinner. Over good food and a well-earned beverage, we worked through the checklist, talked strategy for the next day, and reflected on how much ground had been covered.

Thursday, Feb. 5

Superior, WI | Two Harbors | Sax-Zim Bog

The final day began across the harbor in Superior, Wisconsin, where our first stop was the airport. A Snowy Owl was roosting on a rooftop, calm and unbothered, and we spent time watching it in the soft morning light as it surveyed the open landscape around it.



From there we headed back toward the Two Harbors area to cruise neighborhoods and agricultural roads. Bohemian Waxwings were present when we arrived, feeding heavily on buckthorn and offering excellent views as they moved through the branches. A Bald Eagle was also in the area, adding to a productive stop.

Late morning brought us to Duluth Grill for brunch before returning to Sax-Zim Bog. We worked up McDavitt Road through classic peatland habitat under overcast skies. Coming back down Admiral Road, Patty spotted a Ruffed Grouse perched in a tree, giving prolonged and unusually good views.

We continued to the feeding area where activity was initially slow. Then, unexpectedly, a Pine Marten emerged from the woods and came straight to the feeder. For several minutes it fed on peanut butter, fully visible, alert and curious, giving remarkable looks before scampering back into the forest. It was an extraordinary encounter with a rarely seen animal.

As the afternoon wore on, we made our way back toward Duluth, then returned to Superior as the clouds began to part. In beautiful late-day light we found three Snowy Owls perched on poles and hunting in the airport fields, offering excellent close views.

Dinner that evening was at one of Duluth's premier restaurants, followed by a final checklist session and reflection on favorite moments and lessons from the trip.

Friday, Feb. 6

Canal Park | Departures

A final bonus morning brought one last outing to Canal Park beneath the Aerial Lift Bridge. Common Goldeneye were actively feeding and diving in the channel, and mixed among them was a Harlequin Duck. Canada Geese stood warming on the ice. Huge sheets of ice broke free and drifted through the canal, pushed by a light breeze. The sunrise brought crisp air and gorgeous light on the ducks and water.

After lingering for a while, we said our farewells and headed our separate ways, closing out the tour with one last shared morning on the shore of Lake Superior.

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