



# ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

## Canada

### Manitoba – Northern Owls

*1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (7 days)*

## Trip Report



Great Grey Owl by Lev Frid

**Trip report compiled by Tour Leader: Lev Frid**

**Photos by Hank Davis and Lev Frid**

## Tour Summary

On an unseasonably warm evening, our Northern Owls crew assembled in the restaurant of our hotel to enjoy our first dinner and discuss our upcoming adventure.



**Two-barred Crossbill by Lev Frid**

our group was watching it, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer (the famous “Mounties” here in the north) paused to let us know there was another one down the road! A truly Canadian experience. As we continued towards a marsh, we noticed at first one, and then another dark shape perched up on some power poles. Two Great Grey Owls were hunting the marsh, periodically flying off and returning to the posts. Eventually, one bird landed in a tree, providing some nice photo opportunities on a natural perch. Watching these “phantoms of the North” was breathtaking, and certainly one of the biggest highlights of the trip! We were able to spend over an hour watching the owls, while Pine Siskins, Common Redpolls, Two-barred and Red Crossbills provided welcome distractions. The crossbills especially were highly active and vocal, singing and display-flying over us. While it is normally well below zero at this time of year, the balmy unseasonal temperature made it quite pleasant to be outside. Eventually, we noticed one of the owls flatten and stretch itself out while paying attention to something above it. It was trying to hide from a passing Bald Eagle in a potoo-like fashion. Once the threat had passed, both owls decided it was time to end the morning’s hunt and retreat into the deep woods to roost. Time for us to go!



**Northern Hawk Owl by Hank Davis**

We headed up towards Lac du Bonnet to have our lunch, but not before cruising another backroad on the way. Here, we found another Northern Hawk-Owl that was sitting on a power pole right beside the road, making for excellent views. It was unperturbed by our presence and allowed us to approach directly underneath it. Satisfied with our owl haul for the morning, we sat down for a relaxed lunch. We had a long drive to our hotel this afternoon, so we set out shortly after lunch. While driving westwards, we encountered yet another Northern Hawk-Owl on some power lines that flew out into a field a few times, allowing us to view its hawk-like shape and flight style. At this point we had established it was an exceptional year for hawk-owls in Manitoba! We briefly ducked



**Grey Partridge by Lev Frid**

were watching a cracking Snowy Owl through the scope - a relatively heavily marked probable female. After everyone had a satisfying look at this spectacular bird, we approached a bit closer to try for pictures and set up the scope again. After the third time, the bird had decided she'd move to a higher perch and graced us with a view in flight. Surely one of the world's most impressive owls and one that never fails to awe the observer, from the first to the hundredth time! We left her alone and continued our trek towards Hecla.

The lights of the Hecla Lakeview Resort were a welcome sight after a slow drive through what seemed like the middle of nowhere in a heavy snowstorm. Several centimeters of snow had piled up on the road, slowing us down to a crawl. However, we made it just in time for dinner - and briefly saw another Northern Hawk-Owl and a Great Grey Owl on the ride in the fading light! We enjoyed a delicious dinner in this luxurious retreat in the heart of the boreal and settled down for a well-deserved sleep.

The next morning, we went out for a short jaunt around the grounds that yielded good looks at Black-capped Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and several Pine Siskins. After a very hearty breakfast to warm us up, we headed out for a "game drive". Our first stop produced an entire flock of Boreal Chickadees that were giving abnormally great views as they foraged together in some roadside spruces. Some individuals even descended into some low willows for cracking views - not usual for these normally shy chickadees that rarely leave their dense conifer haunts. As we walked a bit further, we began hearing some redpolls, including many in full song, and before long had a large flock sitting in front of us in some birches. There were several spectacular adult males, but we were searching for something more subtle. We sorted out at least two Arctic Redpolls in the flock, their frosty appearance, pale rumps and unstreaked under tail coverts giving them away.



**Snowy Owl by Lev Frid**

We continued along the road. There were several ice fishers out on a very frozen Lake Winnipeg and their offal attracted hundreds of Northern Ravens and several Bald Eagles. After feasting on the fish remains, the eagles would perch regally in lakeside spruce trees for great views of this iconic North American species. A few Ruffed Grouse were feeding on fresh buds on the roadside poplars, allowing for great studies through the scope. A stop at an impressive black spruce bog to try for three-toed woodpeckers didn't produce any, but as a consolation prize,



we had great views of a Northern Shrike, which responded well and perched in the open for scope views of this fascinating raptorial songbird. A pair of Canada Jays were less cooperative, probably because the shrike was around. Our final stop at some seed-laden Speckled Alders afforded great close-up looks at a flock of Common Redpolls and other finches before we headed back to the resort.



**Ruffed Grouse by Hank Davis**

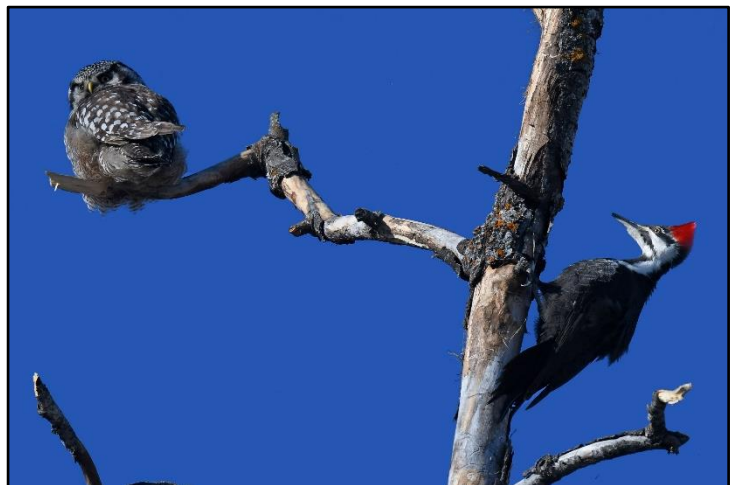
After lunch, we had a chance for a short break while waiting for bird activity to pick up - a good chance to visit the pools or steam room on site. A few folks went out to bird around the property and discovered a Northern Hawk-Owl behind the resort! After our break was over, we headed out to try and find it, as the habitat looked good for a nesting territory. Sure enough, the hawk-owl was perched just above eye-level near a big poplar with several old Pileated Woodpecker nests - likely selecting one of them for its own nest in the coming weeks.

It eventually flew into the top of a dead poplar in the bright sunlight and began calling! Not something you see and hear every day. This was by far our best photography opportunity yet of a Northern Hawk-Owl - on a natural perch in good light. It was about to get better - a female Pileated Woodpecker flew in and landed on the same snag! It noticed the owl and for the next several minutes it flared out its crest and tail, making it appear even bigger than usual, and was engaging and display-drumming at the owl, trying to get it to leave. Eventually, the owl obliged, and we were able to pick our jaws up off the floor. What a sighting!

The rest of the afternoon was rather quiet, with not much activity on the woodpecker front, but with more sightings of Bald Eagles, Ruffed Grouse, a variety of finches, and yet another Northern Hawk-Owl hunting in a marsh. Cindy spotted an early migrant Bufflehead in some open water near the causeway. After dinner, we took advantage of a warm and windless night to try briefly for Boreal Owl not far from the hotel. The owl did not respond, but we heard a great chorus from a pack of distant Grey Wolves – magical!

The following morning, we tried unsuccessfully for Three-toed Woodpeckers but achieving good scope views of Sharp-tailed Grouse perched high in a poplar, before having breakfast and heading out on our long drive to Dauphin. We went slowly along a backroad, noting a pair of Bald Eagles and their huge nest, several more Sharp-tailed Grouse and our first flock of Bohemian Waxwings. They were very cooperative, feasting on some old juniper berries on the ground beside the road and perching in a nearby spruce. They are often tricky to pin down, so we were very happy with our prolonged views!

We got back into the snow after lunch, and it showed no signs of stopping. Once again we were reduced to a crawl, even on the major roads, but made it to our hotel in time for a break before



**Northern Hawk-owl and Pileated Woodpecker by Lev Frid**



**Grey Wolf by Lev Frid**

Canada Jays were much more cooperative than the ones on Hecla, coming over to inspect us at the side of the road. Thankfully, the snowplows were not far behind us and we were able to enjoy relatively snowless roads for the rest of the day!

The major highlight of the day came as we were making our way out of the park towards the town of Wasagaming. We noticed a mammal walking along the road - a Grey Wolf! We pulled over and miraculously the wolf seemed not to notice us, sniffing around the road for a few minutes before casually retreating into the woods. We drove over to where it entered the woods and I attempted an imitation howl to see if it would respond. It did several times, very close to the vehicle in a bone-chilling fashion! Certainly, a highlight of the trip, seeing and hearing this icon of northern wilderness so well. Riding Mountain is full of such surprises. Our drive around Wasagaming in an attempt to find grosbeaks was fruitless (literally and figuratively) - it had been a very poor winter for grosbeaks in southern Manitoba and very few had been observed, most staying in their northern haunts as the result of an excellent mountain-ash crop up there. The fact that roving flocks of hundreds of Bohemian Waxwings had stripped the town of any crabapples that might have attracted the remaining few did not help! We gave it a good try before heading to lunch.

After lunch, we headed to our quaint B&B in Onanole, at the south end of the national park. Cindy, the owner, showed us around and especially emphasized the photographs of Canada Lynx that were taken by past guests in Riding Mountain to whet our appetite. We set off in the evening to a small backroad going through the park in attempts to find the elusive cat and the three-toed woodpeckers. While we saw very fresh tracks of both lynx and Fisher, the animals did not show. Several Red and

White-winged Crossbills were singing, and we encountered another flock of Boreal Chickadees – woodpeckers remained unheard and unseen. We waited until dark to try for Boreal Owl along the road. We systematically searched the areas with the tallest poplars and spruces that the birds use, but despite excellent hearing conditions with virtually no wind, we did not hear any owls of any species. The

having dinner at Mr. Mike's, a Canadian endemic, which everyone enjoyed and it ended up being the favorite restaurant of the tour.

We had breakfast at another famous Canadian eatery - Tim Horton's, before heading into Riding Mountain National Park. The roads had not yet been plowed, so we went quite slowly as there was over 10 cm of snow on the ground in some places! Crossbills were abundant at Riding Mountain this year, and we had excellent views of both species, including males of both feeding side-by-side, and a very close-up view of a male Red Crossbill that had been hit by a car - thankfully a short ride in the warm van had him back in action in a couple of hours and he flew off with his companions. Two family groups of



**Bohemian Waxwing by Hank Davis**





**Boreal Chickadee by Lev Frid**

we decided to take a small detour after lunch to try and find another. It was once again unseasonably warm, a balmy 5C, and pools of water were forming on the roads. A variety of migrant birds were now apparent – Common Starling, Canada Goose, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and American Crows in numbers had arrived overnight. Just as we were driving along the highway, I noticed a Snowy Owl perched on an electrical fixture beside the road. The shoulder was wide enough to park safely and before long we were having amazing views of this provable male bird, much paler than the one we previously saw. It was also a very calm individual and allowed itself to be photographed and observed for a long time at a relatively close range. Shortly afterward, the winds began to pick up out of the north and had started blowing snow from the fields onto the road. This was our cue to start heading back to Winnipeg. We made a slight detour to try and see if we could reach another site for some afternoon owling, but the water on the road had turned to ice and we witnessed several cars leave the road and end up in the ditch, so we decided to turn back – but not after seeing our final owl of the trip, an incubating Great Horned Owl on a large stick nest!

We arrived in Winnipeg safe and sound after battling some traffic in the crazy weather and took a break before having our final dinner together. We reminisced about all the wonderful sightings we had on the trip – from the Grey Wolf to the Great Grey Owls, on a truly unforgettable week of birding in the boreal forest!

Moon was full and while quite spectacular was probably a hindrance to our efforts, as these small owls avoid vocalizing during bright nights. We returned to the bed and breakfast where Cindy had prepared us a lovely home-cooked dinner.

The following day we had a long drive back to Winnipeg, but first, we cruised the road from yesterday again with similar results. However, at one stop George noticed a distant bird calling from the top of a spruce snag – a female Evening Grosbeak! In a winter of virtually no reports, this was an excellent sighting and soon she was calling right over us in another spruce snag, giving great looks in the scope. We had a few options on our way back and considering that we had only seen one Snowy Owl earlier in the tour,



**Great Horned Owl by Hank Davis**

# Manitoba: Northern Owls

## Annotated List of species recorded

**Note:** Number in brackets ( ) indicate number of days on the tour the species was recorded.

List powered through the report generator of our partner iGoTerra.

### Birds (36 in total: 35 seen, 1 heard)

Nomenclature and taxonomy follows Gill, F and D Donsker (Eds). 2019. IOC World Bird List (v 9.2).

**Status codes:** **E** = Endemic, **NE** = Near-endemic, **I** = Introduced

**IUCN codes:** **CR** = Critically endangered, **EN** = Endangered, **VU** = Vulnerable, **EW** = Extinct in the Wild, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient

#### Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies Phasianidae

**Ruffed Grouse** *Bonasa umbellus*

(2) 4 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 2.3 and 1 Riding Mountain NP 5.3.

**Sharp-tailed Grouse** *Tympanuchus phasianellus*

(1) 2 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 4.3 and 30 en route 4.3.

**Grey Partridge** *Perdix perdix*

(2) 4 Oak Hammock Marsh 2.3 and 4 en route 6.3.

#### Ducks, Geese & Swans Anatidae

**Canada Goose** *Branta canadensis*

(1) 3 en route 6.3.

**Bufflehead** *Bucephala albeola*

(1) 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3.

#### Pigeons and Doves Columbidae

**Rock Dove** *Columba livia* var. *domestica*

Observed 3 day(s) in total.

#### Kites, Hawks & Eagles Accipitridae

**Northern Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis*

(1) 1 en route 2.3.

**Bald Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus washingtoniensis*

(5) 5 en route 2.3, 6 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3, 5 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 4.3, 3 en route 5.3 and 2 en route 6.3.

#### Owls Strigidae

**Snowy Owl** *Bubo scandiacus*

(2) 1 Oak Hammock Marsh 2.3 and 1 en route 6.3.

**Great Horned Owl** *Bubo virginianus*

(1) 1 Agassiz Provincial Forest 6.3.

**Great Grey Owl** *Strix nebulosa nebulosa*

(1) 2 Agassiz Provincial Forest 2.3 and 2 en route 2.3.

**Northern Hawk-Owl** *Surnia ulula caparoch*

(3) 1 Agassiz Provincial Forest 2.3, 3 en route 2.3, 2 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3, 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 4.3 and 1 en route 4.3.

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**Woodpeckers Picidae****Downy Woodpecker***Dryobates pubescens*

(1) 1 heard Agassiz Provincial Forest 2.3.

**Hairy Woodpecker***Leuconotopicus villosus*

(5) 1 Agassiz Provincial Forest 2.3, 3 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3, 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 4.3, 1 Riding Mountain NP 5.3 and 1 en route 6.3.

**Pileated Woodpecker***Dryocopus pileatus abieticola*

(3) 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3, 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 4.3 and 1 en route 5.3.

**Shrikes Laniidae****Northern Shrike***Lanius borealis borealis*

(1) 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3.

**Crows, Jays, and Magpies Corvidae****Canada Jay***Perisoreus canadensis*

(3) 2 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3, 5 Riding Mountain NP 5.3 and 2 Riding Mountain NP 6.3.

**Blue Jay***Cyanocitta cristata bromia*

(4) 2 en route 2.3 and up to 4 en route 4-6.3.

**Black-billed Magpie***Pica hudsonia*

Observed 5 day(s) in total.

**American Crow***Corvus brachyrhynchos*

(4) 2 en route 2.3, 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3, 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 4.3 and 7 en route 6.3.

**Northern Raven***Corvus corax*

Observed 5 day(s) in total.

**Waxwings Bombycillidae****Bohemian Waxwing***Bombycilla garrulus pallidiceps*

(3) 14 Riverton 4.3, 30 en route 5.3 and 40 en route 6.3.

**Larks Alaudidae****Horned Lark***Eremophila alpestris*

(2) 2 en route 2.3 and 25 en route 6.3.

**Kinglets Regulidae****Golden-crowned Kinglet***Regulus satrapa*

(1) 1 Riding Mountain NP 6.3.

**Nuthatches Sittidae****Red-breasted Nuthatch***Sitta canadensis*

Observed 5 day(s) in total.

**White-breasted Nuthatch***Sitta carolinensis*

(2) 3 Agassiz Provincial Forest 2.3 and 1 heard Riding Mountain NP 5.3.

**Treecreepers Certhiidae****Brown Creeper***Certhia americana*

(1) 1 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3.

**Starlings Sturnidae****Common Starling***Sturnus vulgaris vulgaris*

(1) 1 en route 6.3.



**Old World Sparrows *Passeridae*****House Sparrow***Passer domesticus domesticus*

(2) 2 en route 5.3 and 5 en route 6.3.

**Finches *Fringillidae*****Evening Grosbeak***Hesperiphona vespertina*

(1) 1 Riding Mountain NP 6.3.

**Common Redpoll***Acanthis flammea*

Observed 5 day(s) in total.

**Arctic Redpoll***Acanthis hornemanni*

(1) 2 Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3.

**Red Crossbill***Loxia curvirostra*

(3) 2 Agassiz Provincial Forest 2.3.

**Two-barred Crossbill***Loxia leucoptera leucoptera*

(5) 10 Agassiz Provincial Forest 2.3 and 5 en route 4.3.

**Pine Siskin***Spinus pinus pinus*

Observed 5 day(s) in total.

**Longspurs and Snow Buntings *Calcariidae*****Snow Bunting***Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis*

(3) 10 en route 2.3, 4 Riverton 4.3 and 8 en route 6.3.

**Mammals (4 in total: 4 seen)****Status codes:** E = Endemic, NE = Near-endemic, I = Introduced**IUCN codes:** CR = Critically endangered, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, EW = Extinct in the Wild, NT = Near Threatened, DD = Data Deficient**Rabbits, Hares *Leporidae*****White-tailed Jackrabbit***Lepus townsendii*

(1) 4 Oak Hammock Marsh 2.3.

**Squirrels *Sciuridae*****Red Squirrel***Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*

(5) Observed en route 2-6.3.

**Wolves, Coyote, Foxes, Jackals *Canidae*****Gray Wolf***Canis lupus*

(2) 3 heard Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 3.3 and 1 Riding Mountain NP 5.3.

**Deer *Cervidae*****White-tailed Deer***Odocoileus virginianus*

(5) Observed en route 2-6.3.

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