

## GOING FOR LIFERS IN NORTHEASTERN MINNESOTA

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Birding Northeast Minnesota for boreal specialties in winter is like a pelagic trip. Success depends on unpredictable weather. There are few birds there, but they are good ones. When four of us reached Minnesota on a Thursday evening in mid-February, 1991, it was eight below. The wind blew 35 m.p.h. Wind chill was minus fifty. "It's going to be cold tomorrow," a Minnesotan remarked. We wondered what "cold" meant.

We planned our three birding days like a military assault. Great Gray, Hawk and Boreal Owls, Sharp-tailed and Spruce Grouse, Boreal Chickadee, Snow Bunting, Bohemian Waxwing, Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers and Hoary Redpoll were lifers for one or more of us. Northern Shrike, Snowy Owl, Common Redpoll, Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, Gray Jay, Northern Goshawk and Ruffed Grouse would be nice to see again. We targeted the lifers on excellent maps in Kim Eckert's *A Birder's Guide to Minnesota*.

We would attack at dawn, driving open country in Aitken County for Sharp-tailed Grouse, crossing a bog where a Hawk Owl had been reported and birding nearby spruce woods for Black-backed Woodpecker and Boreal Chickadee. Finally, we would invade Duluth, capturing Bohemian Waxwings in its Northeast suburbs and Snowy Owls in its harbor.

Before reaching Aitken County, we saw a Sharp-tailed Grouse fly across the road. We got out and watched five more flying in different directions, including one at close range overhead. In the distance we saw the Northern Goshawk that may have flushed them. We decided birding Minnesota was a piece of cake.

What a misjudgment! Friday remained windy. We rarely saw any birds except chickadees at feeders and occasional flying crows or ravens. The spruce areas were empty. Bohemian Waxwings had exhausted Duluth's Mountain Ash berries, then left. The Snowy Owls that are "always" in the harbor were gone. A second reported Hawk Owl spot in nearby Wisconsin produced only empty treetops. For "good birds" we added two Northern Shrikes, one flock of Common Redpolls and eight Snow Buntings. Our Minnesota list was 15.

Nevertheless, we were learning. We would discount the un-updated Duluth hot line and discard heavy parkas and multiple clothing layers, which provide more heat and bulk during long car rides than comfort outside. When we saw birds, we would jump out, get cold and warm up later.

On Saturday, we drove County 2 North from Two Harbors at dawn for Spruce Grouse eating grit beside the road. We expected Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee and Hawk Owl in the spruce. Once again, we started out lucky. We found three Great Gray Owls in town, including one on a car. Another posed for ten minutes at thirty feet. 1990-91 was an invasion year. Altogether, sixty-nine were reported around Duluth.

We found Pine Grosbeaks and three Moose along County 2, but no Spruce Grouse. Instead, a gigantic flatbed truck, capable of disturbing anything, roared South with great clatter. Lacking skis, snowshoes or snowmobiles for off-road travel, we walked the road playing various owl tapes. Screech Owl attracted Black-capped Chickadees and Downy Woodpeckers and two Red-breasted Nuthatches, but no lifers. Except for five Gray Jays and two Pileated Woodpeckers, we saw nothing new.

By mid-day, we were getting discouraged. Our trip was half over. We had only three of eleven target life birds. We decided to drive over a hundred miles to two remaining Hawk Owl bogs near the hamlets of Sax and Zim Northwest of Duluth. According to Kim Eckert's guide, they were even better for Boreal Chickadees and Black-backed Woodpeckers than County 2. We still hoped for Spruce Grouse.

We immediately found a Hawk Owl on a telephone pole at the first "bog," a large open area surrounded by spruce. It flew to a small tree for photos at fifteen feet. Despair turned to jubilation.

The rest of Saturday yielded two more Northern Shrikes and another Great Gray Owl around Sax and Zim, plus a single Ruffed Grouse eating birch buds at dusk. We played the tape for Boreal Owl, although they supposedly do not answer tapes, and none were reported in 1990-91. Nothing replied.

Back in Duluth, we planned Sunday. The two owls made Saturday successful, but we still lacked seven potential lifers. Bird-finding publications, like Eckert's excellent book, Lane Guides, Pettingills, etc., merely indicate possibilities. We needed to know where the birds were now.

We got smart and called local people. One mentioned a Boreal Chickadee stakeout in Duluth. Another was Molly Hoffman, who lives with her husband, Ken, in a cabin on the Gunflint Trail about four miles below the Canadian border. Ken had seen both Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers that morning. Molly gave us their mailbox number.

We drove 100 miles to Grand Marais and started the Gunflint Trail at dawn. The Trail (actually a well-plowed blacktop road) climbed about 2,000 feet through mature-looking spruce. After thirty miles, we found the mailbox. But that was all. No house. No driveway. Just a mailbox. Then we noticed a small car shed across the road. We followed a path of snowshoe-packed snow through thick woods to the Hoffmans' neat little cabin overlooking a small, frozen lake. A large flock of Pine Grosbeaks and a few Common Redpolls fed on sunflower seeds scattered over terraced gardens nearby.

Except for the temperature, which was twelve below, latter day hippies would envy the Hoffmans' lifestyle. They are vegetarians. They heat with wood. They have outdoor plumbing. Their electricity is solar. Molly's hair is braided to the middle of her back and she has rosy

cheeks, like the milkmaid on the wrapper of a Swiss chocolate bar. Ken is big, blond, quiet and frequently smiling.

After allowing binoculars to defrost, we crossed the lake with the Hoffmans. The woods there are infested with Spruce budworms, ideal for both Black-backed and Three-toed. We soon heard drumming and pursued it over a snowshoe-packed trail. We saw the bird fly off. We chased another, then another. I became overheated--at twelve below!

Overheating causes glasses instantaneously to frost over whenever binoculars are lifted, disastrous for viewing a lifer. Invisible birds don't count. I removed my jacket and hat and tried to cool off. Perspiration escaping through my wool sweater frosted on its outside hairs, turning it from fuzzy dark blue to even fuzzier white. "You look like a Hoary Redpoll," one of my companions remarked to general laughter. However, I was helpless. Each time I raised my binoculars, I was blind.

Finally, a Black-backed Woodpecker, my only lifer, parked on a tree stump long enough for me to cool off and see it. Others among us also got good looks at a Three-toed, quite rare in Minnesota.

Back at the cabin, another birder called Molly that Spruce Grouse had been eating grit at a particular bend of the Gunflint Trail. We drove there and found five grouse in a tree beside the road, waiting for photos at twenty feet. Later we found the Boreal Chickadee at the stakeout feeder in Duluth and glimpsed a few Bohemian Waxwings flying. We returned with nine of the eleven potential life birds we wanted, missing only Boreal Owl and Hoary Redpoll. Our Minnesota list was 35. Of our non-lifer targets, we missed only Snowy Owl and Evening Grosbeak.

I suppose my moral is that persistence pays off eventually. But we learned a deeper lesson about Minnesota winter birding. Only a few Boreal specialties are sure bets there, and even they can be difficult. Without direct help from local people we would have missed four of nine lifers. Without the hot line, we might have missed Hawk and Great Gray Owls, too. Without A Birder's Guide to Minnesota, we might never have pursued Sharp-tailed Grouse. Strangers to the North Woods need all the help they can get.