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# Minnesota and Arkansas in Winter

Owls, Grosbeaks and Longspurs



# Sax Zim Bog Birding Festival Minnesota and the Quest for Smith's Longspur in Arkansas

Winter 2014

It was Thursday 13th February and I was leaving the gales and torrential rain that were battering the UK, for the cold snowy landscape of Minnesota. The Delta flight from Heathrow actually left early and arrived in good time for my connecting flight to Duluth from Minneapolis, where I met up with Virginia.

We picked up our rental car in Duluth airport and made our way in deep snow to our hotel on the edge of Lake Superior - this was completely frozen over.

We spent 4 days in this area, exploring the Sax Zim Bog and surrounding areas with leaders from the excellent Bird Festival. The scenery was beautiful despite the intense cold (-10 degrees Celsius on average!). We had two days of blue skies and amazing sunshine and one overcast day and one day of snow blizzards!

The festival was well organised, the people all very friendly and the food good. We enjoyed our after dinner talk on Friday night, from Sandy Komito of The Big Year fame. The school buses were fun apart from the windows constantly icing up inside!

The highlights for most were the amazing views of **Snowy Owls** which were un-phased by the crowds. We saw at least 5 Owls of this species and two beautiful **Hawk Owls**. Despite searching we didn't

connect with the **Great Grey Owl** that was wintering but I did see four excellent lifers; on one set of feeders there were at least 20 **Evening Grosbeak**, with plenty of males in stunning plumage.



In several locations we came across the very smart **Grey Jay** and managed to get some good photos. Another bird found on the same feeder in Admiral Road was the **Boreal Chickadee**. There were at least three birds showing

very well and feeding with the numerous **Black-capped Chickadees**, **Red-breasted Nuthatches** and both **Downy** and **Hairy Woodpecker**.

The **American Black-billed Magpie** showed on two occasions and added to my life list (despite looking exactly like our UK magpie). The bog also turned up some other very nice birds to add to our list; **Northern Shrike**, **Northern Goshawk**, plenty of smart **Pine Grosbeaks**



and several very obliging **Ruffed Grouse**. A local Farmer, Eric, came out for a chat one afternoon and showed us where to look for the Sharp-tailed Grouse next time we visit.

We headed north one day and came across a nice party of over 100 **Bohemian Waxwings, Blue Jays, Ravens, White-breasted Nuthatch** and some good-sized flocks of **Snow Buntings**.

There were several feeding stations at properties around the bog, which attracted Chickadees, Grosbeaks and some large parties of



American Goldfinch. We also saw lots of **Red Squirrels, Grey Squirrel, White-tailed Deer** and two **Short-tailed Weasel** in their smart white winter coats and black tips to their tail. There were reports of brief Moose sightings but we only saw tracks.

A nice surprise was the sighting of two **Black-backed Woodpeckers** beside the road late one afternoon, on McDavitt Road.

We skipped the organised tour on our last day to search for Grouse. The day was spent driving through beautiful snow trails in the huge forests north east of Duluth. The grouse eluded us, however we added **Pileated Woodpecker**, a very smart male **Purple Finch** and small flocks of **Pine Siskin** to our trip list.

We had an afternoon flight



booked on the Monday, and so we set off in the morning to check out



the Canal area in the main harbour of Duluth and the Landfill site just south of the city in Wisconsin.

We found another Snowy Owl and 45 Goldeneye and 3 Common Merganser, plus 4 Bald Eagle including

3 Adults. At the landfill we asked about viewing the tip but were told we must watch from the perimeter fence. Despite this we managed to see at least 100 **American Herring Gull**, a **Great Black-backed Gull** and a **Glaucous Gull**.

On Monday afternoon our luck ran out and the weather forced our flight to be cancelled. The next flight was Wednesday and so we managed to hire the last rental car at the airport and set off for the 3 and half hour drive south to



Minneapolis along with a Fireman and his wife who asked for a lift! We all squeezed into the small car and set off.

The next morning was dry and bright and after a lot of delays and very poor service from United Airlines we were under way to Little Rock in Arkansas. A plane change in Chicago gave me an opportunity to see a **Belted Kingfisher** as we came into land!

We spent the remaining two days of our break in Arkansas. A place that turned out to be the complete opposite to Minnesota; namely mild and warm weather and literally thousands of birds in every direction.

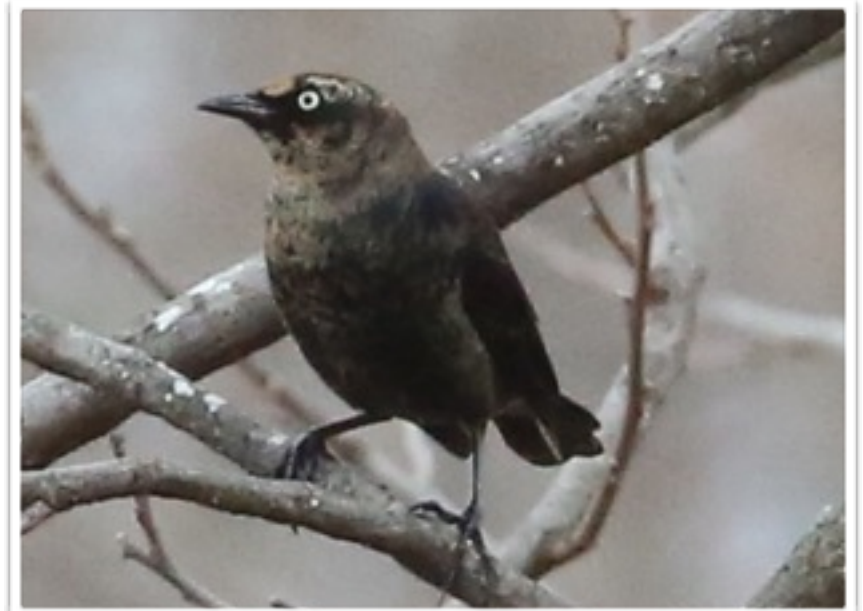


Our base in Stuttgart town meant that we were close to the airfield where the Longspurs winter. Having arrived a day later than planned we were keen to set off early on Wednesday morning and

arrive at the airfield along with around 2000 farmers who were holding an annual farm equipment auction! Carl from the airfield base kindly helped us sign in and guided us to the best areas to search. It was an eventful morning and we were lucky to find 38 **Smith's Longspur** including one which was very confiding. We also saw a cracking **Lapland Longspur**, 3 **Le Conte's Sparrow**, **Eastern Meadowlark**, **Short**

**Eared Owl, Northern Harrier and Horned Lark.** Overhead we saw hundreds of **Snow Geese**.

In the afternoon we visited some lakes and riverine forest. After searching for some time we had great looks at **Red Fox Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird, Vesper Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Pine Warbler, 2 Great Horned Owl** -including one hunting low over a field, **American Golden Plover** and **Wilson's Snipe** and huge numbers of waterfowl including **Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Hooded Merganser, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Green-winged Teal** and both **Snow** and **Ross's Goose**.



It was a fun afternoon and great to see so many feeding birds. The lawns in this area all seemed to have great numbers of **American Robin, Eastern Bluebird, Slate-coloured Junco, Brown-headed Cowbird** and **Northern Cardinals**. The scrub along the roadsides held great numbers of **White-crowned** and **White-throated Sparrow** and **Savannah Sparrow**.

On our last morning we packed and checked out early and headed for the Arkansas River and the Fraser Pike area just south of Little Rock and just 10 minutes from the airport. Here we located a small group of 7 **Sandhill Cranes** that had been reported. We found a flock of **American White Pelicans** and got some better views of **Rusty**

**Blackbird.** We also found **American Wigeon, Wood Ducks, Bufflehead** more **Fox Sparrows** and **Northern Flickers.** **Brown Thrashers** and **Tufted Titmouse** showed well as did a **Yellow-rumped Warbler.** Overhead we saw plenty of **Red-tailed Hawks,** another **Bald Eagle** and **Turkey Vultures** were abundant.

We headed to the airport having seen 107 species in total, including 6 lifers for me and 1 for Virginia. We reluctantly left to fly home but would be looking forward to our next adventure in Colorado!

*Rob Rackliffe*

*21<sup>st</sup> February 2014*