

Owls

ARCTIC

arrive in Minnesota

By JUDD BRINK

On a recent birding trip to Aitkin County, I quickly witnessed the northern owl irruption that is currently taking place, with four species of owls and other hard to find rarities spotted.

What is an owl irruption? Owl irruptions are unpredictable but are closely related to the cycles of their prey of small mammals found in the tundra and arctic. A shortage of this prey causes them to come farther south in search of food. When this event occurs, birders from around the country come flocking to Minnesota for a chance see one of these northern owls to add to their life lists.

A few years ago I took someone from Belgium on a bird watching tour to see our birds in Minnesota and we were able to see a Great-gray Owl. This year Snowy Owls and Northern-hawk Owls started to arrive in late November.

This year has been witness to one of the largest Snowy Owl irruptions on record. They have shown up here and throughout the United States; a single Snowy Owl was even seen as far south as Florida.

The northern owls that people want to see include the Great-gray Owl, Northern-hawk Owl, Snowy Owl and, the most sought after, Boreal Owl. All of them have nested here except for the Snowy Owl.

The Great-gray Owl is the largest in the state, standing at almost 3 feet. This "gray ghost" of bog and peat lands is found in central and northern portions of the state. This region is the most southern range of its breeding grounds which stretch up into Canada and Alaska. The winter season is the best time to view these majestic and cryptic creatures as they tend to come out of the dark bogs to hunt along road sides and logging trails or new clearings. They are very well camouflaged and one can easily overlook one sitting next to the trunk of a large tree or even sitting atop a dead snag. Once discovered you will never forget the amazing experience; their size is very impressive. Over the years of guiding birders to the best viewing locations for Great Grays, we have witnessed their "power plunges" where they can bust through 24 inches of hard snow to catch an unsuspecting vole.

The Northern Hawk Owl is an odd looking bird when perched high in a dead tree, as it looks like a cross between a hawk and an owl. The long tail and pointed wings would suggest a hawk or falcon but the round head is a familiar feature of owls. These unique features and adaptations allow this bird to hunt both mammals and small birds. The Hawk Owl is about the size of a crow and is often seen out in the open or forest edge; once spotted they can be easily identified and photographed. There are a few nesting



GREAT-GRAY OWL

records for this owl in the Sax-Zim Bog area, which is an Important Bird Area (IBA).

For many people the Boreal Owl is the signature bird that can create enough excitement and enthusiasm for a person to hop on a plane to trek through the north woods in January. This rare bird has been on many birders bucket lists and can be one of the most wanted birds to see in the United States. This smaller owl stands less than 10 inches; it is very secretive and solitary most of the year and is found in the mature forests of northern Minnesota. If one is found sunning itself along a quiet trail or backwoods road, it doesn't take long for a crowd to gather just to see and photograph it. Last year during the Sax-Zim Bog Winter Bird Festival, held in February, about 120 people from coast to coast in their rental cars, vans and our festival buses saw and photographed this Boreal Owl that was sunning itself

along a gravel road in the bog. The amazing thing about this unique experience is that the bird stayed for quite some time allowing scopes and cameras to be set up and focused for everyone to enjoy.

The 7th annual Sax-Zim Bog Winter Bird Festival (<http://sax-zimbog.com/birding-festival/>) takes place this year on Feb. 14-16 in Meadowlands. This is a great opportunity to see and learn about the birds that live and thrive in the wildest and coldest places in the state.

For more information about our guided tours (all birding equipment provided with our birding kits) to see these owls and other winter rarities in the area please contact Judd Brink, guide to winter birding, at 218-838-4784 or by email at info@mnbirdguide.com. To view more information about Minnesota's birds visit www.mnbirdguide.com.

Happy Birding!

BOREAL OWL



HAWK OWL



SNOWY OWL



• Photo by Warren Nelson