



2027

EcoTravel

Overnight Natural History Tours and Day Trips

Winter Owl Blitz: Sax-Zim Bog

January 31 – February 5, 2027



Overview

For many people, the first images that comes to mind when thinking of Minnesota winters are of cold, snow, ice, and frozen lakes. To knowledgeable birders, 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 the buds from birches by morning's glowing light; legions of Snow Buntings wheeling in tight formation; flocks of colorful Pine and Evening grosbeaks filling up at bird feeders; frenzied Redpolls darting about an alder thicket; and tamarack bogs occupied by industrious Black-backed and American Three-toed woodpeckers.

Add in boreal residents like Spruce Grouse, American Goshawk, Canada Jay, and Boreal Chickadee; nomadic winter visitors such as Glaucous and Iceland gulls, Snowy Owl, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, and Red and White-winged crossbills, and you begin to see the attractiveness of a midwinter visit to these northern climes. Still not convinced? Well, the chance for rare species including Boreal Owl and Gyrfalcon is not to be overlooked!

As we travel through many remote areas of northeastern Minnesota, our 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 American Marten and Lynx are possible.

Join us as we venture into the North, searching for the rare and breathtaking species that call the boreal forests home. The birds may be different each year, but the camaraderie remains the same!

Climate

Temperature and Season

Winter in Minnesota is notorious for extreme colds, with temperatures on past trips approaching -40° F. Most days range from -10° F to 20° F, but wind chills may result in colder temperatures. Snow is prevalent, and can be deceptively deep if stepping off established trails. Layers are key, but travelers are never far from the vehicle.

Elevation

0 – 1,500 feet above sea level

Accommodation

Our hotel is located in downtown Duluth, right in the heart of Canal Park. With multiple restaurants and breweries within walking distance, there's a variety of spots to explore after the Sun has set.

Pace and Physical Difficulty

This trip is at a casual pace, with minimal walking. Most birding is from the car on snow-covered roads, although short walks are possible depending on the weather. An approximately 2-mile round-trip hike across frozen marsh may be required to search for Long-eared Owls, although if there's a more accessible location that will take priority. Because of the latitude, mornings and evenings are relaxed with departure from the hotel usually around 7:00am, returning around 5:00pm.



Ermine (Short-tailed Weasel) © Matthew Bell/CI Audubon

Itinerary

Day 1

An early morning departure from home airports will allow for a mid-morning arrival in Minneapolis. We'll bird around the city, looking for overwintering ducks, swans, and possibly **Long-eared** and **Northern Saw-whet** owls that are overwintering in the area. After lunch, we'll begin our drive north towards Duluth.

Night: Duluth

Meals: B

Days 2 - 5

Our schedule is purposely kept flexible, since it allows us to travel to locations that give us the best opportunities to find our target birds.

The bogs, meadows, and forests of St. Louis County and neighboring Lake County 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** (whose numbers have decreased in recent years), **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**. Well-established feeding stations buzz with activity, including **Redpolls**, **Pine**, and **Evening grosbeaks**, and the more common winter finches are all possible.

But it's the owls that are so highly prized by visiting birders. While numbers fluctuate from year to year, **Great Gray Owl** is a permanent resident, **Northern Hawk Owl** is an annual visitor, and, if it's an irruption winter, anything goes. When such an event 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 have been possible. Like the Great Gray, **Boreal Owl** is a permanent resident in parts of Northern Minnesota. Unfortunately, unlike the Great Gray Owl, they're not expected during a single visit. Our best chance is to hope for an irruption year or that we happen to find one on a day roost. (Your leader is well connected with the region's active birders, and the local network is always in contact.)

We'll also dedicate a day to exploring far north of the bog, through the logging roads of Superior National Forest. This gives us our best chance at both **Black-backed** and **American Three-toed woodpeckers**, and an outside chance at **Spruce Grouse**. A recent burn has made the grouse more difficult to locate, but with such an expansive habitat, it never hurts to check! Of course, our schedules



Eastern Screech-Owl © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon



Great Gray Owl © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon



Spruce Grouse © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon

will remain flexible as you never know what might show up in the winter months.

Our hotel is located in downtown Duluth in Canal Park, where multiple restaurants and breweries are all within walking distance, and offer refuge from the cold evenings with warm food and drinks.

Nights: Duluth

Meals: BD

Dinner is included on Day 5 only.

Day 6

We'll depart early for the drive back to Minneapolis, where we'll depart on mid-morning flights back home.



Boreal Owl © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon



Great Gray Owl © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon

General Information

Tour Cost: \$2,998.

Members: \$2,698.

The above cost is based upon a minimum number of three paying participants traveling together. If there are fewer participants, there will be a small group supplement. Per person Tour Cost is based on two people sharing a room.

Single Room Supplement: \$425.

All rates are calculated at the time of publication and are subject to change due to conditions out of our control (i.e. hotel rates). All passengers will be notified if changes in pricing occur.

Tour Includes:

Accommodations are based on double occupancy, one or two beds. Meals are included as outlined in the itinerary section (B=Breakfast/L=Lunch/D=Dinner). Additional charges for meals may apply if needs are out of the standard offerings. Entrance fees to national parks and sightseeing as specified in the itinerary.

Not Included:

Taxes; costs of obtaining passports and visas; airfare; baggage fees; personal expenses such as room service, beverages, laundry, gratuities for the local guide and housekeeping; personal communications; airport taxes; tax increases or new taxes charged for services that were not taxed at the time the booking was made; excess mileage carried out at the request of the passenger; sightseeing or meals not specified in the itinerary; personal insurance coverage (strongly recommended); and transfers to and from your home airport.

Leader

Matt Bell is EcoTravel's Assistant Director, who has led more than 175 day trips and overnight tours, including in Alaska, Costa Rica, and Romania. He is an Ohio State University graduate with degrees in earth sciences and evolution/ecology. Matt has been birding for over 13 years and enjoys sharing his passion for birds and conservation with others. He never shies away from helping beginners start their explorations of the avian world. Matt absolutely loves participating in community science, tour guiding, chasing rare birds, and meeting fellow birders from around the globe.



Evening Grosbeak © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon



Bohemian Waxwing © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon



Redpoll © Matthew Bell/CT Audubon

General Terms & Conditions

Reservations

Early reservations with deposit are essential to guarantee your booking. A **\$500 deposit, per person**, applicable to final payment, is required to reserve space on this trip. Reservations made within 120 days of departure require full payment along with the formal Registration Forms. Final payment for programs is due 120 days prior to departure. Payments can be made by personal check, money order, certified check, or a cashier's check.

Rates and Fares

Prices are accurate as available at the time of publication. Prices do not include airfare unless otherwise stated. The Connecticut Audubon Society (CAS) reserves the right to alter quoted prices to reflect changes in airline fares, land service, or currency exchange rates. In the event that the number of participants is below the minimum required for the quoted price, a small group surcharge may be added.

Cancellation and Insurance

At the time the EcoTravel Office receives written notice that you must cancel your trip, the following cancellation fees will apply: Prior to 120 days from departure, your payments will be refunded minus **\$200 per person**. At 120 days and less, no refund is granted. NOTE: In addition to cancellation fees, airline tickets and deposits required to guarantee hotel rooms may be nonrefundable. The purchase of a general travel insurance plan covering baggage, accident/life, and trip cancellation is highly recommended. Give us a call and we can put you in touch with those providers. CAS reserve the right, if registration is insufficient or other reasons out of our control, to cancel, postpone, or offer the trip with a small group supplement. In the event that CAS cancels or postpones, those with reservations will be notified as soon as possible and a credit of payments will be held on file. The Connecticut Audubon Society is not responsible for the refund or credit of additional expenses incurred in preparation for a trip. Any "delay" or "postponing" of departure by tour participants is considered a cancellation and cancellation parameters will be apply relative to the 120-day window. There are no exceptions.

Responsibility

Payment of deposit represents and acceptance of the following terms and conditions by the purchaser: The Connecticut Audubon Society, its affiliates, and all cooperating airlines and agencies act only in the capacity of agents in all matters of transportation and tour operations, and their liability is limited to the terms of the airline tickets and land accommodation contracts. They are not responsible for any delays, inconveniences, accidents, expense, or mishap of any kind whatsoever resulting entirely or in part from the negligence of others or from causes beyond their control. They can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, riot, war, pandemic, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses must be borne by the passengers, as the tour rate provides for arrangements only as describe in the tour brochure. The right is reserved to change tour leaders, substitute hotels, of similar category, and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by unforeseen circumstances. Baggage is at the owner's risk entirely. No refund can be made for unused hotel rooms, meals, and sightseeing tours unless arrangements are made at time of booking. The right is reserved to decline any person as a tour member for any reason which affects the operation of the tour or the rights, welfare, or enjoyment of the other tour members. Any refund of the recoverable land tour services in the limit of The Connecticut Audubon Society and its affiliates' liability.

To make a Reservation:

Send the above stated deposit to hold your reservation. Nonmembers, please add \$28 (65+), \$45 (single), or \$58 (family) for your annual membership and to take advantage of the member discount.

Send your name(s), address, phone number, email address, name of the trip, your deposit, and membership fee (if applicable) to:

The Connecticut Audubon Society EcoTravel

PO Box 903

Essex, CT 06426

(860) 767-0660

ecotravel@ctaudubon.org

www.ctaudubon.org/ecotravel