

WISCONSIN & MINNESOTA IN WINTER

JANUARY 27-FEBRUARY 3, 2019

A trip to the upper Midwest in late January is probably not everyone's idea of a holiday, but then again, birders are a different lot, and this is a trip that most every amateur ornithologist has on their bucket list. Yes, the temperatures can be brutally cold and the wind off of the prairies can make it feel much colder. But there is a stark beauty to the expansive snow-covered landscapes dotted with boreal forests and bogs where the crooked bones of spindly black spruce trees stand as silent sentinels guarding their inhospitable domain. As birders, we come in peace, seeking to find only the avian residents which make this icy realm their winter home. Many of these birds are difficult to find anywhere else on earth and thus braving the frigid climate for a few days provides the best chance of seeing them. For most people, the northern owls are the primary motivator for such a trip. Great Gray, Northern-Hawk and Snowy owls lead the parade, and of course, there is always the chance to Boreal and Northern Saw-whet as well. Sharp-tailed Grouse are also easier to see at this season as they often bud in aspen trees early in the day. Winter finches like Pine and Evening grosbeaks, Red and White-winged crossbills and Common and Hoary redpolls add some color to tour and large flocks of Bohemian Waxwings are present some years. Other high quality birds often seen at this season include Northern Shrike, Rough-legged Hawk, Snow Bunting, Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay, Glaucous and Iceland gulls and Black-backed Woodpecker. The tour also includes a visit to the Buena Vista grasslands in central Wisconsin where a healthy population of Greater Prairie-Chickens can often be found in the snowy fields. The shores of Lake Michigan can also be very interesting in the winter with such birds as Long-tailed Duck, Black and White-winged scoters, Common and Red-breasted mergansers and large numbers of Bald Eagles. If we are especially lucky, a Gyrfalcon will have taken up residence somewhere in the Duluth area and we may even be blessed with a sighting of the "ice falcon." There is also always the chance for other rarities on this tour including Harlequin Duck, Townsend's Solitaire and possibly a rare gull like Slaty-backed or Ivory.

Though the temperatures will be cold we will do much of our birding from, or very near our comfortable heated van and we will stay in excellent hotels that will provide a cozy atmosphere. In short, managing the weather is much easier than one might think and the quality of the birds helps make one forget the icy environment. One caveat regarding the tour is that every midwestern winter is different and thus none of these birds can be guaranteed. More likely is that most will be present, some in large numbers and some in smaller numbers, and probably a few will not be present at all. The itinerary that follows is a framework for the week, but we will be flexible in our day-to-day activities in order to go where the birds are being seen and to maximize everyone's chances of seeing as many of them as possible.

Day 1, January 27, Arrival in Green Bay: The tour begins today with arrivals in Green Bay (airport code GBE). If possible everyone should try to schedule their arrival in Green Bay by 2:00 PM so we can do a bit of birding before dinner. Due to the northern latitude that this trip will be conducted at, the amount of daylight hours are quite limited and generally we will have to

wrap up daily activities by 4:00-4:30 PM. If time allows today, we will visit some areas near Green Bay where Snowy Owls are usually present during the winter. Night in Green Bay.

Day 2, January 28, The Lake Michigan Shore: We'll spend the entire day birding our way south along the coast of Lake Michigan. A series of harbors between Green Bay and Port Washington remain open even in the coldest winters and the open water attracts a nice variety of ducks and gulls. Birds possible today will include Lesser Black-backed Gull, Glaucous Gull and Iceland gulls, Long-tailed Duck, White-winged Scoter, Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser and other more common gulls and ducks. The breakwaters along the lake often have Snowy Owls and in some winters a rarities such as Harlequin Duck, Western Grebe or even an eider turn up. Besides the water birds, Northern Shrike and Rough-legged Hawks are also regular along this route. Night in Green Bay.

Day 3, January 29, Nicolet National Forest: Today we'll drive north from Green Bay about 2.5 hours into the heart of the Nicolet National Forest to search for boreal species. There are many well stocked feeding stations along the route that attract birds like Evening and Pine grosbeaks and Common Redpolls as well as more common residents like Black-capped Chickadee, Blue Jay and Downy and Hairy woodpeckers. Away from the feeders there are areas we can look for Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay, Spruce Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker and both Red and White-winged crossbills. In the town of Three Lakes, where we will have lunch, we can check the abundant mountain ash trees for Bohemian Waxwing. This will be a long day that will begin before dawn, but with many exciting possibilities to keep everyone engaged and interested. Night in Green Bay.

Day 4, January 30, Buena Vista Grasslands and to Duluth: Another early morning departure will take us 90 minutes to the west where a large managed grassland area holds a healthy population of Greater Prairie-Chickens. During the winter the chickens congregate in particular feeding and roosting areas and are usually fairly easy to find in the open fields. In recent years a Gyrfalcon has spent the winter at Buena Vista feasting on the prairie-chickens, but this can't be counted on in 2019. Buena Vista is also a good place for American Tree Sparrows, Northern Shrike, Northern Harrier and Rough-legged Hawks. After a few hours we'll drive northwest with plans to arrive in Duluth by late afternoon. We'll make appropriate detours if anything interesting has been reported. Night in Duluth.

Day 5-7, January 31-February 2, Duluth and Environs: We will have three full days to explore Duluth and its surrounding areas. This area of Minnesota will provide us with the best chance of seeing Great Gray and Northern-Hawk owls. During irruption years dozens of each species can be seen along the roads and highways around town. Sax-Zim bog is generally a hotspot for owls, but in good years they can be quite widespread. In non-irruptive years they are harder to find, but Great Grays are resident in Sax-Zim and diligence will usually turn up this species. In non-irruptive years there are usually a few hawk-owls as well. We'll spend most a day in Sax-Zim looking for owls as well as Sharp-tailed Grouse, Black-billed Magpie, Northern Goshawk, Black-backed Woodpecker and other boreal denizens. On another day we'll drive further west to the area around MacGregor where Sharp-tailed Grouse and magpies are more reliable and the open fields attract Snow Bunting, Northern Shrike and Rough-legged Hawk. In

towns and villages, mountain ash attracts Bohemian Waxwings and feeders have a nice variety of finches including Pine Grosbeak, redpolls and other finches. We will also spend a day driving north along the lakeshore toward the lakeside town of Grand Marais. The Superior National Forests north of Duluth are good places to find Spruce Grouse, which is one of the more difficult species on the tour. If there are any recent burns both Black-backed and American Three-toed (uncommon) woodpeckers can be found. Throughout the tour we will stay plugged in to the local birding community for reports of anything exceptionally rare as well as sightings of the elusive Boreal Owl. The days will be full and there are more than enough options to keep us occupied for three full days. Nights in Duluth.

Day 8, February 3, Flights home from Duluth: Participants can schedule flights home from Duluth anytime today.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

TOUR COST: The cost of the tour will be \$1900 per person from Green Bay. A single supplement of \$475 will be charged to those choosing a single room, or anyone who wants a roommate and for whom we are unable to provide one. The price includes 7 nights of lodging, meals beginning with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8, all ground transportation during the tour, guide service and park entrance fees. It does not include alcoholic beverages, tips or round trip airfare between your home and Green Bay/Duluth.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: In order to reserve a space on the tour, a completed and signed registration form is required along with a \$500 deposit. Registration forms are available on the website www.otusasiotours.com

Deposits should be mailed to:

Otus asio Tours at 900 Hillsborough Road Chapel Hill NC 27516.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made:

90 or more days before the tour departure date (October 30, 2018 or before): 50% of the deposit will be refunded

Less than 90 days before the departure date (October 30, 2018 or later) and after full payment has been received, refunds will be limited to that which can be recouped from vendors, airlines and booking agencies. This may be as little as 25% of the amount paid.

Registrants are strongly encouraged to consider purchasing trip insurance to protect them from financial loss due to cancellation of the tour less than 90 days prior to departure, or for weather issues that could prevent their arrival in Green Bay for the beginning of the tour. An excellent resource for travel insurance is squaremouth.com which is an online clearing house that will help you decide upon and purchase the best travel insurance policy for your trip.

TRANSPORTATION: We will be traveling throughout the tour in a 15-passenger van. These are generally quite large and comfortable. .

PACE OF THE TOUR: This tour will be relatively easy in terms of physical exertion. Due to snow and cold, we will do much of our birding from the vehicle, on short walks along roads or standing and watching feeders. There will be no long or strenuous hikes. Since daylight hours are limited we will not begin most days until 7:30 AM or so and will be finished by 4:30-5:00 PM. There will be days that we leave before dark or arrive at the hotel after dark, but generally the days will be shorter than they are on most birding trips.

CLIMATE & CLOTHING: Obviously the weather on this trip is expected to be cold. Late January in this part of the country can be very cold with temperatures often not rising much above zero. If it is windy it will feel much colder. On the other hand, there can be days that rise into the 30's and if it is sunny, can feel quite comfortable. But in general, you should expect cold weather and snow cover during this trip. You will also need a warm jacket, hat and gloves, warm socks and warm insulated footwear that you can walk in comfortably. On the bright side, much of the birding will be from the van and excursions away from it will be relatively short in duration.

EQUIPMENT: Pack a pair of binoculars in good condition, along with a belt pack or daypack for your daily accessories. Some essential equipment to carry would include sunglasses, lip balm or chapstick and an alarm clock. The sunglasses are especially critical if there is snow on the ground as on sunny days the glare and reflection can be hard on the eyes and cause headaches. Humidity levels during the winter are low, so dry and chapped skin can be an issue. A good supply of hand and facial cream, and lip balm are also essential on this tour. It is always a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items and medications in your carry-on bag, so that in the event of lost luggage you will have your essentials.

BAGGAGE: There will only be one day that we will be traveling with luggage in the van, so space will mostly not be an issue. Even so, it is always a good idea to try and pack as lightly as possible to facilitate comfort when traveling.

INTERNET AVAILABILITY: Wi-Fi is offered at all hotels on this tour.

INFORMATION: For further information contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or otusasiotours@gmail.com.

