



Manitoba Owls Trip Report (Mar 5 - 9, 2023)

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Day 1 - Sunday - March 5, 2023

All participants for this tour arrived in time to meet Ken and Alvin at 6:30 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 6.

We got up early for a 6:30 continental breakfast, loaded our bags and were off by 7:30. Almost as soon as we got out of the city proper and turned onto Jefferson Avenue, we had a brief look at a Sharp-tailed Grouse, and then a Northern Shrike perched for photos on the top of a few willows. Carrying on to some farmyards still inside the perimeter we had brief looks at a couple of White-tailed Jack Rabbits, 5 Eastern Cottontails, several Black-billed Magpies, and a few small groups of Gray Partridges (15 in total). Next we headed north on Hwy. 8, where we soon spotted an adult male **Snowy Owl** on a utility pole along the road. It was splendid, almost pure white and being along a busy road it paid little attention to us as we photographed it.



Snowy Owl © Patrick Venables

Further down Hwy 8 we drove around a small community where a Northern Hawk-Owl had been hanging out on a winter territory but we would have no luck with that bird despite checking this site several times during the tour. Oak Hammock Marsh was our next destination, where we made a pit stop at the Ducks Unlimited Canada headquarters and Interpretive Centre. Nearby we found the first of 51 Snow Buntings we would see today, as well as 6 Horned Larks. At a feeder east of Oak Hammock we added Red & Gray Squirrels, some Common Redpolls and a Hairy Woodpecker. Next we headed back around the Winnipeg perimeter to the SW corner where we stopped at Oak Bluff for restrooms and had a single Bohemian Waxwing in a crab apple tree nearby. A fairly extensive loop in the agricultural areas west on Hwy 2, south to Sanford, east to LaSalle, and finally back into Winnipeg added a few more Horned Larks and Snow Buntings but surprisingly no more Snowies. In south Winnipeg we stopped at Tim Hortons for lunch before carrying on through Winnipeg to the Fraser's Grove neighbourhood where we failed to find any Eastern Screech-Owls in any of their usual hangouts, but we did get a good sampling of feeder birds (White-breasted Nuthatches, Black-capped Chickadees, Hairy & **Downy Woodpeckers**), as well as some heard only House Finches. We also ran into Rudolf Koes, one of the group 1 guides there, who pointed us to some Bohemian Waxwings in a mountain ash but we got there just in time to see 6 fly off.



Downy Woodpecker © Patrick Venables

After another check for the hawk-owl north of the perimeter 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 for another hawk-owl without success, had great looks at a very relaxed roadside White-tailed Deer calmly chewing its cud, and we enjoyed a stop at a picnic spot where at least 15 Black-capped Chickadees have learned to trust humans enough to land on your outstretched hand and take sunflower seeds. From the park, we headed east to Beausejour, took some gravel roads north to PR 317, and eventually ended up on Maple Creek Road, where a Great Gray Owl had recently been reported. It was a great time of day to look for owls but we were unsuccessful so we made our way to Powerview and the Papertown Inn, our "home" for the next two nights, where after a long day we all enjoyed a hearty meal.

Day 3 -March 7.

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. Driving across the Powerview Dam and onto Broadlands Road, we quickly spotted a Red Fox running away on the right and on the other side of the road a small group of Sharp-tailed Grouse stood poised ready to dance on the snowy field! It seemed strange to see them "lekking" at this time of year, but as we watched some of the squared off males would proceed to dance (wings hanging down at their sides and feet rapidly stomping). They weren't in mid-season form yet, but we still enjoyed the show very much. We carried on down Broadlands Road exploring several side roads, adding more **Sharp-tailed Grouse** (total of 57 for the day!), another Red Fox, and a fly-by Pileated Woodpecker. But the outside temp that morning was a frigid -25 Celsius, and the big black van had picked this morning for the heater to quit working so we swapped a few people into the other van and made haste back to the hotel to warm up and for a nice breakfast.



Sharp-tailed Grouse © Patrick Venables

After breakfast, Alvin took the black van in to get the heater working; the rest of us hopped in the white van and headed north on Hwy 304 for a couple hours to hunt for owls. No owls, but we did get the first of 12 **Bald Eagles** for the day hunting over a stretch of open water below the dam, got our first looks at **Canada Jay** (7 for the day), and Andrea's sharp eyes produced a Ruffed Grouse perched half-hidden in some roadside trees.



Bald Eagle in flight © Laura McLarnon



Canada Jays in flight © Patrick Venables

The van's heater was fixed by the time we got back to Powerview, so we headed south on Hwy 11 stopping in St Georges where we got great photos of about 20 **Pine Grosbeaks**, plus a few Evening Grosbeaks and **Common Redpolls** at some feeders.



Pine Grosbeaks, male and female © Laura McLarnon



Common Redpoll © Laura McLarnon

Our next target was a home with several productive feeders on Henry Bellin Road east of Lac du Bonnet. It did not disappoint. Piles of seeds on the ground, plus several hanging feeders and suet produced Pine Grosbeaks, Common Redpolls (65 for the day) and at least one very pale Hoary Redpoll, lots of Blue Jays, a single Canada Jay, single Hairy and Downy woodpeckers, a **White-breasted Nuthatch**, and while the rest of us were in the vans eating bag lunches the hotel had made up for us, Laura spotted a Red-breasted Nuthatch but it flew off before the rest of us got on to it.



White-breasted Nuthatch © Patrick Venables

After lunch we drove through Lac du Bonnet hoping to find more Bohemians, checked out some good habitat on Milner Ridge Road, took backroads to Stead and back to Hwy 304, and finally north and east back to Powerview. Lots of ground covered and plenty of good habitat searched but other than a coyote, and several flocks of Snow Buntings (118 for the day), we had very little to show for our efforts. That evening we planned on making a few after-dark stops in some suitable habitat listening and doing some playback of owl calls. After an earlier dinner, we headed out shortly after 7 p.m. to the Broadlands area where we made quite a few stops on Maskwa Road. At our second stop we heard a Barred Owl calling quite a distance north of the road. This was the spot where a Barred had flown in and was spotted by some of the participants on our previous owl tour, so we got into position and played a couple Barred Owl calls. The owl seemed particularly responsive to only one of the calls but when it was played it immediately called back. After a couple calls we saw it land in some tall roadside trees where it was nicely profiled against the moonlit sky, but shining a light in its direction did not help to see it better. To entice it to move a bit, Ken played the call from a little further away; immediately it flew over the road. Alvin shone the light on it as it flew - a truly memorable sight, and a highlight experience for many. We would make a few more stops, at a couple we heard an owl bark back to our calls but they would not call back or come in so we were unable to identify the caller. There were many big Lynx tracks along the road, and at the last stop Terry and Alvin heard an animal walking with a deliberate gait a short way back in the bush, we thought very possibly a Lynx, but we could not see it. We drove a bit more hoping to see a Lynx along the road, but not tonight. It had been a most successful evening of owling and we got back to the hotel shortly after 9

Day 4 -March 8.

Before breakfast today we would make another trip on Hwy 304 north all the way to Black River. A myriad of snags to check out, and spots where freshly peeled bark indicated the presence of Black-backed or Three-toed woodpeckers, but we would have to settle for a nice Pileated Woodpecker on a snag (the first of 3 for the day), 2 Northern Shrikes, and a couple of Canada Jays. Bags loaded and well fed, we left the hotel shortly after 10, heading for one last look down Maple Creek Road where we would get another Pileated, a Northern Shrike, and then 5 Bald Eagles and a bunch of ravens around what must have been a deer carcass. We stopped by a cattle feedlot for some close looks and photos of a large flock of Snow Buntings and were greeted by a friendly dog with a cute little pup. Driving backroads to Lac du Bonnet we would spot our first of 5 Coyotes for the day. After a pit stop, we took backroads and Hwy 520 to Pinawa, stopping to photograph 3 Ruffed Grouse feeding on buds in some roadside treetops. At a Great Gray Owl Habitat Area sign west of Pinawa we stopped for some group photos.



Great Gray Owl sign © Alvin Dyck

Our next stop was in Elma, where a short walk produced a couple of Red-breasted and White-breasted nuthatches, several Blue Jays, a few Common Redpolls & Black-capped Chickadees, large numbers of Evening Grosbeaks (51 for the day), and most of the day's 37 Pine Grosbeaks. A couple participants spotted a Bohemian Waxwing and while searching for it in some cedar trees, a cooperative **Ruffed Grouse** was found.



Ruffed Grouse © Laura McLarnon

Proceeding south to Hadashville, we stopped at Sophie's restaurant for a pit stop and ordered up a

few of her delicious cinnamon buns for a treat. On Hwy 1 we checked a stretch of woods where a hawk-owl had been reported a few days earlier but had no luck. Heading north of #1 on Spruce Siding Road, we ate our bag lunches while driving slowly and spotted yet another **Northern Shrike** (4 for the day!).



Northern Shrike © Laura McLarnon

It was getting on to mid-afternoon and we had lots of species we still wanted to look for in and around Winnipeg so we beat it back stopping along Hwy 15 to photograph a Coyote and a Red Fox. An **Eastern Screech-Owl** had been reported in Fraser's Grove Park in the north end of the city earlier that morning so we headed there straight off. It was a very noisy spot as a crew had been installing some piping under the river using the park as its base, but there sat the owl by a possible nest hole high in a maple tree next to all this disturbance. What a treat to get to see this little guy as birders in the area said it was only the second time all winter that it had been seen at that spot.



Eastern Screech Owl © Laura McLarnon

Before leaving the area we had a quick look for Northern Cardinal and were fortunate to spot a pair (a write-in & rarity for the province that nests in only a few locations). Proceeding north of the city on Hwy 8 we gave the hawk-owl spot one more look. On nearby Miller Road, we spotted a far off Snowy perched in some trees and later spotted another far-off Snowy on a utility pole but couldn't find a road to get closer. West of Oak Hammock Marsh we took a gravel road north to look for some Short-eared Owls that had been reported there; no luck with the owls but we did finally get good looks at White-tailed Jack Rabbits (5 of them by some willow shrubs not too far off the road). 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 at least 30 White-tailed Deer and some shots of a beautiful Manitoba sunset. After checking into the hotel, we went 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, no mishaps, great company, many good birds and mammals and many excellent 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



EET Manitoba Owls group 2023