Eagle-Eye Tours

Manitoba Owls Trip Report (Mar 9 - 13, 2023)

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Guides: Ken De Smet & Alvin Dyck

Day 1 – March 9, 2023

All participants for this tour arrived in time to meet Ken and Alvin in the hotel lobby. After brief introductions and going over logistics and itinerary for the coming days, we made our way to dinner just around the corner.

Day 2 –March 10

We got up early for a 6:30 continental breakfast, loaded our bags and were off before 7:30. Almost as soon as we got out of the city proper and turned onto Jefferson Avenue, we spotted a Coyote quite close to the road that appeared to have a slight limp but seemed totally unconcerned with our presence even when we stepped out to take photos. In the same area we spotted 2 Northern Shrikes; neither real close but good scope looks nonetheless. Carrying on to some farmyards still inside the perimeter we added several of the more common farmyard birds (Rock Pigeon, Starling & House Sparrow), tried to photograph a few Black-billed Magpies, had 3 Eastern Cottontails, and no fewer than 19 Gray Partridges – the last of which we got to see and photograph pretty close as some males were more preoccupied with chasing each other around than our presence. At the perimeter we spotted a beautiful, white male Snowy Owl but it was a fair ways off and high up on a metal utility tower. Next we headed north on Hwy 8, where a second Snowy (a more-spotted female) was spotted in a tree over a quarter of a mile away; again we wanted something closer but good long-range looks nonetheless. Further up Hwy 8 we drove around a small community where a Northern Hawk-Owl

had been hanging out on a winter territory until a few days before but it had not been seen recently and we didn't find it either. As we drove through the community, a White-tailed Jack Rabbit was spotted by a few folks but it quickly bounded out of view. We turned off on Miller Road and soon were greeted by another female Snowy – this one on a utility pole at the side of the road. Since Snowies tend to be easily spooked, we took long range photos and then crept up in several short jaunts, participants walking behind the vans as we approached. Eventually we were so close there was no need to approach any closer – the bird remained unconcerned with our presence. All got amazing looks and photos of that bird. Oak Hammock Marsh was our next destination, where we made a pitstop at the Ducks Unlimited Canada headquarters and Interpretive Centre. Nearby we found the first of 60+ Snow Buntings we would see today and at a feeder east of Oak Hammock we added Red & Gray Squirrels, several Common Redpolls, a Hairy Woodpecker, and finally as we were leaving 25 Red-winged Blackbirds descended on the feeder (not a normal wintering bird in the area and our first write-in for the tour). As we headed back to and around the perimeter, and were approaching Oak Bluff in the SW corner, another pure white male Snowy was spotted on a roadside utility pole. Again, with all the traffic along the perimeter this bird allowed us a very close approach and terrific looks/photo ops. What a way to cap off a morning. We decided to have an early lunch at the Tim Hortons in Oak Bluff. After lunch we took Hwy 2 a short distance west, and then headed north and west to Beaudry Park and Hwy #1 west of Headingly. A Horned Lark was spotted along a gravel road en route, and an American Robin was spotted by a couple participants as we drove through a residential area near Beaudry. After another check for the hawk-owl on Hwy 8, we swung by Lockport on the Red River where an overwintering Canada Goose and Mallard were spotted. In Bird's Hill Provincial Park we checked another recent hawk-owl wintering territory without success, and we enjoyed a stop at a picnic spot in the park where 15-20 Black-capped Chickadees and a richly-colored Red-breasted Nuthatch have learned to trust humans enough to land on your outstretched hand and take sunflower seeds.

Black-capped Chickadee landing on hand © Alvin Dyck

Black-capped Chickadee landing on hands © Alvin Dyck

Heading east of the park, we took some gravel roads to Beausejour, and along the way ran into a huge flock of at least 65 Bohemian Waxwings feeding in some crab apple trees (a fantastic stop that was enjoyed by all but particularly the photographers in the group). East of Beausejour we turned off on the Milner Ridge Road where a kettle of 6 Bald Eagles and a surprise Golden Eagle were spotted (the Golden was our second write-in for the day). At Lac du Bonnet, we took Hwy 317 northwest to Maple Creek Road, where a Great Gray Owl had been reported about a week earlier. It was a great time of day to look for owls but we were unsuccessful so we made our way to our "home" for the next two nights, where we checked in and enjoyed a hearty dinner. It had been a long day already, and normally we would wait for our second night in Powerview to do any after-dark owling, but tomorrow's forecast sounded a bit daunting so after dinner we headed out to do a couple hours of owling. There was a slight breeze and little moonlight so we weren't sure if the owls would cooperate but at our first stop on Maskwa Road we heard a fairly distant Barred Owl. Playback did little to bring this owl any closer so we proceeded down the road less than a mile to a spot where we'd had some luck with previous groups. different Barred Owl was calling maybe a quarter mile north so we played a couple calls. No response until we tried a different call and immediately one called back quite close to the road. Ken moved away from the group a bit and tried one more call; this time the owl broke in calling back half way through the call and it was half way up a tree very close to us. Alvin shone the light not directly on it but close enough that all could see it – what an amazing encounter. We left the owl, and while driving between stops had a small owl dive in from behind the van and land in thick spruce trees beside the road. We backed up, looked for it, and hoped it might call but that one will have to remain a mystery owl (very likely Boreal or Northern Saw-whet based on size). After a couple more stops, we checked out some roadside Lynx tracks and drove back to the hotel hoping we might see a Lynx but quite pleased with our evening of owling under a sky full of brilliant stars.

Day 3 –March 11.

To take advantage of the early morning hours, we put out a few snacks for folks to grab if they were hungry, and ventured out at 7 a.m. on a before-breakfast outing. Crossing the Powerview Dam we

spotted 4 Common Goldeneye in the Winnipeg River below the dam, and a Bald Eagle perched in a tree on shore probably keeping an eye out for some fish. We turned off at Broadlands Road and soon spotted some Sharp-tailed Grouse not far from the road. Some of the grouse appeared poised to dance on the snowy field like they would on a lek so we watched them for a while. Sure enough, some of the squared off males did a few bouts of "dancing" (wings hanging down at their sides and feet rapidly stomping). They weren't in mid-season form yet, but we still enjoyed the show. Carrying on down Broadlands Road, we split up briefly each checking different side roads. This was when one van located a Ruffed Grouse perched in a tree along Maskwa Road (it flew just as the second van pulled up); the other van had a brief look at another Northern Shrike. From there we backtracked to Hwy 304 and drove north for a few miles checking out very good habitat for Great Grays and Hawk Owl. We also stopping occasionally to listen for Black-backed or Three-toed woodpeckers where scaled trees indicated that they were frequenting these areas, but finding little save for a couple of Canada Jays, a roadside Sharp-tailed Grouse, and a few ravens. After breakfast, as we got ready to leave the hotel, a Golden Eagle was spotted circling at a distance. After a few minutes it was close enough to see field markings – a second Golden, but this one everyone got to see well. We headed south on Hwy 11, stopping to check a couple feeders in St Georges where we had a few Pine Grosbeaks and Common Redpolls. Further south on 11 we got some fly-by looks at a Pileated Woodpecker. At Lac du Bonnet we stopped for gas and restrooms at Drifter's, before crossing the Winnipeg River to check out several productive feeders on Henry Bellin Road. The yard was alive with birds, including at least 40 Evening Grosbeaks, decent numbers of Pine Grosbeaks (48 for the day), Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatch, Hairy & Downy woodpeckers, Common Redpolls, 2 Canada Jays, and an estimated 25 Blue Jays that descended on the house when the owners came out and threw out some shelled and unshelled peanuts. As we were leaving, two Pileated Woodpeckers flew in, so we hung around another 10 minutes getting super looks and photos of them. From there we took backroads and Hwy 520 to Pinawa, spotting a few more Sharp-tailed Grouse (24 for the day), and stopping at a Great Gray Owl Habitat Area sign west of Pinawa for group photos. The anticipated stormy conditions were now starting to take hold, and as we drove south the snow got heavier and the winds stronger. We ate our lunches in the vans watching a large flock of Snow Buntings in between seven Sisters and River Hills. At River Hills we checked out a few feeders adding a few more Evening Grosbeaks and Common Redpolls. Further south at Whitemouth we turned around, stopping at a nice little store/gas station in Seven Sisters for a pit stop, before proceeding to Milner Ridge for another look at the good habitat along this stretch of road. On the way back, we checked out Maple Creek Road once more, adding a couple more large flocks of Snow Buntings (440 for the day), more small flocks of Common Redpolls (96 for the day), and 4 Gray Partridges. As we got nearer to Powerview, we realized that the stormy weather had not even hit that area, but we'd had enough for one day so we beat it back to the hotel and had an earlier dinner.

Day 4 –March 12.

Before breakfast today we would have a quick look at Broadlands and Maskwa Road and then headed north a short distance down Hwy 304 for one last look there. Coming back, we had 6 Common Goldeneye on the water by the dam, a Bald Eagle eating a fish on the ice, and a second Bald Eagle in a tree close to the water. Bags loaded and well fed, we left the hotel shortly after 10 heading south on Hwy 11 to Lac du Bonnet where we stopped for gas and restrooms. Continuing south on Hwys 11 and 44, we stopped in Elma for a short walk about. Here we had our first Purple Finches for the trip (4), 25 Evening Grosbeaks, a couple Pine Grosbeaks, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, Black-capped Chickadees, Common Redpolls, and a nice flock of 25 Bohemian Waxwings.

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Next we hit Juno Road, south and east of Elma. We'd heard of a Meadowlark sighting here and wanted to see what the area looked like and we were not disappointed. Seemingly everywhere we were spotting Bald Eagles (13 for the day; most in this stretch). Back at Hwy 11, we continued south to Hwy 1, stopped at the Pinegrove reststop for restrooms, good looks at a couple of Canada Jays, and to eat our bag lunches. After lunch we drove a few miles north and back on Spruce siding road, finding some fresh otter tracks/slidings, and smaller vole tracks, and what looked like mink tracks. On the way back, at the railroad tracks, we spotted a chubby little Meadow Vole running in the ditch so we stopped to watch it. As we were watching it scamper across the snow, out of nowhere a Northern Shrike landed on it and carried it off. An amazing sighting, but what was more amazing was a couple of folks in the back of the van caught it all on camera (thanks Milton & Amy!). Unfortunately, the second van had been turning around and missed the show, but we have the pictures to prove it happened! At this point, we needed to get back to the city as we had some productive areas we wanted to check/recheck in and around Winnipeg. First destination was the west entrance of Birds Hill Park hoping that the hawk-owl might have returned – no such luck. We'd had a report of an Eastern Screech-Owl in the Fraser's Grove neighbourhood in Winnipeg earlier that morning so we headed there next hoping it wouldn't have moved – whew, there it was perched halfway up a rather scrawny spruce. Such a treat to see these little guys, and this one sat snoozing and occasionally peaking at us as we got our fill of looks and photos. Before leaving the area we had a quick look in the area adding Hairy and Downy Woodpecker plus a few more of the regular suburban birds to our list including a pair of singing House Finches. Proceeding north of the city on Hwy 8 we gave the hawk-owl spot one more look. Heading north and west to a section of Oak Hammock marsh where some Short-eared Owls had been reported, we got decent looks at a congregation of White-tailed Jack Rabbits (7) by some willow shrubs not too far off the road. The owls were not present, but another Jack Rabbit bolted out of the marsh showing off his best moves and jumps, and the second van got to see a Meadow Vole (this one got away without being hauled off). It was nearing dusk as we headed into the city hoping for a Great Horned Owl along Sturgeon Road – no owls, but we did get a fly by Horned Lark, and at least 35 White-tailed Deer. After checking into the hotel, we once again visited Chicago Joe's for our last dinner together. Notwithstanding this being a rare off year for the big two winter owls - Great Gray & Northern

Hawk, it had been a very successful tour. Decent weather for the most part, no mishaps, great company, so many good birds and mammals and tons of photos. Alvin & Ken thank you for your patience and generosity. We hope you enjoyed yourselves and hope to see you again some time in the future, perhaps on another Eagle-Eye Tours adventure. Ken De Smet & Alvin Dyck