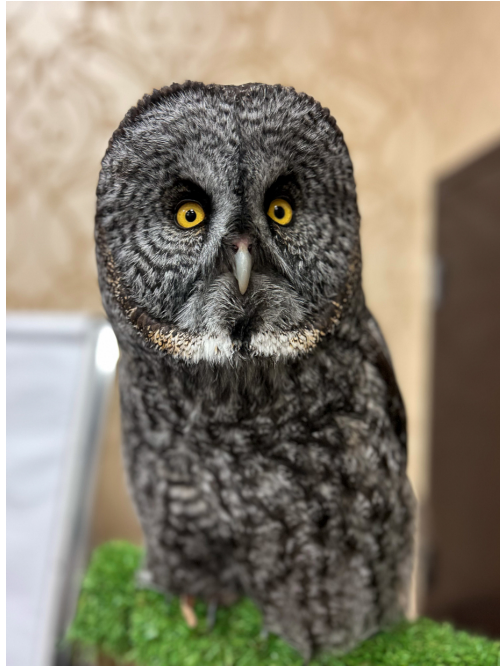




Eagle-Eye Manitoba Owls Tour # 2 - March 3-7, 2024

[Link: Eagle-Eye Manitoba Owls Tour # 2 - March 3-7, 2024](#)

Written by Ken De Smet Despite some pretty nasty winter weather the day before the trip and high winds with poor driving conditions on a couple days during this tour, we had really good luck with most of the owls (5 in total) and 41 species of birds plus 7 mammals are among the highest totals for this tour in recent years. **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 seemed to be paying attention to us and 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.



Great Gray Owl

Day 2 After a nice continental breakfast, we braved the last of the storm that had hit the previous day and headed out to check a feeder in the north end of the city where we had brief looks at a couple of rare winter birds for Manitoba - Brown Thrasher and White-throated Sparrow. Next we drove to an open residential area on the north end of the city where we spotted most of day's 57 Gray Partridge and an American Kestrel.



Gray Partridge © Jarmila Vinterová

Proceeding around the perimeter to the south end, we carried on south to LaSalle, Domain &

Osborne. Near Osborne, we spotted 6 Snowy Owls, but extremely windy, cool conditions meant that they were all hunkered down on the ground and quite far from the roads. Along the highway, we woke up a sleeping Red Fox in the ditch, a large feeding flock and some smaller groups of Horned Larks were located (250 in total!), and a few Snow Buntings flitted by.



Snowy Owl © Jarmila Vinterová



Horned Larks © Jarmila Vinterová

Back in NE Wpg, we did a brief walk in Kildonan Park where a close-up Pileated Woodpecker digging for grub was a highlight. After lunch, we checked out some feeders where a splendid male Cardinal and plenty of Pine Siskins, House Finches and other feeder birds were spotted. After a quick look for Eastern Screech Owls, we proceeded to the Bunn's Creek walkway to check out a Great Horned Owl nest - terrific looks at the female with two smaller young in the nest, and the male snoozing nearby.



Pileated Woodpecker © Jarmila Vinterová



Great Horned Owl nest with chicks © Jarmila Vinterová

Heading northeast, we stopped at Birds Hill Park where some unusually trusting Black-capped Chickadees are usually looking for handouts. Eerily quiet today, we soon realized the presence of a nearby Northern Shrike was the reason. At Beausejour we stopped for a restroom break before carrying on east and north to Maple Creek Road. This road is a favorite among local birders and had produced several sightings of Great Grays and Northern Hawk Owls in the past month. We were able to find one far off Hawk Owl (silhouette looks only) and another Northern Shrike, but several trips down this road and other sites where a Great Gray had been seen recently failed to yield any results. **Day 3** Prior to sunrise, we fueled up on coffee, fruit, and muffins and were off by 7 for some early morning birding 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 outstretched, the males pranced around the females, kicking up little clouds of snow as they tried to impress. An amazing total of 108 Sharp-tails were observed today, most of these during our early morning jaunt!



Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing © Jarmila Vinterová

We also observed a large flock of Snow Buntings (150+) mostly perched in trees but some feeding along the road. On the way back for breakfast, we made a quick stop at the dam by Pine Falls to observe a nearby pair of Bald Eagles sitting cosily side by side in a small tree; nearby on the open water were 3 Common Mergansers and a female Hooded Merganser (a nice surprise addition to our list). After breakfast, we walked a stretch of road where Boreal Chickadees are occasionally observed, but we had to settle for a few calls and a couple fleeting looks at the chickadees as they flitted by in the treetops. A couple Canada Jays were also observed. Carrying on to Lac du Bonnet along Highway 11, we crossed the Winnipeg River to a well-known private residence feeder. Spending over an hour there, everyone got more than their fill of views and photos of Pine Grosbeaks, Blue Jays, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, and Common Redpolls. Fifteen Evening Grosbeaks put in an appearance but disappeared shortly after we arrived, and a highlight was a nice male Hoary Redpoll that perched for minutes in a full view allowing all to contrast its pale overall coloration and faintly streaked flanks.



Hoary Redpoll © Jarmila Vinterová

Proceeding south, another Northern Shrike and two Pileated Woodpeckers were observed, and a Northern Hawk Owl was spotted near the Great Gray Owl habitat sign west of Pinawa. We had an early return to the hotel that afternoon and an earlier dinner in preparation for an evening owling excursion. Venturing back to a heavily-forested road of Broadlands, we used playback to entice some owl calling. Although we were rewarded with just a single calling Barred Owl during the couple hours we were out, the clear sky completely lit up with stars that got brighter at each stop was quite spellbinding. **Day 4** Today would be our final birding day, so we once again had some coffee, fruit, and muffins, and were off by 7. Today, we slowly cruised Hwy 304 north of Pine Falls at first light hoping to spot a Great Gray, as the mature boreal forest along this stretch has occasionally produced when this elusive owl is at a low in their cycle. A few more Canada Jays and a couple more Pileated Woodpeckers (total of 7 for the tour) were spotted and at one stop a few folks briefly got onto a Black-backed Woodpecker but it flew off before all could get looks. Backtracking to Pine Falls and on to Lac du Bonnet where we had a nice sit down breakfast. Carrying on south, we located a Northern Hawk Owl near the Great Gray Owl habitat sign west of Pinawa, checked out feeders at Seven Sisters, River Hills, Whitemouth and Elma, and spotted numerous Bald Eagles (total of 14 for the day). Near Elma, we spent a fair bit of time looking for some of the boreal woodpecker and grouse species along old 15 but with little success.



Northern Hawk Owl © Jarmila Vinterová

The forecast called for some snow and heavier winds later in the afternoon and we'd hoped to maybe get a better look at some Snowies south of Winnipeg later on, but light snow was already starting to come down as we hit Hwy 15 headed for Wpg. En route, we stopped briefly to scope our second Hawk Owl for the day (4th for the trip) and a few miles further along had great looks at a nice dark morph Rough-legged Hawk. By the time we reached the perimeter, heavier snowfall and high winds were making for poor visibility, so rather than heading to open country for Snowies, we decided to give some good fruit trees in north Winnipeg one more look for Bohemian Waxwings (no luck) and have one more look to see if the Eastern Screech Owl was around. We were not really expecting to see it, however, since a friend had texted us earlier that afternoon saying that it wasn't sitting in its traditional spot. But when we looked through the heavily falling snow at the cavity it occasionally occupied, we thought it looked somewhat promising. Alvin got out and walked closer, and verified that indeed it was there!! We excitedly dismounted, took a few somewhat hazy photos and scope looks through the heavy snowfall and decided we'd just take our group shot right there and then... in the midst of a late winter storm!!



Eastern Screech-Owl © Jarmila Vinterová

All in all, it had been a very successful and enjoyable Manitoba Owls tour. Decent looks at 4 owl species, a 5th owl species heard, but this time no Great Grays other than Jim's beautiful ambassador "Oska". The 41 bird and 7 mammal species we'd observed were also above average for this tour. 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. Alvin 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.