

## Trip Report: Sax Sim Bog

By Ellen Linton

Ever since I discovered Mammalwatching.com I have become completely and utterly obsessed. I have been reading and rereading trip reports, listening to podcast episodes, and discovering more and more places to go and mammals to see. However, I hadn't had much opportunity to actually go mammal watching. Up until I learned about my dad and brother's planned trip to the Sax Sim Bog in Minnesota in early January. This was originally planned to be a birding trip only but with my joining mammals also became a big focus. I did attempt to convince them of a detour to Grand Marais, but the long distance between the Bog and Grand Marais meant that it wasn't a possibility. I was also well aware that early January is not the best time for Canadian Lynx, even if we were to make it to Grand Marais, and so I settled to explore the Bog and see what mammals I could find. My main targets were Snowshoe Hare, Short-tailed Weasel, American Marten, North American Porcupine, and Red Squirrel. I believed these mammals would be very likely within the bog and I should place most of my focus on them. There had been reports of Moose and Eastern Timber Wolf from the Bog but these seemed unlikely and so I didn't put much stock into seeing either one. Now even though I am a mammal watcher through and through, I do have a particular interest in owls. I think they're extremely cool birds and I was actually excited for the potential owls we would see on this trip.

### **First Day (Thursday, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2024):**

Thankfully, despite my dad and brother being obsessive birders, they both hold an interest in mammals and were actually interested in a lot of the species I was looking for. We had flown in on Wednesday and made a brief stop at a picnic site in Minneapolis to see Eastern Grey Squirrels. We ended up arriving late at our accommodation, so we decided to wait until Thursday to begin our search. We awoke early Thursday morning and set off before dawn to begin searching for Great Grey Owls. We had brought spotlighting equipment along with a thermal monocular, but we saw nothing except for some White-tailed Deer running alongside the road. For most of the morning after that, we drove up and down McDavitt and Admiral roads because these roads had the most Great Grey Owl sightings. We didn't see anything and so we decided to head over to Mary Lou's feeders. This was where I encountered my first Red Squirrel who was stealing bird food from the feeders. It was quite tame and didn't mind my

photography session with it.



After this we returned to Admiral Road and got a brief glimpse of an American Marten at the feeders. This Marten had been visiting the Admiral Road feeders for quite some time, after volunteers had begun putting out peanut butter. We waited for a few minutes to see if it would come back but when it didn't, we decided to continue driving. As we drove up Admiral Road, we had to suddenly dodge a small rodent who made a mad dash across the road. I was sitting in the back and didn't see it, but both my dad and brother did. We decided to wait until later to attempt to ID it. Aside from the excitement of the rodent, there were no owls to speak of, so we decided to drive up to Walmart for a supply run in the meantime. As we were driving up, we caught a brief glimpse of a Northern Hawk Owl, which was very exciting. We then decided to go to the visitor's center. We reported our sightings, and they told us some info about the mammals in the area. They mentioned the American Marten who'd been visiting the feeders, that there was a resident Short-tailed Weasel who liked to hang out in a log pile by the visitor's center, and that someone had found Bobcat tracks off the highway. I asked about Snowshoe Hares, and they said they found tracks often, but they were rarely spotted. I also asked about Moose, but they said they were infrequent, and it was very unlikely we'd see one. Afterwards, we went outside and met a photographer who was very familiar with the area. She gave us



similar information as we'd gotten in the visitor's center, but she said she'd seen a wolf the day before off a side road on the highway. She also gave us some good tips for the owls. We then decided to walk the trail behind the visitor's center called Grey Jay Way, but there were no mammals and no interesting birds. However, it was absolutely gorgeous.



We returned to Admiral and McDavitt Roads and began driving up and down them again. My brother and I had a brief glimpse of a Great Grey Owl flying deeper into the woods, and we dodged another rodent scrambling across the road. I once again didn't see it and my dad and brother did. They were confident it was the same kind as the one they'd seen earlier. We then decided to drive up the northern section of Admiral Road, which wasn't often visited by the birders in the area. We stopped so my dad could look around for some small bird he'd gotten a glimpse of and must've heard because he began playing calls on his phone to try and deduce what he'd seen. He and my brother were distracted, when I suddenly heard a hooting noise. Think of the stereotypical owl calls you hear in movies. I told them to roll down the windows and as we were listening wolves began howling. This was very exciting, but they were too far north to get to. We drove away and back down Admiral Road and I asked my brother to play the calls of all the owls in the area. Once he got to the Great Grey Owl call, I realized I'd heard one calling right before the wolves began howling. We decided to drive back up to that

part of Admiral Road and see if we could find it. Once we got up there, it was getting dark and so we pulled out the spotlights. My brother was using one and suddenly shouted out in excitement that he'd just seen a Snowshoe Hare. As I was looking, trying to see it for myself, a Great Grey Owl flew above the road! Only my dad saw it, but we were pleased we'd now all seen the bird, even if they were only quick glimpses. We returned our attention to the Snowshoe Hare, when my brother spotted another one. I also saw this one and I was extremely excited. As we kept driving, we saw a total of eight different Snowshoe Hares in this one area. It was as far north as you could drive up Admiral Road on the corner of Norway Ridge Road. We realized they must be denning there, and thought they were very brave because they were all hanging out right next to a house which had fifteen Husky dogs. After this success, we decided to head to dinner where we encountered the same photographer from earlier along with a friend of hers. We told her about the Snowshoe Hare spot we thought was reliable and she said she was going to check it out the next day. Her friend also seemed interested and said she wanted to look too. Once we got back to our accommodations, I searched through my field guide for likely rodents, and showed my dad and brother the illustrations to see if they could pick one out. They both thought they'd seen a Southern Bog Lemming, but I wasn't totally confident in their ID until I saw it for myself later.

#### **Second day (Friday, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024):**

We once again set off early. We again saw some White-tailed Deer along the highway, one of which had been unfortunately run over. We drove down McDavitt and Admiral Roads, when we encountered a Great Grey Owl sitting right by the road on Admiral. There was a very large crowd surrounding the bird and it unfortunately flew off only a minute after we arrived. We stayed for another ten minutes in the hopes the bird would return but it clearly decided it had better things to do. We did see the photographer again and she confirmed she'd seen the Snowshoe Hares and gotten good photos. We continued driving along the same roads and saw a Snowy Owl flying away. Aside from this, we saw some more Red Squirrels at various feeders and some other birds, of which none were what my dad and brother wanted to see. We went back to the corner where the Hares were, but they weren't out and about. We did see another Great Grey Owl once again flying deeper into the woods.

After all this excitement, we decided to head to the visitor's center. The resident Short-tailed Weasel had made an appearance minutes before we got there, and I was a little sad to have missed it. I asked about wolves and the volunteers said they were very rare and seeing one just came down to dumb luck. We also met a lady who'd gone to the Snowshoe Hare spot, and we realized the photographer was the right lady to tell because soon enough every birder in the bog knew where to see Snowshoe Hares. We then decided to walk Grey Jay Way again, looking for Pine Grosbeaks. Personally, I was more interested in going for a stroll, but I hoped they saw one anyway. So, we set off down the trail and I quickly fell behind, because my dad and brother

were determined to make it to the ribcage they put at the end of the trail for the Grosbeaks, while I was happy to meander along. I was caught up in the beauty of the place and I stopped to take a photo of the landscape. After I'd taken some photos, I happened to glance down to my right and spotted a Short-tailed Weasel hopping along. I was so excited I yelled to my family that there was a weasel and also alerted some other people in the process. We watched it hop along for a bit desperately trying to photograph it, but it was too fast. We got good views though and I must say I have never seen such an adorable psychopath. We walked the rest of the trail and found no Grosbeaks, but it seemed we were all riding high on the lovely weasel sighting. It made sense for my dad since he considers himself a bit of a naturalist, but for my die-hard birder brother I was surprised by his excitement at the weasel. We headed back and after we got into the car, my brother put me onto a Lemming he'd seen right by the car. As I was looking at the area he indicated, it made a quick sprint from one bush to another. Because I was staring exactly where it ran, I felt really confident about the ID of it being a Southern Bog Lemming and I was really excited to have finally seen it. It also helped that I'd stolen the front seat from my brother.

The next stop was Winterberry Bog, to photograph a Black-backed woodpecker, which we'd been told were common along the boardwalk. I was happy to take another stroll, so I followed them along the boardwalk. By this time, it was starting to snow, and it was getting quite cold. We found none of the woodpeckers they wanted, but my dad spotted two more Short-tailed Weasels hopping in and out of their burrows right next to the boardwalk. I only got a brief look at them and though we waited in the hopes they'd come out, they didn't reappear. I decided to go back to the car while they continued their search for the woodpecker. I was happy with my choice though, as I was thoroughly entertained by a frantic and seemingly crazy Red Squirrel scrambling along the forest floor and later over my dad's shoe. We then went back to



the Hare spot and found a few amiable enough for us to take photos of.



We then drove back down Admiral, and found a few people stopped for another Great Grey Owl. This one was even closer to the road and with the smaller crowd we got right up to it and got good photos. It took off a few minutes after we got there but we were so pleased with

our encounter we didn't care.



**Third day (Saturday January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024):**

The next day the snow had properly hit with about three inches during the night. We headed out and stopped by the welcome center, where there was very little activity with both mammals and birds. We then drove again to Winterberry Bog, and by this time I was developing a headache. I elected to remain in the car, but it didn't matter either way, as there were no mammals about. There were also no good birds, including the woodpecker my dad and brother were desperately trying to find. After this, my headache was getting very bad, so I decided I wanted to lie down in the room for a bit and carry on later. As we were driving back to our accommodations, I glanced over at an open field right by our rooms and saw a big Canid standing in the field. I said, "what's that", expecting us all to conclude it was a farmer's dog, but when my dad and brother looked at it, they both immediately screamed wolf! That had been my first thought as well, but I was so doubtful we would see one I decided it must be a pet dog. But after the screams from my dad and brother, I became certain it was a wolf and I became so excited I could've jumped into the sky with joy. We stopped and got some far-off pictures, but we were all extremely happy. After watching it for a few minutes it retreated back into the tree

line, and we continued driving.



But a few feet away was a deer carcass, hidden behind some trees in the next field. We realized the wolf must've been looking for that and as we were discussing this, we accidentally missed the turn off to our room. I must admit that in the excitement I completely forgot about my headache, but it would soon worsen due to the next events. We turned around after realizing we'd driven too far, only for our tire to go flat. We had to pull over and began the process of changing it. Thankfully, a good Samaritan named Russ stopped to help us. He helped us get the tire off, get the spare on, and when we discovered the spare was flat, took us to go air it up in his car! He then drove us back and helped us get the spare on again. It's times like these when my faith is restored in humanity.

We still needed to make sure the tire was fine, so I was dropped off to the room to get some rid of my headache, and my dad and brother did the very heroic thing of going off to a car repair service. I settled down and thankfully was able to get my headache under control by the time they returned quite some time later. Car service never goes by quickly, does it? We set off again and they excitedly told me they'd seen the wolf again, but the pictures weren't better than earlier since it was still quite shy. We decided to drive to a road called Stone Lake which we'd heard had American Mink and Muskrat sightings. We drove along the road staring at the



creek running alongside it and eventually came to an open section which we parked at. Unfortunately, due to the dark setting in, we missed the no parking signs there. This led to a particularly unpleasant encounter with a local but after we'd driven off, we did our best to put it out of our minds and focus on celebrating a wonderful trip. We didn't see the Mink or Muskrat, although we did see another small rodent burrowing into the snow right next to the highway later. We couldn't ID it, although it was probably another Southern Bog Lemming.

**Overall thoughts:**

I got seven lifers on this trip and saw three new owl species for me! Even though I missed one of my main targets, the North American Porcupine, the Wolf more than made up for it. My dad and brother only got one lifer with the Great Grey Owl, but this owl is so spectacular they were thrilled. They also really enjoyed seeing the mammals, and they thought it was an excellent trip. This is a great area and if you're interested in both mammals and birds, it is a place you have to go. And trust me, even if you're not a birder, a Great Grey Owl is so awesome you'll want to check it out!

(P.S my brother is way too good at photography!)

