

Frozen Bog Birding!

By Rich Hoeg (365DaysOfBirds.Com)

“His true destination was forty-five miles northwest of Duluth. Officially, this place had no name, even the roads had only numbers ... Levantin would be on cherished ground ... the place birders called Sax-Zim Bog!” (The Big Year ... Hollywood Movie starring Steve Martin)

Yes, Sax-Zim Bog is famous among birders having received nationwide accolades via the New York Times and Audubon, but for most Minnesotans this winter birding Mecca is unknown. After all, who would want to explore frozen wilderness bogs in the dead of winter when overnight temperatures may reach minus 30F? Yet it is the combination of failed farms, bog and black spruce forest which makes for this a birding gem. The roads which now give birders access to wilderness areas were built by railroads and lumber companies in the early 1900's to lure settlers to their unwanted land, but the bog was not farm friendly. The growing season was too short, and the ground too wet.

The primary birding target in Sax-Zim Bog is the Great Gray Owl. The bog is the only reliable location in the Lower 48 where this owl may be found year round. If you hope to see a Great Gray Owl, Rich Hoeg who is a volunteer naturalist, recommends arriving by daybreak. Not just owls, but all birds feed more heavily during early morning hours and thus are easier to find. Although owls are nocturnal, on low light, calm winter days Great Gray Owls may hunt till mid morning.

(Photo of a Great Gray Owl taken this winter perched in hoar frost near the Welcome Center)



The best time of the year to see Great Grays hunt is late fall or early winter; young owls have not yet perfected their hunting skills. Hunger is a great motivator! Great Grays hear mice and voles running beneath the snow. After triangulating their prey's location the owls dive, punching their talons through the snow. Other tips for finding owls include driving very slowly (10 mph) while scanning dead trees and Tamarack pines. If you see other cars stopped, especially on owl "hotspots", Admiral and McDavitt Roads, pull over and stop. Scan the trees ahead and you will often see an owl!

There are many other unusual winter birds in the bog including: black-backed woodpeckers, boreal chickadees (they love peanut butter!), gray jays, common redpolls, evening grosbeaks, magpies, northern hawk owls, pine grosbeaks, rough-legged hawks, and the occasional snowy owl. Folks who arrive by dawn, or stay till dusk may be rewarded with the sighting of an Ermine, Mink, Moose, Pine Marten, or Timber Wolf! Remember, this is a wilderness area. You are the visitor, not the animals. Mark "Sparky" Stensaas, Executive Director of the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog (FOSZB), reminds folks that while cruising the Bog looking for owls, "get out of the car!". FOSZB, whose main missions is to support, promote, and protect the Bog, has purchased over 475 acres of sensitive Bog land, including the Warren Nelson and Winterberry Bogs. Both bogs and the South Logging Road have tracked trails in the winter which allow the visitor to hike into black spruce habitats and sometimes find rare American three-toed and black-backed woodpeckers.

(Photo of a Boreal Chickadee taken this winter at the Welcome Center)



If you plan a visit, check the FOSZB web site (saxzim.org) to read food and lodging recommendations, review a Frequently Asked Questions list, and download a birding road map

including the locations of bird feeder stations and hikes. The Welcome Center with its many feeders (located on Owl Avenue north of Meadowlands) is open from early December to early March, 10 to 3 daily. When the Welcome Center building is closed, you are still welcome to walk the grounds, read a White Board listing current sightings, and use the Outhouse. Thus, get out there and enjoy our northern winter in this unique habitat.

Recommended Birding Excursion

- Use accompanying map
- Arrive just south of the Welcome Center by sunrise
- Drive to the Welcome Center will take approximately 60 minutes
- Recommended Routes marked off with “red rectangles”
- Recommended Visits marked off with “black ovals”

Look for Great Grays Owls at Sunrise

- Drive Owl Avenue, Overton Road and Mottonen Road
- Do not exceed 15 mph. If you drive fasted you will not find any owls
- Look at the tops and branches of all trees, and telephone poles
- Great Grays are masters at camouflage

Next visit the Welcome Center (on Owl Avenue)

- You will find a clean outhouse!
- Check the White Board on the door to the Welcome Center for recent sightings
- Check all the bird feeders and deer carcasses
- Gray Jays, Evening Grosbeaks and Pine Grosbeaks are regular visitors
- Hike ½ mile down “Gray Jay Way” from Welcome Center Outbuilding
 - Easy hike ... well packed snow ... no need for snowshoes
 - At the bench look to the right. You will see a small suet feeder. Boreal Chickadees have been regular winter visitors

Drive to the Winterberry Bog (Murphy Road ... just north of Arkola Road / #52)

- Walk the boardwalk ... well packed snow ... no need for snowshoes
- Look for trees with stripped bark
- Stop and listen every 50 yards for “syncopated tapping”. With some luck you will find a Black-Backed Woodpecker. These birds never visit bird feeders, and are only found in the Boreal Forest.
- Feel free to get off the Boardwalk. You will find lots of sidetrails packed down in the snow. Often those trails lead to areas where Black Backed Woodpeckers live. Remember both look for stripped bark and listen!

Feel free to explore more of the Bog, but remember it is a large wilderness area. Be careful when driving. Plows clear the roads wider than the roads are wide. Pulling way over to park could easily get you stuck.

Learn more about Northern Minnesota Birding via [Rich Hoeg's web site!](#) (the author & photographer)

Download a free PDF copy of Rich's book, [Do You Hoot?](#) (or any of his other children's bird books)

