

EASTERN ONTARIO TRIP REPORT January 1 - 4, 2009

Day 1: Drive to Amherst Island

Starting in Delaware County, Debbie and I picked up Edie and headed north, where we met Becky in Scranton. It was a beautiful sunny New Year's Day with many Red-tailed Hawks and 3 Rough-legged Hawks seen, as well as a new bird for this trip, Common Grackle, while driving through New York. We crossed the border at 2pm and headed into Kingston. The Hot Ponds held a plethora of Mallards, American Black Ducks and Hooded Mergansers along with American Coot, Gadwall, female Common Mergansers and 3 Ring-necked Ducks.



Kingston Hot Ponds

We caught the 3:30 ferry for the short ride to Amherst Island on Lake Ontario, and with light fading we headed straight to Owl Woods. In certain years this small patch of woods can produce a wonderful variety of owls. We bundled up as today's high temperature had only reached 9 degrees and walked in through the deciduous section of the woods. There was an inch of snow on the ground covering a sheet of ice making us fully aware of each step we took. The further in we went the more numerous cedars trees became. In one grove we found the bird of the day, a Boreal Owl (*left*), sitting on a branch against the trunk, in full view and fluffed up to keep itself warm.



This winter the meadow vole population has exploded on the island. The voles are a major food source for a number of owls and the reason why so many owls can be found on Amherst. While walking Owl Woods we caught sight of many scurrying away from our footsteps.

Before dark we located a Long-eared Owl in the large stand of Jack Pines, peering down at the four of us. On the way out of the woods there were several small groups of Short-eared Owls hunting at dusk. There was one last owl as we headed back to catch the ferry, an immature Snowy Owl, perched on a telephone pole.

Day 2: Amherst Island; Orillia vicinity

We were back on Amherst Island shortly after dawn watching a male Snowy Owl stalking prey and distant Short-eared Owls making their last forays before settling in for the day. It was far warmer and windier today and we seemed to dodge the snow they were calling for this morning. The open water around on the lee side (north) of the island had a good showing of Greater Scaups and Tundra Swans. A nice find was flock of a dozen White-winged Crossbills feeding on spruce cones as we came in on Marshall Forty Foot Road. This winter there has been a small irruption as the cone crop to the south has been good.

It was the Amherst CBC today, so with many extra pairs of eyes it made locating the owls a little quicker. First up was the Boreal Owl, roosting in a different tree from yesterday followed by a couple of Northern Saw-whet Owls. Seeing these two species in quick succession made it easy to recognize the size and bulk difference between them. The well stocked feeders had many Black-capped Chickadees, Dark-eyed Junco, American Goldfinch, White-breasted Nuthatch, Downy Woodpecker, American Tree Sparrows and a couple of Golden-crowned Kinglets move through. We picked up a dark morph Rough-legged Hawk, American Kestrel and several Northern Harriers on our way out to the late morning ferry.



Looking at Northern Saw-whet Owl. Note the white-wash on the branch below the Saw-whet Owl

It was a long journey west to the Orillia area, punctuated with the obligatory stop at Tim Horton's. A very reliable Northern Hawk Owl was exactly where we expected it to be. Perched at the top of a maple tree it was looking all around in search of any unsuspecting rodent. At one stage we had a flock of 40 Bohemian Waxwings land in the same tree and, interestingly, it did not bother the hawk owl one bit. Our next stops produced our target species: a large family group of Trumpeter Swans at the Narrows, followed by a minimum of 5 Iceland Gulls and a 1st year Glaucous Gull at the dump!



Trumpeter Swans

Through intermittent heavy snow showers at last light, we checked an area where a Great Gray Owl (*below*) was sighted 10 days earlier. The car came to a screeching halt as one was spotted flying parallel to us, low over a field and up into a tree. What excitement! We watched it for 10 minutes flying around looking for voles, perching in 4 different trees, before it flew over the woods and out of sight. It is not too often that you can say you saw the all the "Big Four Northern Owls" in one day.



Day 3: Algonquin; Quebec

Birding when the thermometer reads a frigid zero degrees may seem a little extreme, but on a brilliant sunny day in Algonquin Provincial Park not only is it the norm it is absolutely gorgeous. This wonderful wilderness with its towering spruce and pines, outlining large expanses of flat snow covered lakes, is one of winter's most beautiful locations.



Algonquin Provincial Park

There were never great numbers of any species this morning but we did have a nice variety of winter finches. Pine Grosbeaks were probably the most numerous species, with a few seen at various points all along Highway 60, the only road through the park. A small number of Evening Grosbeaks fed alongside Blue Jay and Pine Grosbeaks at the visitor's center feeders. The Gray Jays, as always, were as confident as ever feeding out of our hands as was a Red-breasted Nuthatch and the fearless Black-capped Chickadees at the Spruce Bog car park. A Red Squirrel was quite happy with the seed offerings as well. Our walks along the Spruce Bog Trail and Opeongo Road produced a couple of White-winged Crossbills, Common Redpolls and three Boreal Chickadees.



Gray Jay (l) note that it is banded; male Evening Grosbeak (r)



Male Pine Grosbeak (l) and Red Squirrel (r)

Working our way eastwards towards Quebec we came across several groups of Wild Turkeys and a massive flock of over 150 Snow Buntings feeding and swirling around a few patches of bare dirt near a barn. We could not really end the day without seeing an owl, so we decided to try for a Great Gray. Once again it was late in the day by the time we reached our destination. We walked through the woods, following a trail of footprints to a meadow. It took many scans and changes of vantage points before Edie found a majestic Great Gray blending in perfectly with the color of the trunks and branches of a deciduous tree. There is so much good habitat for the owls that it makes you wonder how many are actually in less accessible locations this winter in this part of the country? I would say many.

Day 4: Ottawa and environs

The Northern Hawk Owl (*right*) is the only species in its genera, *Surnia*. Though its scientific name comes from the Greek for ill omen, it is its common name that alludes to the fact that it has hawk like characteristics. Indeed it is different from other owls. With its long tail, pointed wings and direct raptor-like flight it is an active daylight hunter specializing in small rodents and birds as large as Ruffed Grouse.

These northern owls, along with Great Gray, Snowy and Boreal, are irruptive species, meaning that in years when the prey population plunges in their normal winter range they venture south. It has been an excellent year for seeing them with no less than 4 Northern Hawk Owls in the Ottawa area alone. We picked one and were rewarded with an extraordinary show. Perched atop an isolated ash tree it was constantly rotating its head looking far and near. It had already hunted successfully this morning as we could clearly see blood on the bill. Taking off, it dropped down towards the snow covered ground in front of us intend on picking off another meal. The rodent must have escaped as the bird came right at us and then lifted up into a tree only meters from us. They seem to have no fear of humans, even trying to stare us down. It then took off and landed in a spruce tree where a small group of Pine Grosbeak proceeded to mob it. Of note in the area was a couple of southern species, a Northern Cardinal and a Northern Mockingbird. Three Common Redpolls and 2 Pine Siskins alighted in the same tree along the main path.





Snow covered fallow agricultural land is ideal Snowy Owl habitat. Can you see it?

Though not the largest, the Snowy Owl is the heaviest of our owls. Against a backdrop of snow covered fields they blend in perfectly when sitting on the ground, but when on top of an evergreen tree they do stick out! I often wonder why the weight of such a bird does not bend these seemingly flimsy branches. We were fortunate to find one in each type of setting. As with the hawk owl, we witnessed the Snowy fly towards us and land on a barn. Based upon the heavy dark markings on the bird it was likely a young female.



Snowy Owl

We made a stop in Ottawa to look for Barrow's Goldeneye but only found their cousins along with many Mallards and a female Common Merganser.

Our last target bird was a western vagrant, a Varied Thrush. For a species that inhabits moist woodlands, this shy beautiful orange and black ground forager, is best seen at backyard feeding stations in winter here in the east. This was the case once more. In a sparsely populated rural area it put in a late afternoon appearance for us just as we were thinking about calling it a day and begin our journey home. This was the 4th time that we have recorded this species on this trip this decade. There were many American Tree Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos and Blue Jays at this location as well as a Downy and Hairy Woodpecker for comparison on the suet.



Varied Thrush

We managed to squeeze out one last bird just before dark, a silhouette of a Great Horned Owl, our 8th owl species. This was just another remarkable experience in what was a very memorable trip.

(Species Seen List below)

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SPECIES SEEN LIST

(the 1st number is the maximum seen in one day; the 2nd number is the number of days it was seen)

Birds:

| | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Tundra Swan 20/2 | Herring Gull 100/2 | Boreal Chickadee 3/1 |
| Trumpeter Swan 9/1 | Iceland Gull 5/1 | Red-breasted Nuthatch 2/1 |
| Mute Swan 1/1 | Glaucous Gull 1/1 | White-breasted Nuthatch 3/4 |
| Canada Goose 100/2 | Greater Black-backed Gull 10/1 | Golden-crowned Kinglet 3/1 |
| Gadwall 30/1 | Rock Pigeon 100/3 | American Robin 10/2 |
| American Black Duck 15/3 | Mourning Dove 20/4 | Varied Thrush 1/1 |
| Mallard 100/3 | Great Horned Owl 1/1 | Northern Mockingbird <i>heard</i> /1 |
| Greater Scaup 60/1 | Snowy Owl 2/2 | Bohemian Waxwing 40/1 |
| Ring-necked Duck 3/1 | Northern Hawk Owl 1/2 | European Starling 30/4 |
| Bufflehead 8/3 | Great Gray Owl 1/2 | American Tree Sparrow 25/3 |
| Common Goldeneye 28/3 | Long-eared Owl 6/1 | Dark-eyed Junco 6/2 |
| Hooded Merganser 20+/1 | Short-eared Owl 6/2 | Snow Bunting 120/2 |
| Common Merganser 3/1 | Boreal Owl 1/2 | Northern Cardinal 1/1 |
| American Coot 8/1 | Northern Saw-whet Owl 2/1 | Common Grackle 3 (NY only) |
| Bald Eagle 1/1 | Downy Woodpecker 2/3 | Pine Grosbeak 25/3 |
| Northern Harrier 3/1 | Hairy Woodpecker 4/2 | House Finch 12/1 |
| Cooper's Hawk 1/1 | Northern Flicker 1 (NY only) | White-winged Crossbill 9/2 |
| Red-tailed Hawk 20/4 | Northern Shrike 1/1 | Common Redpoll 10/3 |
| Rough-legged Hawk 3/3 | Gray Jay 8/1 | Pine Siskin 2/2 |
| American Kestrel 4/1 | Blue Jay 20/3 | American Goldfinch 4/3 |
| Ruffed Grouse 1/1 | American Crow 30/4 | Evening Grosbeak 5/1 |
| Wild Turkey 22/1 | Common Raven 30/1 | House Sparrow 12/2 |
| Ring-billed Gull 4 (NY only) | Black-capped Chickadee 25/4 | 68 species |

Mammals:

| | | |
|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Red Squirrel 2/2 | Black Squirrel 2/1 | White-tailed Deer 30/4 |
| Muskrat 2/2 | Meadow Vole 20/2 | |

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