Eagle-Eye Tours



Manitoba Owls Tour Trip Report (Mar 8-12, 2025)

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Mid-afternoon first day out and we'd already had excellent looks at Snowy, Eastern Screech, and Great Horned Owls. As we headed north of Winnipeg on Henderson Highway nearing Lockport folks in the back of one van spotted a Great Gray. It was close and we all got out to admire it, camera's snapping like crazy. But the best was yet to come. After a few minutes, the owl turned staring down intently. It waited for some cars to go by so it could hear better and plunged head and feet-first into over a foot of snow. Holding that pose for what a minute or two, it eventually came up with a big fat Meadow Vole. After displaying its prized prey for a few seconds, it swallowed it whole and flew to another perch. We all were stunned to be able to experience such an amazing event!

Day 1 – March 8

On Day 1, participants gathered in the lobby of our hotel at 5 pm 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 9

After a hearty continental breakfast at the hotel, we checked out a feeder in the north end of the city which was quiet today before heading to some fairly open residential areas just inside the north perimeter where we'd hoped to find Gray Partridge and maybe a White-tailed Jack Rabbit, but had to settle for some more regular yard birds and some Eastern Cottontail rabbits. Swinging around the west perimeter, we stopped at the Wilks Sewage lagoons hoping to find some ducks on the open

water but this time settled for a few Canada Geese.



© Mitch Doucet

After a brief pit stop at Oak Bluff we proceeded south of the city on Hwy 330 into Snowy Owl country. First, we spotted two White-tailed Jack Rabbits and a little later got good looks at a pair of Gray Partridge. Closer to Osborne, we began to see some Horned Larks chasing each other as they were already starting to claim territories in the half-melted agricultural fields. Further along a Snowy Owl was spotted on a side road – at maybe 200 yards it was not terribly close but nice for first scope looks and pics. Further along we stopped to look at some huge flocks of Snow Buntings (an estimated 1000!) getting close-up looks as some landed on or near the roadside railroad tracks. Scanning further over the fields, a far-off Snowy Owl was spotted and even further a couple more and some coyotes could be seen! Further down the road, 3 more were spotted on the fields, all at least a quarter mile out. We carried on hoping to see one closer, and sure enough a really cooperative male obliged for real nice close-ups as it perched on a roadside utility pole. Heading back to the city, we stopped at a Subway in LaSalle for lunch before proceeding around the city to Fraser's Grove hoping that an Eastern Screech Owl that is occasionally found there would be around today. Luck was on our side, as there is was – a well camouflaged gray-phased bird perched by a large hole high up in maple.



Horned Lark © Mitch Doucet



Snow Bunting © Mitch Doucet



Snowy Owl © Mitch Doucet



Eastern Screech-Owl © Mitch Doucet

After getting great looks at it and walking around the neighborhood to look at some feeders that were quite quiet that day, we carried on to Bunn's Creek park to check out a Great Horned Owl nest. This time the female which had been brooding young on previous tours was perched near the nest and a half-grown chick and its barely visible sibling occupied the nest. The photographers went crazy, snapping a multitude of pictures of mom, the cute half-grown baby owl that peered down

curiously at us, and the male that was perched on guard nearby (as we were leaving it woke up and hooted once, perhaps spotting a Bald Eagle that had been spotted soaring high overhead.



Great Horned Owl © Mitch Doucet



Great Horned Owl chick © Mitch Doucet

As we headed north of the city, the memorable first encounter with a Great Gray (described in the intro) occurred. After watching the Great Gray perched a little further from the road, our attention

was diverted by some White-winged Crossbills that were feeding in some nearby spruces. Crossing the bridge over the Red River, we counted at least 100 fishing shacks and half as many vehicles stretching out on the ice below the locks. When we happened to cross this same bridge the following day, almost all were gone – obviously the ice was thinning and it had become too dangerous to remain on the ice. Near Oak Hammock, we checked a feeder that had some Redpolls, Pine Siskins, Black-capped Chickadees and White-breasted Nuthatches, when three Common Grackles were observed flying by, and a Red-winged Blackbird was heard - another uncommon winter straggler. As we were leaving a male Pileated Woodpecker flew in and gave us great looks perched near the top of a utility pole We debated heading northwest of Balmoral where we'd had some luck with Great Grays with earlier groups, but decided our time might be better spent near Beaudry Park closer to Winnipeg where several Great Grays had been reported recently. As we approached the park, a Great Gray was spotted in its day roost within a roadside oak forest, but none were found in the park (we surmised that with the recent time change, it was probably too early in the afternoon for them to be out hunting). Rather than waiting for them to emerge from the forest, we headed to the Assiniboine Park and Zoo where a Boreal Owl and Barred Owl had recently been found. But an extensive search of several appropriate areas in the park turned up nothing, so we headed back to the hotel with a little time off before dinner. It had been a most eventful 4-owl day with super looks and lots of other lifers. We celebrated over dinner at Chicago Joe's that evening.



Great Gray Owl © Mitch Doucet



White-winged Crossbill © Steven Rowe

Day 3 – March 10

Checking online, we'd found out that someone had spotted the Boreal Owl at the Assiniboine Zoo the previous day so with better info on where they'd spotted it, we headed there first thing that morning. But checking that area and several nearby clumps of suitable habitat, we still could not find any more than droppings in trees where it had previously roosted. From there we headed to Kildonan Park, where a Raccoon was spotted sleeping in the crotch of a large cottonwood. But the park was unusually quiet today. Eventually the hoped for Red-bellied Woodpecker (a rather rare recent resident in Manitoba) was found near its nest hole high up in an ash tree. On to Bird's Hill Park where we walked into a spot where some trusting Black-capped Chickadees and a few Red-breasted Nuthatches were found (one of the latter even perched on Josh's outstretched fingertips!). In Beausejour, we stopped for lunch and checked out a few spots in town where there were lots of crab apple trees we had previously found Bohemian Waxwings but none were around today. While eating we'd heard of a Boreal Owl had been found earlier that day less than an hour away, so although it meant backtracking, we decided to try for it. But the spot where it had been reported was not correct or precise enough. After checking any suitable spruce near where it had been reported, we again had to give up. The weather had called for some snowfall and brisk winds that afternoon and as we headed for Powerview, the storm descended on us. But the snowfall showed signs of letting up some as we neared town, so we decided to check out a couple of nearby open water patches on the Winnipeg River. As we drove though Powerview, a huge flock of at least 500 Bohemian Waxwings were found (a highlight lifer for many). Some feeders were also found with several Purple Finches among the Redpolls and Pine Siskins, and a female Common Goldeneye was found in the second open water patch.



Bohemian Waxwing flock © Mitch Doucet

The plan for this evening was to have an earlier dinner and then see if it was nice enough to go out and do a bit of calling and listening after dark for owls. By the time we had finished dinner, the snow had ceased and the winds had died down a bit, so with a few folks that were up to the challenge, we waited till dark and made several stops in areas that have been productive in the past. At one stop, a local "Red-neck" (as he was referred to by some of the group) drove up and had very little nice to say about the owls ("I'll shoot them all") and those who wanted to see them ("just get back to where you came from")!! It was cold and windy, but along a better sheltered road, we did get a couple squeaks (no doubt owls but unidentifiable). When we were playing the Saw-whet call, one participant even saw an owl fly into a roadside spruce, but it never called or approached closer. Though we were well dressed, it was a very cold evening so we were quite content to retreat back to the hotel before 9. Still, most had some favorable memories from having gone out that evening.

Day 4 – March 11

Today would be our final day of birding for the tour, so we made the most of it having some drinks, fruit and muffins in the lobby, before heading out for a little pre-breakfast birding in the Broadlands. Not far down the road, a Ruffed Grouse was spotted in some thick aspen forest snacking on buds. Further on, we spotted our first Sharp-tailed Grouse. Eventually we would all get really good looks at some as a total of 22 were found in several spots that morning. Back at the hotel, we had breakfast, loaded up our gear and went back to the Broadlands (Maskwa Road) walking a stretch of road where Boreal Chickadees are sometimes found. Although some groups had had only heard one, we heard a few and then had one super cooperative birds that gave us unbelievable close-up looks.



Sharp-tailed Grouse © Mitch Doucet

Carrying on to our lunch spot near Lac du Bonnet, we checked some feeders in Silver Falls where there were lots of birds (Evening & Pine Grosbeaks, Blue Jays, Redpolls, Pine Siskins, etc), but the best feeders were in behind some houses so we couldn't get great looks at most. At a yard along Hwy 11, we stopped to get much better looks at a Ruffed Grouse, only to find two Ruffed Grouse, and some spruce with a bunch of feeding White-winged Crossbill and a couple Red-breasted Nuthatches. The superb feeders near Lac du Bonnet where we stopped to eat our bag lunches never disappoints. Today, there would be tons of Redpolls and Pine Siskins, at least a dozen Purple Finches and Blue Jays, and more Evening Grosbeaks but less Pine Grosbeaks than usual. The hoped for Canada Jays never put in an appearance, but a nice close female Pileated Woodpecker did. Proceeding south of the feeders to Pinawa, and through some good Great Gray and Hawk Owl habitat, the only good bird we saw was a Canada Jay, but it flew across the road and carried on.



Blue Jay © Elizabeth Moon



Evening Grosbeak © Elizabeth Moon



Pine Grosbeak © Mitch Doucet

We made our way to Spruce Siding Road, which can be good for Northern Shrike and a few other boreal forest birds. Today, we would find one more Great Gray Owl along it – not the best looks but still nice to see. Further on, we had really good looks at a pair of Canada Jays. Some folks wanted to give the Boreal Owls one more try so we beat it back to Wpg and checked every spruce and cedar at the zoo in the area where it had been previously seen, but this time had to settle for a couple of Dark-eyed Juncos and a Red Fox. Back at the Hampton, we had an extended break before getting together for our final meal at the nearby Oak and Grain. It had been a very successful and enjoyable Manitoba Owls tour. Superb looks and photo ops for 4 owl species, with 42 total bird species and 9 mammals (loosely counting the Meadow Vole which appeared still quite alive when it was being carried around in the bill of the Great Gray)! Both totals were well above long-term averages for this trip. Unfortunately, it had been a very poor year for observing the normally reliable Northern Hawk Owl and there were no locations where any had been hanging out on winter territories. Nevertheless, I think all participants were very pleased with what we did find and the many great looks and photo ops we'd had. We shared highlights of the tour, swapped stories, laughs and experiences, and said our goodbyes after enjoying our 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 8 - 12, 2025)