Eagle-Eye Tours



Manitoba Owls Trip Report (Feb 28 - Mar 3, 2024)

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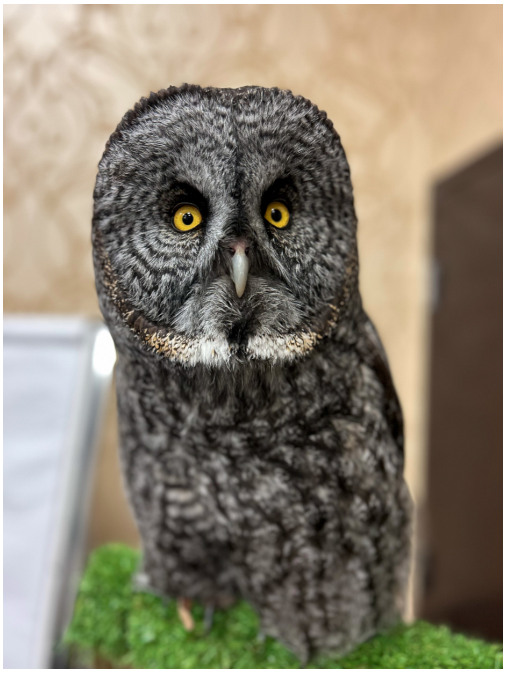
Written by Alvin Dyck The Manitoba Owls Tour lived up to its name as we were able to see and/or hear 6 different species of owl including Snowy, Northern Hawk, Great Horned, Eastern Screech, Northern Saw-whet, and Barred! Guests were treated to the full range of weather one would expect in Manitoba in late winter, but none were complaining as we visited a wide range of habitats and locations from the wide open fields in the South, to the mixed forests and Black Spruce/Tamarack bogs in the North. We tallied an impressive 41 bird species in all and added 6 different mammals as well.



Snowy Owl, male © Alan Collier

Day 1 On the first day of our tour, participants gathered in the lobby of our hotel for introductions and greetings, and we walked over 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 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. A special treat was watching Oska do a few short flights around the meeting room.



Great Gray Owl © Alvin Dyck

Day 2 After a hearty breakfast, we got an early start and headed South in search of Snowy Owls. Cold temperatures and very strong winds made for challenging spotting, but we were able to get good (but brief) scope looks at a gorgeous male bird that had been spooked by the first van and flew to a distant hydro pole. As we continued to search the windswept fields, we chased up small flocks of Horned Larks and Snow Buntings that were swept away to land in the fields. A highlight was seeing two Common Ravens harassing and then mobbing a Great Horned Owl until it finally escaped into the safety of some thick trees in a nearby shelterbelt.



Scoping for Owls © Alvin Dyke

In North Winnipeg, the birds seemed to be in hiding and even a reliable Eastern Screech Owl was nowhere to be found. We were delighted to get excellent photos of a single Bohemian Waxwing along a street with trees laden with fruit as well as House Finches, Pine Siskins, and even a couple of Dark-eyed Juncos.



Bohemian Waxwing © Jarmila Vinterova

We continued to a nearby wooded creek for excellent views of a Great Horned Owl on her nest with at least one owlet peeking out from under her as the male stood vigil in a spruce tree close by.



Great Horned Owl © Alan Collier



Great Horned Owl on nest with owlet ©Jarmila Vinterova

Our next stop was Birds Hill Park where we were delighted to have friendly, trusting Black-capped Chickadees eating sunflower seeds from our hands. A pleasant surprise was an active group of 7 Red Crossbills moving in the tops of the spruce trees searching for cones.



Red Crossbill © Alan Collier

The backroads on the way to Pine Falls turned up many more Snow Buntings, Horned Larks, and other species until we got to the prime Great Gray habitat just before sunset – the “golden hour”- according to our photographers. With the light fading we came upon a Northern Hawk Owl at the

apex of a spruce, bathed in golden light. Enough time for some memorable photos before the bird made a beeline for the nearby forest to roost for the night. A perfect end to our 3 owl species day!



Northern Hawk-Owl © Alan Collier

Day 3 Prior to sunrise, we fueled up on coffee, fruit, and muffins to prepare for an early morning birding session in search of the elusive Great Gray. The highlight was excellent views of Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing out in the open fields. With tails up, wings outstretched and curved, the males pranced around the females, kicking up little clouds of snow as they tried to impress.



Sharp-tailed Grouse lek © Jarmila Vinterova

After breakfast, we found an active group of Boreal Chickadees calling and flitting through the spruces. We also got beautiful views of Canada Jays perched high atop a spruce with an azure sky for a backdrop.



Canada Jay © Alan Collier

Below the Pine Falls dam, the swirling water is ice-free, and we got brief views of Common Mergansers as we crossed the dam. Two majestic Bald Eagles perched in a tree nearby surveyed the scene. We looped Southward through prime Great Gray and Hawk Owl habitat to end up at the home of a friendly couple that have a myriad of feeders all over their yard. They graciously invited us into their yard where we were treated to raucous Blue Jays, Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskins, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers and excellent close-up views of a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers. Our hosts took great interest in learning some of the finer points of bird identification. Side-by-side views of Hoary and Common Redpolls feeding on the ground were a special treat. We had an early return to the hotel for a rest and dinner in preparation for an evening owling excursion.



Downy Woodpecker © Alan Collier

We ventured back out at sunset and made our way to the end of a heavily-forested road. After admiring the net of stars (one guest lay on his back staring up) and listening for awhile, we tried playing the call of a Northern Saw-whet Owl. We had a response immediately and the bird even flashed over our group a few times, landing in the nearby trees, and continuing to call. Despite the loud “tooting” of the Saw-whet, we hear the distant “who cooks for you” of the Barred Owl. We tried to entice it closer with a call, but it did not respond. A few more stops were tried along the way as we made our way out of the forest and back to our beds at the hotel. It was very exciting to add two new species to our owl tally. **Day 4** Our final birding day and another early start to continue our search for the elusive Great Gray. We drove slowly South with our eyes trained on the forests beside us and it wasn’t long before the keen spotters in our vans located a very well-hidden Northern Hawk Owl, the first of 4 that day! The other van saw another bird flash behind their vehicle. As the first bird flew off deep into the woods, the second Hawk Owl perched in a tree above a cabin for some excellent looks. As we continued South, we encountered Bald Eagles, 10 in all, perched, on a nest or soaring high in the sky. A highlight for many of us was a cooperative Northern Shrike that stayed perched on the tip of a Poplar long enough for everyone to get close-up and personal with a scope. In the Pinawa area we spotted a distant Hawk Owl that kindly flew to a much closer snag to allow photographers an excellent photo op.



Northern Hawk-Owl © Jarmila Vinterova

We had lunch in the vans in a beautiful patch of Boreal Forest and just as we were leaving, came across a group of 5 Ruffed Grouse, two eating buds in the trees and 3 on the ground. One of birds on the ground (a male) was in full display with his tail flared and the black ruff feathers on his neck puffed out for full effect. He strutted after the other birds shaking his head as he disappeared into the bush.



Ruffed Grouse © Jarmila Vinterova

Another treat along the road back to Winnipeg was a dark morph Rough-legged Hawk sitting on a

dead snag. On our second try for the Eastern Screech Owl, we were successful in finding it snoozing at the opening to its favoured cavity.



Eastern Screech-Owl © Alan Collier

From here we drove South of the city again for a second try at Snowy Owls. As before, it was very windy but this time we had more success. We got distant looks at a male and then a female owl sitting on the field but then a little further south we located a juvenile bird on a hydro pole that allowed us to creep close enough for some great pictures.



Snowy Owl on pole © Jarmila Vinterova

The decision was made to also make a second attempt at locating Gray Partridge. We had seen a covey of 20 Gray Partridge earlier in the trip, but they all ran so fast into the sheltering willows that we didn't get a satisfying look and very little chance for pictures. With some keen spotting we did locate a pair of birds, so mission accomplished!



Gray Partridge © Alan Collier

During our search, Ken saw a small group of Red-winged blackbirds flying at speed with the wind at their backs. Time to head back to the hotel. Weary but satisfied, we gathered for a final meal together, shared highlights of the tour and swapped stories, laughs and experiences. Ken and I would like to thank everyone for their enthusiasm and generosity and wish them well on all their future birding adventures.



Manitoba Owls group 2024

Manitoba Owls species list 2024