MINNESOTA OWLS 2020

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While looking for owls in the Sax-Zim Bog northwest of Duluth, a local naturalist told us the temperature at the same time last year was 50 degrees colder than this year. I thought 30 degrees Fahrenheit was pretty chilly, guess not compared to the usual Duluth winter at the end of January. Turns out we were present during a “heat wave”, 30s during the day and 20s at night with no wind.

We stayed in the conveniently located Country Inn and Suites by Radisson where we enjoyed nice rooms and a very pleasant staff. After a nice continental breakfast we headed for the bog and started cruising for owls. After some looking and a few stops we spotted a very cooperative Northern Hawk Owl near the greenhouses on Highway 7. A little further south on Highway 7 we spotted another Northern Hawk Owl nicely perched atop a spruce tree. These same two birds were seen the following day as well.

As the sun was going down on our first day we set up a vigil along Admiral Road, the spot where Great Gray Owls had been seen most frequently in the past few days, but no luck. So we had one out of three for big owls so far. The following morning we had received a tip that placed us at 7:15am just south of the Sax-Zim Bog headquarters checking for Great Gray Owls, where they had been seen the previous night, but again, no luck. However, our luck or skill, was about to change. We decided to head back to Highway 7 where there was a recent report of a flyby Great Gray Owl that disappeared into the woods. After cruising Highway 7 for a bit we saw a car pulled over and folks had their scopes pointing toward the woods. Sure enough sitting on a broken off tree trunk was an actively hunting Great Gray Owl. We had extended looks as the bird tilted its head listening for rodents under 18 inches of snow. Eventually the largest North American Owl dropped to the snow covered ground and emerged with a vole that was consumed on a different tree in two gulps. It was fascinating to watch the hunting, catching, and eating of the vole. After a total of about thirty minutes it was time for a restroom stop back in the town of Cotton. This now allowed us to bird a bit more in the bog and eventually head to Superior, Wisconsin, just across a small portion of Lake Superior. We all were hoping Starling or House Sparrow would not be our first bird in Wisconsin, and as it turns out we did not need to worry. The first birds we saw after crossing the short bridge leading into Wisconsin were two adult Bald Eagles. Though the eagles were nice we were in search of Snowy Owls that hang out feeding around the Superior Airport, and we were not disappointed. After looking at a heavily marked juvenile snowy from a distance we located another juvenile Snowy Owl on a low post just opposite the Richard I. Bong Airport Terminal, so named for the WWII flying ace Richard Bong. Adjacent to the airport terminal was the Commemorative Air Force Museum where we learned about the restoration projects going on at the museum. We were even giving a behind the scenes tour of some aircraft being restored. The Snowy Owl made it a clean sweep of the three owls we flew north to observe.

In between chasing the three big owls of the north we spent time in Sax-Zim Bog looking for other birds. We enjoyed a short hike in the snow to view an adult female Black-backed Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadees at numerous feeder locations, along with Canada Jay and Red-breasted Nuthatch. A spectacular sight was upwards of twenty Evening Grosbeaks coming to seed at Mary Lou’s feeders, and we all enjoyed the Boreal Chickadees we found north of the bog.

Our first trip to the boreal forest of Northern Minnesota turned out to be a huge success allowing us extended views of all three owls while enjoying mild weather.

Brandon and I decided the only way we would return to the far north in the dead of winter would be if there was an invasion of owls one winter and we had four intrepid birders that wanted to go on short notice. This was not an invasion year for owls and there were very few finches present. Finches that we hope to see in the future include Pine Grosbeak, Common Redpoll, Hoary Redpoll, Red Crossbill, and White-winged Crossbill, with Bohemian Waxwing as a possibility as well. I will send out an email if there is an invasion year in the future.