



Eagle-Eye Manitoba Owls Tour # 3 - March 7 - 11, 2024

[Link: Eagle-Eye Manitoba Owls Tour # 3 - March 7 - 11, 2024](#)

Written by Ken De Smet Day 1 On the first day of our tour, participants gathered in the lobby of our hotel for introductions and greetings, and we carried on to a local restaurant for dinner. Lively discussions continued, and we outlined what our plans and itinerary were for the coming days. After dinner, we had a special presentation by Jim Duncan and his Great Gray Owl education ambassador "Oska." We all got close-up views of this stunning bird, who would occasionally "hoot" her approval during Jim's talk. It was a fascinating presentation that spanned 39 years of Jim and his wife Patsy's dedication to owl research and conservation activities.



Oska, Great Gray Owl

Day 2 After a hearty breakfast, we headed out in cool but clear and calm conditions to check a feeder in the north end of Winnipeg where we'd get brief looks at a couple of rare winter birds for Manitoba - a Brown Thrasher and 3 White-throated Sparrows. Next we drove around a couple of fairly open residential areas on the north end of the city where we spotted most of day's 60 Gray Partridge, a couple of Eastern Cottontail rabbits and a handful of Common Redpolls, among which a few folks got onto a Hoary Redpoll.



Gray Partridge © Michael Riffel



Eastern Cottontail © Michael Riffel



Hoary Redpoll © Michael Riffel

Proceeding around the perimeter, we stopped at some mostly frozen sewage ponds on the west end and were surprised to find 35 Herring Gulls sitting on the ice (a real early date for returns of this species). As we checked out the gulls, a White-tailed Jack Rabbit was also observed here by a

number of the participants. After a brief rest stop, we headed south of the city on Hwy 330 past Domain where we spotted our first Snowy Owls on the ground a fair distance from the road. Near Osborne, we got quite close to a couple of nice males on roadside utility poles. After watching and taking some photos of the second male, it flew off and almost immediately was replaced by a slightly larger and more heavily speckled female! Nice close looks at both male and female Snowies, what more could one ask for.



Snowy Owl © Michael Riffel



Snowy Owl flying © K Bartels



Snowy Owl in flight © K Bartels

We would turn around just past Osborne but not before we had tabbed a total of 7 Snowies and one realistic looking decoy - that despite its rather weird positioning in the tree had us almost believing it might be real until someone showed us a close up photo that convinced us otherwise! Along the way back and forth, several small groups of Horned Larks (42 in total) and a few Snow Buntings flitted by. Back in Winnipeg, we stopped for lunch in the north end before heading to Fraser's Grove Park to check out a spot where an Eastern Screech-Owl often could be seen. It was our lucky day - there is was.



Eastern Screech Owl © K Bartels

A gray morph Screech-Owl sitting by a tree cavity in full sunlight perfectly camouflaged by its surroundings. We walked a bit closer, had great scope looks and photos and carried on to some nearby feeders where a short walk about added a few House Finches and Pine Siskins among other more regular feeder birds. Before leaving the city, we checked out a Great Horned Owl nest where we would get terrific looks at the female with two smaller young in the nest, and the male snoozing nearby.



Great Horned Owl chicks © K Bartel

Heading north, we stopped at Lockport for some looks at a couple of Mallards with at least 40 Canada Geese at some open water below the locks. From there, we made a long haul north and east to Maple Creek Road, a perennial favorite among local birders and along which several Great Grays and Northern Hawk-Owls had been seen in the past month. No luck with the Great Grays, but we were able to observe that spectacular Northern Hawk-Owl mentioned in the intro. Near a feedlot, we came upon a very large flock of 300 Snow Buntings that gave us great looks as they circled about and occasionally landed on the snow-covered ground or in the trees.



Snow Bunting in flight © Michael Riffel

Before checking into the hotel at Pine Falls, we made a brief stop to check out some open water below the Pine Falls hydro dam and were rewarded with a surprise female Hooded Merganser among 3 Common Mergansers, a River Otter popped up on the ice on the far side of the open water, and two adult Bald Eagles sat so close to each other on a nearby tree branch that you had to look hard to tell there was more than one bird there. The Hooded was our third write-in bird for the day, and the River Otter was also a write-in. It had been an incredibly successful first full day -- 4 owl species, 4 write-ins, plus 22 other birds and 4 other mammal species! **Day 3** Prior to sunrise, we fueled up on coffee, fruit, and muffins and were off by 7 for an early morning birding session along Broadlands Road in search of the elusive Great Gray Owl. A highlight was excellent views of Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing out in the open snow-covered fields. With tails up, bodies crouched, and wings spread, the males pranced around the females, kicking up little clouds of snow as they tried to impress. An impressive total of 52 Sharp-tails was observed today, most of these during our early morning jaunt!



Sharp-tailed Grouse lek © K Bartels

Other highlights were a roadside Northern Hawk-Owl that was harassed briefly by a Canada Jay, and an incredible flock of about 400 redpolls that circled for minutes over an unharvested Canola field before landing to feed. We would also observe the first 20 or so of the days 140 Pine Grosbeaks & 52 Blue Jays (both firsts for the trip). We'd pre-ordered breakfast so that we'd have more time that morning to look for birds. First off, we walked a stretch of Maskwa Road off Broadlands where Boreal Chickadees are often observed, but none could be scared up. In St Georges, we'd get better looks at Pine Grosbeaks and a handful of Common Redpolls as well as at least 2 Hoary Redpolls. Further along Hwy 11 we found two more very close-up Northern Hawk-Owls, a couple of Pileated Woodpeckers flew by, and a Northern Shrike landed briefly on the very top of a roadside tree but unfortunately it departed before everyone got onto it.



Pileated Woodpecker © K Bartels

We'd been telling everyone that they'd get all the looks and photos they needed for many of our winter birds at a feeder near Lac du Bonnet, and once again this private residence feeder did not disappoint. We spent over an hour there eating our bag lunches, and observing/photographing Pine Grosbeaks, Blue Jays, Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Siskins, more Common & Hoary Redpolls (462 and 6, respectively for the day!), plus a few Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers. A Pileated Woodpecker was seen by a few participants just before we left the site, but this time there were no Evening Grosbeaks so we might need to find them elsewhere or come back tomorrow. Proceeding south and east to Pinawa, we added several of the town's resident White-tailed Deer, but no waxwings or Evening Grosbeaks. West of town we stopped to take some group pictures at the Great Gray Owl habitat sign, and were greeted by yet another Northern Hawk-Owl (our 4th for today!). As we crossed the Winnipeg River, a couple Common Goldeneyes were spotted diving in calm water near the bridge. On the way back to the hotel, we took a quick tour through Lac du Bonnet looking for waxwings, crossbills, or grosbeaks, and we looped back to Maskwa Road for one more try at the Boreal Chickadees (again unsuccessfully).



Getting back around 4, we pre-ordered dinner, took an hour off and had an early dinner before heading out for a couple hours of late evening/night time owling. It was about 6:15 when we departed the hotel and there was still ample light to spot grouse and owls, so we drove a section of Hwy 304 north of Pine Falls and were rewarded with a fly-by Ruffed Grouse, but little else. At Maskwa Road, we made several stops doing playback and listening for owls, but we heard little other than a possible Barred (heard briefly by a couple participants) and a far-off dog that had us all thinking it might be an owl until we heard it more clearly. Still it had been exciting to hear what many of the area's owl calls sounded like (the playback calls) and the clear sky completely lit up with stars that got brighter at each stop was quite spellbinding. We'd lose an hour's sleep tonight because of the time change, so we hurried back to the hotel before 9 to rest up for one more early morning excursion. **Day 4** Getting up and out by 7, the pre-dawn light was perfect to spot owls or grouse. Although none were found, as we drove east along Sentier Bouvier Trail to St Georges, we were so intrigued by the multi-hued pinkish pre-dawn skyline that we stopped and got out of the vans to snap off some photos. On Hwy 11, we would run into two more Northern Hawk-Owls before we turned off on Maple Creek Road. Along Maple Creek Rd, we picked up our first of five Rough-legged Hawks for the day, had some nice looks at a curled-up Red Fox, had even better looks than the day before at a lek of Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing, and get more looks at the Northern Hawk-Owl in the same tree where we had seen it the first day.



Northern Hawk Owl © K Bartels



Rough-legged Hawk © Michael Riffel

We stopped for breakfast at Lac du Bonnet and then hit the same feeder spot as the day before - this time we were able to get great looks at a dozen Evening Grosbeaks, including a couple of stunning males.



Evening Grosbeak © Michael Riffel

Today, a male and female Pileated Woodpecker also showed up while we were there giving us all great looks and photo ops. Carrying on south, a couple more Canada Jays were spotted by the lead van, but except for a barrage of Bald Eagle sightings (21 for the day!), 10 Horned Larks, and a couple more flying Rough-legged Hawks, we were unable to find much of interest along the way nor at feeders at Seven Sisters, River Hills, Whitemouth or Elma. Slowing cruising through excellent boreal forest habitat along Old Hwy 15 southwest of Elma also turned up very little, until a cooperative Ruffed Grouse was spotted in some spruce along the road giving excellent looks and photos.



Ruffed Grouse © Michael Riffel

The afternoon was getting on, and we had a couple more prime spots near Winnipeg to check so we made tracks, stopping for one more Rough-leg and a rest stop at Anola. As we approached Birds Hill Park, a flock of 30 Bohemian Waxwings flew over and landed in some crab-apple trees. That was a highlight for many as the birds showed off nicely for photos. In the Park, we stopped for a few minutes to hand-feed some sunflowers to at least 20 very trusting Black-capped Chickadees. Last order of the day was to investigate a feeder near Oak Hammock Marsh where a few Red-winged Blackbirds had overwintered. The Red-wings were not around but a splendid male Northern Harrier glided by - a very nice surprise. Driving into the city, an American Kestrel flew over the road (our 42nd bird for the trip). It had been a most successful and enjoyable trip indeed. Great looks at 4 owl species, 5 if you include Jim's ambassador Great Gray Owl. 42 bird species and 7 mammals also represent highs for this year's three tours and for recent years. Weary but very satisfied, we gathered at Chicago Joe's for a final meal together, shared highlights of the tour and swapped stories, laughs and experiences. Rudolf and I would like to thank everyone for their enthusiasm and generosity and wish them all the best in future birding adventures - here's hoping our paths may cross again, perhaps on a future Eagle-Eye tour.