Eagle-Eye Tours



Manitoba Owls Tour Trip Report (Mar 4-8, 2025)

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The weather was pretty decent on this tour; a bit cool to start out most days but sunny and quite nice as the day went on. There were a lot of photographers on this tour and I think we exceeded what we would normally expect for real good looks at most species and terrific photo opportunities. We had particularly good fortune with most of the owls, getting close ups for Snowy, Great Gray, Eastern Screech, Barred and Great Horned Owls and having a Northern Saw-whet come very close calling on our night owling excursion. That, and the 43 species of birds we saw were both probably the highest totals we have had for this tour in recent years!

Day 1 – March 4

We started out this tour with a bang as an Eastern Screech-Owl at Frasers Grove Park that had rarely been seen this winter had been reported that morning. We gathered up participants that had arrived early and a couple participants from the previous tour in mid-afternoon and drove down hoping to see it. On the way we passed by a Rough-legged Hawk on the north perimeter, the only one we would see on this tour. At the Screech-Owl spot we had great looks at this gray color-phased bird before it got chased down its hole by a couple of Black-capped Chickadees!



Eastern Screech-Owl © Mitch Doucet

Later that afternoon, the rest of the participants (minus a couple that would arrive later that day) gathered in the lobby of our hotel for introductions and greetings, and we walked to the nearby Oak & Grain 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 and photos with this stunning bird. It would occasionally "hoot" her approval and closely inspect some of the slides from its perch 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.

Day 2 – March 5

After a hearty continental breakfast at the hotel, we checked out a feeder in the north end of the city but we had only House Sparrows this time before heading to some fairly open residential areas just inside the north perimeter getting decent looks at a tree-top Northern Shrike and a couple pairs of Gray Partridges. Swinging around the west perimeter, we stopped at Oak Bluff for a brief pit stop before heading south of the city on Hwy 330 into Snowy Owl country. Heading out, we spotted a Red Fox, some Horned Larks, and a large flock of Snow Buntings. Past Osbourne we found a nice male Snowy Owl, no doubt the same one we'd seen on the previous tour, perched on some railroad ties in the ditch. Later we snuck up quite close for better looks and photos as it perched on a seldom used road.



Snowy Owl © Mitch Doucet



Gray Partridge © Mitch Doucet

On the way back, we had more Horned Larks and the first of 4 Coyotes for the day, before running into a close heavily striped female Snowy along Floodway Road. In Winnipeg, we stopped for an early lunch and swung through the city stopping at Fraser's Grove not expecting the Eastern Screech-Owl to be back. But there it was for the second day in a row, so participants who had missed it the previous day got the same great views we'd had the day before! Walking around a

nearby neighbourhood with some good feeders yielded many of the common feeder birds (Pine Siskin, Redpoll, House Finch, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadee, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers). We carried on to Bunn's Creek Park to check out a Great Horned Owl nest. The female sat high partially shielding at least one young from the cold as it peered out at us. The photographers went crazy, snapped hundreds of pictures of mom, the cute downy chick, and the obliging male owl perched nearby.



Great Horned Owl with chick © Art Cimento



Coyote © Mitch Doucet

The rest of the afternoon was spent checking out some feeders near Oak Hammock where we got decent looks at a Sharp-tailed Grouse. More Sharp-tailed Grouse flew over and landed in the tall marsh vegetation, and a few folks spotted a larger falcon (possibly a Gyrfalcon), but it quickly disappeared. Hoping to get better looks at it, we swung around to the west side of the marsh and stopped at the interpretive center (which unfortunately was closed for renovations), but we never saw it again.



Sharp-tailed Grouse © Mitch Doucet

Our main goal that afternoon was to locate a Great Gray Owl, so after a pit stop in Teulon, we headed south and west to where some have been seen this winter. Eventually one was found on some posts near a farmstead. It was probably 100 yards from the road and it eventually flew to some trees further away, but all were excited to get scope looks and photos of one in the wild. Checking out a spot where a Porcupine had been found with the previous group, we found it in exactly the same tree! It was now getting on and we needed to head back, but not before checking a stretch of road west of Balmoral where we'd seen two Great Grays more than a week earlier. Finally, we located a second Great Gray, this one real close perched on a roadside utility pole. We got great looks and photos before it flew off. Heading back to Winnipeg, we added more White-tailed Deer (130 for the day!), and had dinner at Chicago Joe's that evening, excited with our 4-owl day and getting super looks at all four.

Day 3 – March 6

First order of business after breakfast today was to search for a Boreal Owl at the Assiniboine Zoo, but despite splitting up and checking a large section of forest where one had been seen the previous day, we could not find it. A nice consolation, however, was a Barred Owl perched out in the open on a deciduous tree. From there we headed to Kildonan Park; we got split up on the way and one van got to see a Pileated Woodpecker en route. At Kildonan Park a coyote waltzed by us at an extremely close distance seemingly oblivious to our presence! We searched hard for some of the more unusual woodpeckers that we knew were in the park but came up with very little, until finally a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers (rather rare for Manitoba), were spotted by a recently created nest-hole high

up in an ash tree. Next destination was Bird's Hill Park where we walked into a spot where many trusting Black-capped Chickadees and a few Red-breasted Nuthatches were usually present, but today there were only a few chickadees and we had to look hard to find a Red-breasted Nuthatch. Pulling away, a Ruffed Grouse was spotted high up in some trees, but if flew off before all could get a look at it.



Barred Owl © Art Cimento



Red-bellied Woodpecker © Mitch Doucet

After lunch in Beausejour, we drove around town checking fruit trees hoping to find some Bohemian Waxwings but they were not around today. We carried on to a super feeder setup east of Lac du Bonnet where hoards of Redpolls, Pine Siskins, and a few Pine Grosbeaks, Blue Jays, and Purple Finches ate to their heart's content at several feeders and on the seed-littered ground. But in the hour we spent there, the hoped for Canada Jays, Pileated Woodpecker, and Evening Grosbeaks never showed up. Heading back to Pine Falls/Powerview we took Maple Creek Road which is normally one of the best areas for winter owls, but it has been quiet this year. And it was quiet today too; we got some better looks at Black-billed Magpies but little else. Turning onto Hwy 11, we had only gone a short distance when a Great Grey Owl was spotted in flight very close to the road. It flew back into the woods and we thought that would be it. But we waited, and within a few minutes it flew out perching on some nearby willows. Very nice close-up looks and shots were appreciated by all. Further down 11, we got onto some rather cooperative Sharp-tailed Grouse in an open roadside yard. At Powerview we stopped to look over some open water below the dam. A Bald Eagle was perched nearby in its favorite tree. Along the opposite shore a River Otter ran along the ice, and another one was seen a couple times diving in open water closer to the dam. Before heading to the Paperview Inn where we would be staying tonight, we checked out another open water patch adding a couple Common Goldeneye to our list.



Great Grey Owl © Rob Lisc

Checking in at the Papertown Inn, we had a little time off, an earlier dinner, and went out at 7 for a couple hours of after dark owling. It was a rather cold evening, and the breeze made it even colder at the first stop in the Broadlands. But shortly after playing a Saw-whet Owl call, one responded way off. We were able to coax it in closer and then it flew across the road. Although it called from trees quite close to us, only a couple people saw it in flight. But for most the thrill was getting to hear it calling so close. Carrying on to Maskwa Road and making a couple stops along Hwy 304, we were unsuccessful in getting a Boreal Owl to respond, but we considered our evening a great success and at the last couple stops it even cleared up enough to have nice looks at the starlit sky.

Day 4 – March 7

Today would be our final birding day, so we had some drinks, fruit and muffins in the lobby, and did a little pre-breakfast birding along Hwy 304 north of town. We spotting another Ruffed Grouse which cooperated nicely as it climbed up after buds in an open tree in the ditch. But the normally reliable Canada Jays were nowhere to be found until we finally ran into a group of 3 as we hurried back for breakfast. After an 8:30 breakfast, we walked a stretch of Maskwa Road where Boreal Chickadees and White-winged Crossbills are occasionally found. A couple White-winged Crossbills flew over; one perched on a treetop but it was rather far for decent looks. Those with better hearing also got onto a couple Boreal Chickadees but they would not come to the roadside for any looks. At the Powerview dam, a couple Bald Eagles sat side by side where one had been seen earlier, and the otter was just a black spot on the ice along the water, but we needed to carry on so we didn't stop this time. On the way to Lac du Bonnet we had another Ruffed Grouse and more Sharp-tails. We made a pit stop at the popular Drifters Motel and headed across the Winnipeg River to the feeders we'd been to yesterday where we ate our bag lunches and had a another quick look at the birds. Today, in addition to the regulars, we spotted a small flock of Evening Grosbeaks, some Sharp-tailed Grouse flew over, and a couple Red Crossbills that flew over calling were a surprise. We'd checked many spots where Northern Hawk Owls were normally found including some where one had been seen earlier in the winter, but this was a very unusual year where very few had been seen and none were hanging around winter territories. We'd received a report of one that had been seen a day earlier by Birds Hill so we made our way there. Stopping in Beausejour, we once again cruised through areas where fruit trees were abundant and finally found a flock of Bohemian Waxwings that flew back and forth to a tree with some small crab apples which they gulped down.



Evening Grosbeaks © Art Cimento



Pine Grosbeak © Mitch Doucet



Canada Jay © Mitch Doucet



Ruffed Grouse © Mitch Doucet



Bohemian Waxwing © Mitch Doucet

North of Birds Hill we searched far and wide for the Hawk Owl but it had moved on. We wanted to give the Boreal Owl at the Zoo one more chance, but on the way we stopped by some open water on the Red River close to Winnipeg's south perimeter, where we added a large flock of 50 Mallards. A real bonus here was a close-up Northern Shrike. Our last order of the day was to check out every spruce and cedar in the area where the Boreal Owl had previously been seen at the Zoo. Once again,

we failed to find the Boreal but settled for more nice looks at a Barred Owl. Back at the Hampton, we checked in and had an extended break before getting together for our final meal at the nearby Oak and Grain.



Northern Shrike © Mitch Doucet

It had been a most successful and enjoyable Manitoba Owls tour. Superb looks at 5 owl species, with a 6th owl species heard at close range. Unfortunately, the normally reliable Northern Hawk Owls were extremely scarce this winter and there were no locations where any were hanging around winter territories. Nevertheless, the 43 bird and 7 mammal species we'd observed were well above average for this tour, and we'd had many great looks and hundreds of photos to sort through for owls plus a host of other northern winter birds and lifers we'd encountered. A bit weary but very satisfied with what we'd seen, we shared highlights of the tour, swapped stories, laughs and experiences, and said our goodbyes after enjoying our a final meal together. Josh, Mitch and I would like to thank everyone for your patience and enthusiasm, your stories and good humour, and we wish you all the best in future birding adventures. Here's hoping our paths may cross again, perhaps even a return to Manitoba or other location on a future Eagle-Eye Tour. Manitoba Owls Tour eBird list (Mar 4 - 8, 2025)