

Minnesota in Winter: Birds, Bogs and Northern Forests February 14 - 18, 2018

Description and Itinerary

Minnesota in winter offers unrivaled opportunities for northern owls, forest grouse, winter finches and adventure amidst the region's meadows, bogs and forests during its winter splendor.

For many people the first image that comes to mind when thinking of Minnesota in winter is of frozen lakes, cold, snow and ice. To birders in the know, that image exists only as a glittering backdrop for Great Gray and Northern Hawk Owls hunting from spruce-top perches, Sharp-tailed and Ruffed Grouse stripping Birch buds by morning's glowing light, legions of Snow Buntings wheeling in tight formation, flocks of colorful Pine and Evening Grosbeaks refueling at bird feeders, frenzied Common and Hoary Redpolls darting among Alder thickets and Tamarack bogs occupied by industrious Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers. Add in boreal forest residents like Spruce Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Gray Jay and Boreal Chickadee; nomadic winter visitors such as Glaucous and Iceland Gull; notable species like Snowy Owl, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, Red and White-winged Crossbill, Varied Thrush and Townsend's Solitaire and you begin to see the attractiveness of a midwinter visit to these northern climes. Still not convinced? Well, recent winter tours have also recorded surprises like Boreal Owl, Gyrfalcon, Barrow's Goldeneye, Slaty-backed Gull, Mountain Bluebird and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch.

As the group travels through many remote areas of northeastern Minnesota, the chances of turning up a few interesting mammals are quite good. Past winter tours have recorded Snowshoe Hare, Beaver, Porcupine, Long-tailed Weasel, Mink, Fisher, Moose and Gray Wolf. Spectacular species like Pine Marten and Lynx are possible.

BOOKING TRAVEL: As you begin to look for flights into/out of Duluth, please keep in mind that it's best if you arrive no later than 2:00 PM on February 14, 2018. This will allow time to do an evening search for Great Gray Owls or to chase any rarity present in the Duluth/Superior area. Likewise, you should plan your departure on February 18, 2018 for any time after 1:00 PM as the group is able to use the morning of the last day to search for anything that might still be missing from our bird list. Please remember, do not make your plane reservations until the trip is confirmed.

If anyone wishes to arrive a day or two early, Kim Risen can get you into the same room at the hotel (so there would be no need for you to change hotels or rooms during your visit). As on all previous TOS Minnesota in Winter trips, Jim and Kim are happy to take anyone arriving in advance of the tour's start birding in the area, charging each person only their share of the extra van rental and gas. Jim Hailey is planning on arriving before the tour's start, so anyone electing to arrive early wouldn't be alone.

PLEASE NOTE: February travel to Northern Minnesota does present winter weather concerns. Arriving a day early allows you to be a bit more relaxed in case you encounter

a winter storm, and you'll gain at least a full morning of additional birding at very little cost—remember no guiding fees are charged; those participating will simply divide the extra cost of vehicle and gas equally.

As unbelievable as it might sound, northern Minnesota is a popular winter birding destination and there will be numbers of birders scouring the area for owls and rare birds. When you add the stark, yet striking, landscape and unpredictable weather, the atmosphere here is truly extraordinary. We'll use our experience to help you enjoy this one-of-a-kind adventure. Remember, we're there to look for northern owls, winter birds, experience the boreal forest in its winter splendor while helping you make it through your adventure with a minimum amount of discomfort and a maximum amount of enjoyment!

An informational email detailing climate, clothing, etc. will go out to individuals once your registration is received. A final e-mail will go out to the entire group about February 1st. It will have any last minute information that you may need, phone number of the hotel for you to leave with loved ones and any items that has been brought to Kim's attention that the group might find of interest.

If you have questions, or there is some way Kim can be of service, please contact him at: 218-4263293 or kimrisen@naturescapenews.com

TOS Minnesota in Winter Itinerary

Day One, February 14 - Tour participants arrive in Duluth no later than 2 p.m. We'll enjoy some local birding for owls, gulls or staked out rarities as time allows. Night Duluth

Days Two - Four, February 15 - February 17 - Duluth, Superior and Northeastern Minnesota's Aitkin, Cook, Lake and St. Louis Counties. Our schedule is purposefully kept flexible for one reason—it allows us to travel at times and to locations that give us the best opportunities to find your target birds.

We'll visit secluded boreal forests bordering the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness searching for Spruce Grouse, Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers, Red and White-winged Crossbills, Boreal Chickadee and the always entertaining Gray Jay.

We'll travel Lake Superior's north shore and marvel at the simple beauty of ice kaleidoscopes along the rocky shoreline while we scan for ducks and gulls. Long-tailed Duck, Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted and Common Mergansers are the more expected waterfowl species but rarities such as Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye have been found in recent years.

Superior, Wisconsin offers several vantage points to scan for raptors wintering in the harbor area and its landfill usually hosts a good variety of gulls. Raptor possibilities include Snowy Owl, Red-tailed Hawk, Peregrine Falcon and, if luck is with us,

Gyr Falcon. A typical collection of winter gulls would include Herring, Glaucous, Iceland and perhaps a rarity or two. A highlight from 2012 was a lonely ice floe with three gulls lined up one in front of one another offering unparalleled comparisons of Thayer's, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls and 2015 had a Common Eider—first live record since the mid-1960's! (Note that Thayer's and Iceland Gull were lumped in 2017 and now Thayer's is a subspecies of Iceland.)

The bogs, meadows and forests of St. Louis and neighboring Aitkin Counties are reliable places to find Great Gray and Northern Hawk Owls. If snow levels are low enough, an assortment of Rough-legged Hawks and Snow Buntings are likely and these are the best areas for Ruffed and Sharp-tailed Grouse (sometimes displaying early on sunny days even in February!), Northern Shrike and Black-billed Magpie.

Duluth and other cities of the Arrowhead region are wonderful birding areas unto themselves. Large numbers of Mountain Ash and Flowering Crab Apple trees are a magnet for Bohemian Waxwings and rarities like Varied Thrush and Townsend's Solitaire. Highlights from 2013 include finding more than 600 Bohemian Waxwings feeding voraciously on Mountain Ash fruit, 2012 provided a cooperative Mountain Bluebird along Superior's North Shore and most winters have colorful Pine and Evening Grosbeaks feeding on colorful crab apples or other berries. Well established feeding stations buzz with activity, and Common and Hoary Redpoll, Pine and Evening Grosbeak and the more common winter finches are all likely to be found.

But it's those owls that remain so highly prized by visiting birders. While numbers fluctuate from year to year, Great Gray Owl is a permanent resident of this area, Northern Hawk Owl is an annual visitor and, during an owl irruption winter, anything goes. When such an irruption takes place, Minnesota's bogs, meadows and forests provide birding thrills that are one-of-a-kind. In 2005 we tallied more than 200 Great Gray Owls and more than 35 Northern Hawk Owls in a single county! That year proved to be the single greatest irruption ever to visit Minnesota, but even in recent years, daily totals of 10 or more owls were not unusual. Like the Great Gray, Boreal Owl is a permanent resident of Northern Minnesota, unfortunately, unlike the Great Gray Owl, they are NOT to be expected during a single visit. Our best chances are to hope for an irruption year or that one is found on a day roost during our tour. (Our leader is well connected with the region's active birders and the local network is always in contact.)

Day Five, February 18 - Tour ends upon departure. Group participants should try and book return flights that depart Duluth in the mid-afternoon. This will give us one last morning to search for any species that may have eluded us thus far. Tour concludes upon return to the Duluth airport

Cost includes: airport transfers, 4 nights lodging (double occupancy), all group transportation, all group admissions and National Forest permits, four meals (breakfast at the hotel each morning), weather dependent owl banding outing, tour checklist, post tour report, expert guide.

A \$350 deposit per person is required to register for the tour, with final tour balance due January 1, 2018. Minimum 10, Maximum 14.

Please note: By making a deposit for this trip you agree to the TOS Trip Cancellation Policy below.

Texas Ornithological Society Cancellation Policy for TOS Field Trips

This policy applies to TOS field trips or other events that require non-refundable deposits to retain guide services, hotel rooms or transportation.

In the event you have to cancel, refunds are made according to the following schedule:

- If cancellation is made more than 90 days before departure date, your deposit less \$100 will be refunded.
- If cancellation is made between 60 and 90 days before departure date then 50% of the trip fee is refundable.
- If cancellation is made fewer than 60 days prior to departure date, there will be no refund of the trip fee.

Note: If you cancel late (less than 90 days before departure), but you are able to find a substitute to take your place (or we have a substitute on a waiting list), once the substitute has paid Texas Ornithological Society in full for the trip, a refund of your deposit less \$100 will be made.

TOS recommends that participants purchase travel insurance to protect against unexpected events.