

Minnesota's Lake Superior Shore & Boundary Waters | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman & Mason Flint | Sept 7-14, 2021

Guides: Dave Mehlman and Mason Flint with participants: Barb, Barbara, Fred, Frank, and Janet



Tues., Sep. 7 Duluth Area Birding | Hawk Ridge

Sax-Zim Bog is a famous birding destination, particularly for seeing northern owls and finches in winter. A hearty group decided to add a late summer visit after Mason received a tip from a friend that a Great Gray Owl had been seen along a stretch of road that passes through the heart of the bog. It was a longshot, but the possibility of seeing North America's largest owl provided enough incentive for the group. We arrived before sunrise, driving slowly north as the first hints of light appeared on the east horizon. Within minutes we saw the outline of a large bird sitting on top of a spruce. We stopped, hoping the bird would stay put, and were rewarded when it flew to a utility pole even closer to the road – it was a Great Gray Owl! We observed the bird for several minutes, watching it fly across the road as a train passed between us. Much to our surprise, we then noticed a second Great Gray Owl further off the road. It was before 6:30 in the morning and the day was already a success with a life bird for most in the group.

After getting our fill of owl watching, we spent the rest of the morning exploring other parts of Sax-Zim. Late summer birding at the bog was quiet but we were rewarded with good looks at Broad-winged and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Northern Harrier, numerous sparrows including Chipping, White-throated, Swamp, and Lincoln's, and a few warblers including Black-and-white and American Redstart.

Hungry after skipping breakfast, we drove to nearby Hibbing for lunch. As we appraised our restaurant options in the middle of Hibbing's charming downtown, a few locals walking by steered us to the Sportsman's



Restaurant and Taverna and we were rewarded with a great meal. After lunch, all agreed we should make a stop at the childhood home of Hibbing's most famous son, Robert Zimmerman, who grew up in town and graduated from Hibbing High School. Mr. Zimmerman is now better known as Bob Dylan. While the group took a few photos outside the home, the current owner stepped out and offered to give us a tour of the house where he shared childhood photos, a signed high school yearbook, and other family mementos.

On our way back to Duluth we stopped at Stone Lake, hoping to get lucky again and find a recently reported LeConte's Sparrow. Windy conditions had the birds hunkered down, so we continued back to the hotel where some of us took a well-deserved nap. After reassembling at the end of the day, the whole group walked to the nearby Lake Avenue Restaurant for our welcome dinner, then met in the Hampton lobby for an overview of the trip and a discussion of the agenda for the next day.

Wed., Sep. 8 Duluth | Two Harbors | Tettegouche State Park | Cascade River | Grand Marais

After a satisfying, help-yourself breakfast at the Hampton, the group loaded up and drove a little bit south of the hotel, over the Duluth Lift Bridge, for a bit of morning birding at Park Point. Apparently, due to the combination of decent weather overnight and a strong westerly wind, Park Point was really hopping that morning! These couple hours proved, by far, to be the best birding of the tour (and, in fact, the best of Dave's total of 3 weeks spent around Lake Superior in 3 states!). Streams of warblers were flying by our head, with all but the American Redstarts going by way too quickly to have a hope of identifying them, unless they landed visibly in some nearby tree or shrub.

We ended less than 2 hours of birding with 12 species of Warblers (Magnolia, Yellow, Yellow-rumped, Tennessee, Nashville, Palm, Black-and-white, Blackpoll, Bay-breasted, Wilson's, American Restart, and Northern Parula), Black-bellied and American Golden-Plover, Swainson's Thrush, and an American Phoebe. Even more impressive than the species tally were the numbers: Dave counted 32 redstarts and 20 Palm Warblers (and undoubtedly missed many), to give an example of the most abundant species, but we saw easily 1,000 individuals stream by that could not be reliably identified! Weaning ourselves from this great place, we returned



to the hotel, Dave went off to pick up sandwich lunches from the Whole Foods Co-Op, and we rounded up all our gear and set off to explore the famed North Shore of Minnesota.

Our first stop was the Two Harbors Lighthouse and adjacent Agate Bay, where the sun was shining, and life was very pleasant. Perhaps the most noticeable animals here were the massive numbers of Common Green Darners (a species of dragonfly), which have a huge migration along the north shore of Lake Superior each fall, and quite a few Monarchs. Although not too many other birds were seen, most folks had a very nice view of a Merlin and a Cape May Warbler and we noticed quite a few Sharp-shinned Hawks flying overhead, in addition to Red-winged Blackbirds and Savannah Sparrows around the parking area. Indeed, upon checking the online hawk count site, today was by far the highest count day of the season for Hawk Ridge.

Our next stop up the shore was Tettegouche State Park, the visitor center for which is right on both the highway and the shore. Upon arrival we ate our sandwiches and other snacks, then hiked around the nearby trails for about an hour. Those who walked down to Shovel Point, overlooking the mouth of the Baptism River, were rewarded with 2 Red-necked Grebes swimming offshore; Dave saw the only Scarlet Tanager of the trip (male in fall plumage) but could not get anyone else on it in time. Oddly, the visitor center feeders were very quiet with no avian traffic. Continuing north, we pulled off the highway at the Cascade River Falls overlook and hiked the short trails to see the beautiful falls which fortunately had water in them. The exact total of birds seen at this lovely spot was zero! Puzzled, we continued north and arrived at our destination for the next 2 nights: the Best Western Plus Superior Inn in the town of Grand Marais. After unpacking and a brief rest, we sent out Mason, our trusty dinner location scout, and he secured us patio seating at a nearby restaurant, My Sister's Place, for a rewarding dinner.

Thurs., Sep. 9 Grand Marais | Grand Portage State Park | Grand Portage National Monument

After breakfast at the Best Western, the group drove to the nearby (and aptly named) Artist's Point that sticks out into Lake Superior from Grand Marais for some early morning birding before hitting the road. This spot proved to be very interesting for a variety of birds, including various shorebirds (Lesser Yellowlegs, Ruddy



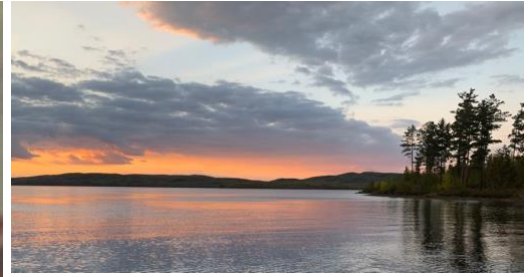
Turnstone, and Semipalmated Plover) foraging on or among the rocky shorelines. A few migrants were also found, including the only Clay-colored Sparrow of the trip. Returning to the hotel, we prepared for our full day exploring the remaining sections of the North Shore up to the Canadian border. On our way through town to Artist's Point, we passed by the famous Beaver House, the one with the walleye sticking through the roof! Unfortunately for us and the walleye, its tail seemed to have fallen off!

Our first stop on the trip north was the Wauswaugoning Bay Overlook (aka the Susie Islands overlook) where we admired the great view to the east out over Lake Superior, with the imposing Mt. Josephine to the south, Canada to the north, and Isle Royale visible in the far distance. The weather was almost perfect!

Continuing, we pulled into Grand Portage State Park right on the Pigeon River at the border, noting the very quiet border crossing station just up ahead. The group walked the easily accessible trail system to the High Falls of the Pigeon, where viewing platforms are nicely located for photographing the highest waterfalls in Minnesota. Few things were to be seen except for some warblers, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Purple Finch. We then ate our box lunches which Dave had procured from the Cook County Co-Op in Grand Marais at the Park's picnic tables and some walked to the obligatory selfie station on the river for photos. Given our proximity to the border, a few folks' cell phones locked on to Canadian cell towers and were greeted with "Welcome to Canada!" messages.

Heading back down the coast, we next stopped at Grand Portage National Monument to learn more about the fascinating history of this major trading center, where beaver and other pelts trapped in the interior of the U.S. and Canada were transported to the Great Lakes for eventual shipping to Europe. In return, supplies and trade goods were brought from Europe to be sent into the interior. We thought about the incredible labor of the voyageurs, who typically carried 180+ pound loads up and down the 8-mile grand portage to get around the impassible falls on the Pigeon—hard to imagine these days! The partially reconstructed trading post of the Northwest Company is a highlight of our tours to this area with its living history demonstrations and copious amounts of information.

Returning to Grand Marais for a brief interlude, we sent our accomplished dinner scout (Mason) off to The Angry Trout to stake a place for us at this popular restaurant. He succeeded after a short while, so Dave rounded up



the group and we drove over to the restaurant, navigating a huge road reconstruction project on the main highway in town along the way. We had to sit outside, due to the popularity of this place, but the food, views, and company were excellent!

Fri., Sep. 10 Gunflint Trail | Chik-Wauk Museum | Gunflint Lodge

To get in some more early morning birding after breakfast at the Best Western, we again went over to Artist's Point and were rewarded! We added Least Sandpiper to our shorebird list, found some American Pipits wandering around on the rocks, and some had an excellent view of a Philadelphia Vireo. Indeed, a great way to start the day. We then returned to the Best Western, Dave picked up another round of sandwiches from the Cook County Co-Op, and off we went to the Gunflint Trail. The first stop was the Pincushion Mountain Trail System overlook, high up on the ridge above Grand Marais. We admired the spectacular view out over town and Lake Superior for a while under sunny skies as flocks of Blue Jays flew by. Next stop was the Moose Viewing Trail a bit further up the Trail. Despite the advertising, no moose were seen, even in our imagination, though we did get an excellent view of a male Black-throated Green Warbler and some Golden-crowned Kinglets.

We pulled into the Chik-Wauk Nature Center toward the end of the trail just after noon and ate our box lunches at the picnic tables nearby; some spotted a female/young Hooded Merganser on the adjacent arm of Saganaga Lake. Most explored the small museum inside to learn about the construction and settlement of the Gunflint Trail (and we learned that the trails had just re-opened today from closure caused by the nearby John Ek Fire!). However, a short walk on the Center's trail system yielded a lot of nice-looking habitats (e.g., a tamarack bog) but no birds. We then headed back down the trail to our home for the next few days: the historic Gunflint Lodge right on Gunflint Lake. Arriving in mid-afternoon, we settled into our cabins and explored our new surroundings a bit. Reconvening on the Lodge's boat dock at 5:30pm, we hopped into the pontoon boat for the sunset dinner cruise, ably helmed by Captain Rich. It was a lovely evening, though with a bit of a breeze and cool temperatures on the water, most were happy to have brought extra layers. Along the way, we saw several Common Loons and a few beavers, though not a whole lot else. Since the US/Canada border runs right down the middle of Gunflint Lake, we enjoyed the unusual experience of being in Canada for some of the trip!



Sat., Sep. 11 Gunflint Lodge

After enjoying a hearty buffet breakfast in the Lodge’s dining room, we reconvened with John, the Lodge’s naturalist, for a guided bird walk to Lonely Lake. Although John certainly knew his stuff, only a few birds could be found, including some Black-capped Chickadees. After lunch in the dining room, Dave and Mason drove the group to the Magnetic Rock trailhead for a hike to the aptly named Magnetic Rock—a well-known local attraction (pun intended!). After about a 1.5-mile hike in a very interesting landscape of rocky ledges, lakes, and young Jack Pine (regenerated after a fire) we arrived at this isolated rock, which apparently has been known for centuries, if not longer. Someone had put a small magnet on the side of the rock, so its magnetism was easily demonstrable. A few birds were seen along the way, including Yellow-rumped (Myrtle), Blackpoll, and Palm Warblers and more Golden-crowned Kinglets. Returning from the hike, we enjoyed dinner in the Lodge’s dining room, assisted by the very affable Parker.

Sun., Sep. 12 Gunflint Lodge

The previous day, John, the Gunflint Lodge naturalist, had told us that our best chances of seeing a moose would be to get up early and drive toward the end of the Gunflint Trail. Therefore, a small, but determined, group got up early with Mason for what we called the “moose cruise.” The trail was very quiet and devoid of traffic as we drove slowly toward the end of the road, about 12 miles from the lodge. The early bird[ers] got the...moose...when we found a cow moose feeding at the edge of a pond. We continued to the end of the trail, stopping to watch beavers working, and enjoyed the wilderness solitude before heading back to the lodge for breakfast. After breakfast, the group reconvened in late morning for a guided canoe trip into the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area from the Lodge beach. Lead by AJ, our guide, 6 intrepid travelers piled into 3 canoes (Barbara, Barb, and AJ in one; Janet and Fred in another; and Dave and Mason in the third) and set off on our wilderness adventure! The trip was about 5.5 miles round trip and proceeded directly across Gunflint Lake and through a small narrow into Magnetic Lake. From these narrows on, the route of the trip roughly paralleled the U.S./Canada border, which is occasionally marked by small white posts set in the rocks on either side. We



crossed Magnetic Lake and landed on the north shore of an arm. There we portaged our gear and the canoes about 100 ft around a non-passable part of the Pine River and canoed another short distance in the small lake below to the head of Little Rock Falls. Though AJ handled the portaging of 2 canoes, “voyageur-in-training” Mason ably shouldered one of the canoes for this relatively short, but very rocky, path. We landed on the rocks at that point, got out of the canoes, and enjoyed the view of the falls, the Pine River continuing below, and on into the vast Wilderness Area. Nearby signs on the trees marked this as the route of the Trans Canada Trail (providing a strong clue as to what side of the border we were on!). We enjoyed the sandwiches that AJ had brought while sitting on the rocks by the waterfalls and noticed a small flock of mostly Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers foraging along the banks of the water, apparently interested in an insect hatch that was happening. Unfortunately, we had to abandon our wilderness paradise to retrace our steps (paddles?) and we made it back to the Lodge, portage and all, with excellent memories and sore arm muscles. After a break, we enjoyed our final dinner at Gunflint Lodge in the dining room.

Mon., Sep. 13 Gunflint Lodge | Hawk Ridge | Duluth

We enjoyed our last buffet breakfast today in the Lodge dining room, then a bit of free time before packing up the vehicles just after 10:00 am. Departing back down the Gunflint Trail, we made a quick stop at the Pincushion Mountain Trail System overlook for a stretch, then drove into Grand Marais to get lunch sandwiches at the Cook County Co-Op (the Gunflint Lodge had somehow misplaced our take-out sandwich order which had been turned in the evening before). Continuing back to Duluth, we stopped at the Gooseberry Falls State Park visitor center and ate our sandwiches on the benches outside. Some then explored the trail system there to see the Middle Falls before we had to depart on our way south. We stopped by the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory on our way back into town, arriving just before 3:00 pm on what appeared to be a slow day for migrating hawks. A few folks saw a Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Bald Eagle fly by, but perhaps the most interesting observation was a very good view of a Franklin’s Ground Squirrel in its burrow right by the side of the road. After this visit, we continued into town and arrived at our final evening destination: the familiar Hampton Inn Canal Park. After getting organized a bit, we went for our final group dinner back to At Sarah’s Table since we had enjoyed it so much the first time—a nice finale to our tour.

Tues., Sep. 14 Departures

This marked departure day, with some heading off in vehicles in various directions and a few others heading to the airport for their various trips home. Rain overnight pretty much washed out any attempt at an early morning birding trip. So ended the 2021 version of the Minnesota Lake Superior Shore and Boundary Waters tour.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Mason Flint - MF), Great Gray Owl (Greg Smith - GS), White-throated Sparrow (Steve Shunk - SS), Mourning Cloak (David Mehlman - DM), Black-throated Green Warbler (Nick Tepper), Bob Dylan Plaque (MF), Pigeon River Falls (DM), Lighthouse at Two Harbors (MF), Lesser Yellowlegs (Barb/Gary Stone), Red Admiral (DM), GP Tour (DM), Common Green Darner (DM), Lookout Photo-op (DM), Artist's Point (DM), Susie Isle (DM), Blue Jay (Doug Greenberg), Gunflint Lake Sunset (DM), Common Loon (Peg Abbott), Canoe Trip (DM), Yellow-rumped Warbler (Nick Tepper), Hawk Ridge (DM), Magnetic Rock (DM), Gooseberry Falls (DM), Bald Eagle (Carol Comeau), Woodland Scene (DM)