Minnesota: Owls and Finches of the Bog

February 6st – 10th, 2025

Great Gray Owl by Luis Gonzalez

If someone asked what the ultimate winter birding destination within the US would be, then the Sax-Zim Bog in Northern Minnesota is the holder of the title. The Bog is the winter residence for a variety of species that are found all around the northern hemisphere in the boreal/taiga biomes, but rarely do we get to enjoy their presence.

This trip was 3 years in the making with a few delays that turned into lucky breaks as the trip coincided with the best winter season within the Bog in the last decade. A total of 52 bird species were seen in a span of 5 days, with some being considered Holy Grail birds by birders around the world. The trip was completed by three birders with the help of local guide Judd Brink in parts of the trip. While exploring the bog is pretty straightforward, the local knowledge of the different spots, ease of driving and the feeding station Judd personally set up helped us feel comfortable during the 2 days we counted on his help.

Ring-necked Pheasant by Luis Gonzalez

Detailed Itinerary:

- February 6 (Arrival and first day in Minnesota)

  After an early morning flight, we all arrived at Minneapolis airport around 10:30AM, some quick luggage pickup and car rental confirmation had us in the field hoping to find some of the first birds of the trip, with a quick stop in Nicols Road Marsh giving us our only **Green-winged (American) Teal** among a raft of Mallard and an active feeder in a nearby home had enough **Dark-eyed (Slate-colored) Junco** to make sure we didn't miss them for the rest of the trip. Our drive took us west to Babcock Park, where we finally connected with a big target of the trip, the **Trumpeter Swan**, as we enjoyed 14 of these birds foraging in the river alongside a large raft of **Common Goldeneye**.

  We decided to warm up with a slightly late lunch and from there continued our drive to a spot where a Townsend's Solitaire was reported this season, along the way we noticed a field with over 100 **Trumpeter Swan** on it, while a juvenile **Bald Eagle** betrayed our hopes of seeing the uncommon Golden Eagle. When we arrived at the Solitaire site, we noticed that it was on the opposite side of a snowy field and that only parking area was in a public school around the time that parents come pick-up their kids, we decided that it wasn't worth it and moved north on our goal to reach our accommodations late night, but on the way out we noticed a female

Pileated Woodpecker having a field day on a suet feeder in someone's front yard and a pair of **Snow Bunting** briefly flew in front of our car.

Passing through many empty fields, we began to notice and eventually got great photos of the introduced **Ring-necked Pheasant**, alongside a flock of **Horned Lark**, and a single **American Tree Sparrow**, before we noticed that we still had 2 hours to go, and the sun was setting. After a long drive and enjoying the winter landscape, we arrived at our base for the next four nights, Alesches Accommodations, where we were greeted by the hosts and relaxed by the fire for a bit before calling it a night.

Sharp-tailed Grouse by Luis Gonzalez

- February 7 (Sharp-tailed Grouse Lek and Duluth Area)

  An early 6AM departure had us driving south for about 2 hours in hopes of seeing an active lek of the iconic Sharp-tailed Grouse, but not without having our first views of a **Great Gray Owl** on the side of the highway! Spending little more than 5 minutes in bad lighting gave us no photos to show for it, but at least we knew we came at the right year as some winters, these birds are barely seen within the bog, let alone hundreds of miles from it. When we arrived at the **Sharp-tailed Grouse** site, we noticed two unusual things about these interesting grassland-loving chickens, 1. They were lekking on the road due to the large amount of snow on the field and 2. They were surprisingly confiding as we walked slowly towards them, and they mostly ignored us. While we are unsure if the birds were too focused

on their mating displays to care about us or figured that the cold morning was too much for the group, it wasn't until a local drove past the lek that the birds scattered, never to be seen again by us.

With such a good start to the morning, we drove north and east this time, to the town of the Duluth, along the way we noticed our first **Red-tailed Hawk**, **Wild Turkey** and **Blue Jay** of the trip, before a flyover flock of **White-winged Crossbill** had us stop on the side of the road to enjoy them in morning light. A little way down the road, the situation repeated itself, but this time with a flock of **(Common) Redpoll** instead. A pit stop at the Culkin Rest Area had us staring at some feeders where we had our only **White-breasted (Eastern) Nuthatch** of the trip, alongside our first **Common Raven**, **Hairy (Eastern) Woodpecker**, and a brown ball in the bushes turned out to be the first mammal of the trip, an *Eastern Cottontail*.

After a delicious brunch break at the Duluth Grill, we managed to pick out a single **Glaucous Gull** in a flock **American Herring Gull**, sadly, the wintering Iceland Gull could not be found, but seeing a tree full of **Bald Eagle** was a neat change of pace before we made our first attempt to find a Snowy Owl in the nearby state of Wisconsin. While the owl was a no-show due to time of day and overall sunny conditions, a stop at the harbor of Park Point had us enjoying a raft of over 300 **Common Goldeneye**, with a surprise drake **Hooded Merganser** through in the mix.

A coffee break had us leaving Duluth, but not without seeing a small traffic accident on the way out. By the time we reached the empty fields around Meadowlands, we made a beeline for the female **Snowy Owl** that had been reported. Thankfully, we quickly found the bird, even if the distant views left a bit to be desired. After about an hour with it, we decided to fill the tank for tomorrow and this became a blessing in disguise as we managed to see the only **American Goshawk** of the trip as a bird flew across the road in front of us. After an early dinner, we spoke a bit with Judd about our plans for the following day and called it an early night.

- February 8 (First day at Sax-Zim Bog)

  With a 7AM departure, we began driving through the bog on our way to connect with other birders that were joining us today. Our only **Ruffed Grouse** of the day was seen foraging in a tree close to the accommodations, while the feeders at the visitor center showed the common finches of the season with **Pine Siskin**, **Purple Finch** and **(Common) Redpoll** all being present.

  As we drove around the bog, we noticed the first **Great Gray Owl** of the day, along with the only **Northern Shrike** of the trip, before a train scared both birds from their respective perches. A visit to the Sisu Feeders had us adding a flock of **Evening Grosbeak** to the trip list, alongside one of many *White-tailed Deer* seen in the area. From there, we spent close to an hour in the Admiral Road feeders, which is regularly visited by an American Marten, but the large mustelid was a no-show today, in its place, the feeders were full of flocks of finches that included species we had already seen, alongside our first proper views of **Red-breasted Nuthatch** and *American Red Squirrel*. The next hour was spent trying to find the best photo-

ops for **Great Gray Owl** and thankfully the birds cooperated, along with a hungry *North American Porcupine* that was eating the bark off a pine. We moved to the Arkola Road feeders to get amazing views of **Canada Jay** and **White-winged Crossbill**, but the true standout was a bright male **Pine Grosbeak** that was a lifer for everyone in the group.

Pine Grosbeak by Luis Gonzalez

After a late lunch break and a minor mishap where a pair of binoculars were left in the restaurant, we arrive back at the bog with cryptic news of a Boreal Owl being seen. This species is an irruptive member of the bog with it being uncommon some years and completely gone in others, this year it just happened to be the prime year for them and in the weeks leading up to our trip, there had been up to 10 of these cute owls being reported between Sax-Zim Bog and the Duluth area. Unfortunately, the person who shared the tip did not provide a working GPS pin, so it became a game of deciphering their words to find the spot, but when we did, we managed to arrive to the owl site before the bulk of the visitors to the bog did. Seeing this adorable but difficult owl was a clear trip highlight and a clear pride for even a veteran of the area like Judd, as this **Boreal Owl** was perched out in the open at eye-level in perfect light, while nearly 100 birders managed to see it for the next hour it was there. During that time those of us that faced the cold enjoyed seeing it open the eyes, scratch their faces and huddle up a bit, by the time we left, the owl stuck around for another 10 minutes before moving further into the woods, much to the dismay of some delayed birders.

Boreal Owl and Canada Jay by Luis Gonzalez

Due to the time spent with the owl, we lost our chance to connect with a Black-backed Woodpecker, but we didn't really mind, and instead decided to return to the **Snowy Owl** to see if we could have better views and this time, the owl cooperated! Sort of? She was closer to the road but perched on the highest pine in the area, so it was great seeing it closer, even if the photo ops left something to be desired. From there, we encountered one more **Great Gray Owl** in fading light, before warming up at Alesches, planning our route for tomorrow and calling it an early night.

- February 9 (Second day at Sax-Zim Bog)

  Our final day in the bog had us spending nearly 2 hours by to the Arkola Road feeders in hopes of seeing the **Boreal Chickadee**, but the species would remain on our heard only list for the trip as we looked around all the different **Black-capped Chickadee** that were enjoying the peanut butter that Judd spreads on the trees for the birds of the area. During the time spent here, we also saw two male **Pine Grosbeak** and a pair of **Brown Creeper**, among the more common species that call the bog home.

  Driving to the CR213 road, we noticed our first Great Gray Owl of the day, while the hoped for pair of **Black-billed Magpie** were seen foraging on the backs of cows in a nearby field. A brief visit to the Admiral Road feeders turned into a highlight as the *American Marten* was happily eating frozen peanut butter for all the visitors to see. From there, we scanned the area around Admiral Road to eventually find a *Snowshoe Hare* in full winter coat and a cooperative trio of **Ruffed Grouse**, with both species posing for photos. By revisiting the Sisu and Arkola Road feeders, we encountered the flock of **Evening Grosbeak** of the previous day and other species we had seen that morning, but the Boreal Chickadee remained heard only for every visitor that day. Before leaving for lunch, we encountered a hunting Great Gray Owl out in the open in sunny weather, leaving us with the best photos we could have hoped of this resident of the north.

  The plan for the late afternoon was simple but time-consuming as we would drive over 2 hours to reach the only reliable Northern Hawk-Owl in the area this year. Along the way, we attempted a report of a Hawk-Owl that was closer but no luck there; but on the drive we managed to connect with a **Rough-legged Hawk** perched on a power pole and seeing our last **Great Gray Owl** of the trip. When we finally reached our destination, we began scanning for the Hawk-Owl with no luck on the preferred poles and wires by the road. Eventually, an out of place ball on a distant tree proved to be our lifer **Northern Hawk-Owl**, the views left us a bit upset as birders had seen it right by the road that morning, but nothing to do, except accept how birding works sometimes and begin a long drive back to Alesches, but seeing a flock of Snow Bunting fly over a field was a nice ending point.

Ruffed Grouse and American Marten by Luis Gonzalez

- February 10 (Back to Minneapolis and departure)

  After an early departure from Alesches, we aimed to explore a known spot for a wintering Long-eared Owl in the Minneapolis area. Due to driving conditions and overall time restrictions, we only had about an hour to look for the owl, but this sadly proved to not be enough time. The warmer weather did help us hit over 50 species for the trip as we had a couple of birds that wouldn't go further north at this time of year like **Red-bellied Woodpecker**, **Northern Cardinal**, **Sharp-shinned Hawk**, **American Robin** and two sparrow species, **Swamp** and **Song Sparrow**. In hindsight, more time was needed for this bird that can roost in any of the trees in that island, but we considered it a good walk and made it to the airport with time to spare to catch our flights home.

Snowy Owl by Luis Gonzalez

Bird List:

***HO = Heard Only*

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Location
1	Canada Goose	*Branta canadensis*	Multiple locations
2	Trumpeter Swan	*Cygnus buccinator*	Multiple locations
3	Mallard	*Anas platyrhynchos*	Multiple locations
4	Green-winged (American) Teal	*Anas crecca*	Nicols Rd Marsh
5	Common Goldeneye	*Bucephala clangula*	Multiple locations
6	Hooded Merganser	*Lophodytes cucullatus*	Aerial Lift Bridge
7	Wild Turkey	*Meleagris gallopavo*	Multiple locations
8	Ruffed Grouse	*Bonasa umbellus*	Sax-Zim Bog
9	Sharp-tailed Grouse	*Tympanuchus phasianellus*	Aitkin WMA
10	Ring-necked Pheasant	*Phasianus colchicus*	Benton WMA
11	Rock (Feral) Pigeon	*Columba livia*	Multiple locations
12	American Herring Gull	*Larus smithsonianus*	WLSSD
13	Glaucous Gull	*Larus hyperboreus*	WLSSD
14	Sharp-shinned Hawk	*Accipiter striatus*	Palmer Lake Park
15	American Goshawk	*Astur atricapillus*	Sax-Zim Bog
16	Bald Eagle	*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*	Multiple locations
17	Red-tailed Hawk	*Buteo jamaicensis*	Multiple locations
18	Rough-legged Hawk	*Buteo lagopus*	11860 East Highway 210
19	Snowy Owl	*Bubo scandiacus*	Sax-Zim Bog
20	Northern Hawk Owl	*Surnia ulula*	Aitkin Co. Hwy 18 & 5
21	Great Gray Owl	*Strix nebulosa*	Sax-Zim Bog
22	Boreal Owl	*Aegolius funereus*	Sax-Zim Bog
23	Red-bellied Woodpecker	*Melanerpes carolinus*	Palmer Lake Park
24	Downy Woodpecker	*Dryobates pubescens*	Multiple locations
25	Hairy Woodpecker	*Dryobates villosus*	Multiple locations
26	Pileated Woodpecker	*Dryocopus pileatus*	Multiple locations
27	Northern Shrike	*Lanius borealis*	Sax-Zim Bog
28	Canada Jay	*Perisoreus canadensis*	Sax-Zim Bog
29	Blue Jay	*Cyanocitta cristata*	Multiple locations
30	Black-billed Magpie	*Pica hudsonia*	Sax-Zim Bog
31	American Crow	*Corvus brachyrhynchos*	Multiple locations
32	Common Raven	*Corvus corax*	Multiple locations
33	Black-capped Chickadee	*Poecile atricapillus*	Multiple locations
34	Boreal Chickadee **[HO]**	*Poecile hudsonicus*	Sax-Zim Bog
35	Horned Lark	*Eremophila alpestris*	9648 Partridge Road
36	White-breasted Nuthatch	*Sitta carolinensis*	Culkin Rest Area
37	Red-breasted Nuthatch	*Sitta canadensis*	Multiple locations

38	Brown Creeper	*Certhia americana*	Sax-Zim Bog
39	European Starling	*Sturnus vulgaris*	Multiple locations
40	American Robin	*Turdus migratorius*	Palmer Lake Park
41	Evening Grosbeak	*Coccothraustes vespertinus*	Sax-Zim Bog
42	Pine Grosbeak	*Pinicola enucleator*	Sax-Zim Bog
43	Purple Finch	*Haemorhous purpureus*	Sax-Zim Bog
44	(Common) Redpoll	*Acanthis flammea*	Multiple locations
45	White-winged Crossbill	*Loxia leucoptera*	Multiple locations
46	Pine Siskin	*Spinus pinus*	Sax-Zim Bog
47	Snow Bunting	*Plectrophenax nivalis*	Multiple locations
48	American Tree Sparrow	*Spizelloides arborea*	9648 Partridge Road
49	Dark-eyed (Slate-colored) Junco	*Junco hyemalis*	Nicols Rd Marsh
50	Song Sparrow	*Melospiza melodia*	Palmer Lake Park
51	Swamp Sparrow	*Melospiza georgiana*	Palmer Lake Park
52	Northern Cardinal	*Cardinalis cardinalis*	Palmer Lake Park

Purple Finch by Luis Gonzalez

Mammal List:

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Location
1	Snowshoe Hare	*Lepus americanus*	Sax-Zim Bog
2	Eastern Cottontail	*Sylvilagus floridanus*	Culkin Rest Area
3	North American Porcupine	*Erethizon dorsatum*	Sax-Zim Bog
4	North American Red Squirrel	*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*	Sax-Zim Bog
5	American Marten	*Martes americana*	Sax-Zim Bog
6	White-tailed Deer	*Odocoileus virgianus*	Multiple locations

Happy Birders at Sax-Zim Bog