

Eagle-Eye Tours

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Manitoba Owls Tour

25 - 27 March 2004 with Rudolph Koes

Trip Report and Checklist

25 March

The tour got underway about 11 a.m., after the last of the participants had arrived. The group was met by sunny skies and mild temperatures. At the northwest edge of Winnipeg one of our first birds was a stunning male Mountain Bluebird, hardly expected and a real bonus. A nearby feeder had several Common Redpolls and a short search in the area delivered a pair of Gray Partridges, high on the wanted-list of several tour members. Snowy Owls had been all but absent this winter and a search west of Winnipeg proved fruitless.

At St. Adolphe we had lunch while waiting for raptors to migrate over. It was rather quiet, but we saw the first of many Bald Eagles we were to see in the following days. An adult Northern Goshawk made a low flyby. Some open water on the Red River in south Winnipeg held a good variety of migrant waterfowl, including Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers. A beaver was also present. At one of the staked-out sites in north Winnipeg we found a grey Eastern Screech-Owl, roosting in a Wood Duck box.

The drive to Lac du Bonnet, our base northeast of Winnipeg for the next two nights, was uneventful, but close to our destination we had some distant views of Sharp-tailed Grouse. After dinner we headed out to Bird River Road, in the hopes of hearing owls, but the wind had shifted to the north and picked-up in the process. A Great Horned Owl, heard in the distance, was all we got for our efforts.

26 March

The day started cool, at about -10° C, and it was overcast. Temperatures later nearly reached the freezing point. Winds were light for most of the day, but unfortunately increased again in the evening.

The day started with a Great Horned Owl on the nest right opposite the motel. The next stop was for a staked-out Black-backed Woodpecker, but the bird did not show. As we were ready to leave, Gary spotted the woodpecker fly in and for the next several minutes we had great, close looks at it. The photographers in the group were in their glory.

Heading towards Pinawa, we soon saw the first of five Northern Shrikes we were to see on the tour and we had decent looks at two Sharp-tailed Grouse. In the small town of Elma we found a noisy, but colourful, flock of about 30 Evening Grosbeaks. Then, in the Sandilands Provincial Forest, we started to look for Great Gray Owls, which had been prominent here during the winter. While searching we saw another male Mountain Bluebird, quite rare so far east, and two Pileated Woodpeckers played hide-and-seek. Ginny spotted our first Great Gray, which was rather distant and really blended in with the trees in the background. Soon we had another and then a third bird, but it was not until Preston found one roosting in jack pines along nearby PR. 503 that good photo opportunities presented themselves. Perhaps even better was a bird later along PR. 308, which was seen to cough up two pellets in quick succession. Both these birds were extremely confiding and we watched and photographed them at length. Our third Pileated Woodpecker was also in this area.

After a filling dinner we once again headed out to listen for owls, but as mentioned above, the conditions had deteriorated and other than a glimpse of a Great Gray we were skunked.

Still, six Great Grays in total, plus Sharp-tailed Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker and two Northern Shrikes, were enough to call it a successful day.

27 March

We woke up to strong southeasterly winds and temperatures around freezing. A feeder in the town of Lac du Bonnet held a good flock of Common Redpolls, which included at least one Hoary. An early flock of Snow Geese landed in a nearby field. Light rain soon changed to a downpour, with lightning and thunder. From then on it rained all day, frequently very hard, and by the end of the day Manitoba had recorded its largest amount of rain ever in the month of March. Suffice it to say that birding was severely restricted and almost entirely from inside the van. This prevented us from exploring a number of hiking trails for hoped-for Spruce Grouse, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee and White-winged Crossbill. If there was one bright spot in all this, it was that if the precipitation had been in the form of snow we would have been hopelessly stranded.

We still managed to find some good birds, including three Great Grays and three Northern Shrikes, all west of Elma. North of Elma Nick alerted us to three Sharp-tailed Grouse near the road; these birds were so close that we could see the feathers on their "snowshoe" toes.

Much of the day was spent driving around the countryside, which netted us some more Bald Eagles, redtails, kestrels and a Rough-legged Hawk, but little else. We returned to Winnipeg at dusk; owling in the evening was out-of-the-question with the rain and wind still continuing strong.

Most tour participants got at least some "lifers", a few had several, and the consensus seemed to be that, weather notwithstanding, this had been a great tour. On a personal note, I enjoyed the experience a lot: good birds and great company - not much more that one could ask for!

Rudolf Koes.

Species list (51 total):

Snow Goose
Canada Goose
Wood Duck
Mallard
Northern Pintail
Northern Shoveler
Gadwall
Ring-necked Duck
Hooded Merganser
Common Merganser
Bald Eagle - 24 birds
Northern Harrier
Northern Goshawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Rough-legged Hawk
American Kestrel
Merlin
Gray Partridge - one pair
Sharp-tailed Grouse - 7+ birds
Wild Turkey
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Rock Pigeon
Eastern Screech-Owl - one
Great Horned Owl - two
Great Gray Owl - **at least nine**
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Black-backed Woodpecker - one male
Pileated Woodpecker - three
Horned Lark
Gray Jay - 16 birds
Blue Jay
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow
Common Raven
Black-capped Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch

Mountain Bluebird - two males
American Robin
Northern Shrike - five!!
European Starling
Dark-eyed Junco
Western Meadowlark
House Finch
Common Redpoll
Hoary Redpoll - at least one
Pine Siskin
Evening Grosbeak
House Sparrow