

## Gunflint trail northern Minnesota Charles Foley

Living in Minnesota means I've been able to regularly visit the Gunflint trail to look for wildlife. The Gunflint trail is a long road that runs along the boreal forest adjacent to the Canada/US border starting in Grand Marais, a town on the north shore of Lake Superior. Grand Marais is about a 4 1/2 hour drive from Minneapolis and 2 hours from Duluth. It is one of the best places in Minnesota to look for boreal wildlife and probably one of the best places in the continental US to see Canada lynx. There is at least one tour (with Wise Birding) that offers trips to the area to look for lynx, but I thought I'd add my observations built over a number of visits in case you want to try it independently.

### When to go

Winter is definitely the season for visiting the Gunflint. During the summer the place fills up with campers, fishermen and the many people who own what Minnesotans call 'cabins' which are basically second homes to use as a retreat from the cities. Don't be fooled by the name; what classifies as a 'cabin' in this area would be called a mansion anywhere else. Once the snow and ice moves in though (usually from late November/early December through March), most of the people move out. The main roads are still plowed – Minnesota has a snow plowing network so vast it could probably singlehandedly repel an invading army – but many of the businesses close and the only visitors are a trickle of hardy cross-country skiers and snowmobilers. And as the people disappear, the wildlife emerges. February and March is also breeding season for the lynx and they are more likely to be on the move and thus more visible.

### Where to stay

I've found that the best wildlife action occurs at the very end of the trail. The Gunflint is about 55 miles long and it takes about an hour and a half to drive the length of the trail. The further you get from Grand Marais, the less traffic you'll find on the roads, and once you pass the fork to the Gunflint lodge, you can expect to pretty much have the road to yourself for long periods of time. I've tried various lodges and Airbnb's on the trail, but I now like to stay at the Borderland lodge. It's run by a friendly young couple, is reasonably priced, and is located at the start of the 'good part' of the trail. The lodge only offers dinner on Friday and Saturday evenings, so you'll have to bring your own food – every room has a kitchen – or else eat at one of the other lodges on week-nights. It does however offer a snack menu and happy hour every day. The staff staying at one of the cabins puts food out on their bird feeder, and every night a northern flying squirrel visits for a snack. The timings are irregular, but if you are prepared to wait you'll likely see it. They also have an American marten that wanders around the lodge grounds at night. I've recommended that they put up a feeder with both seeds and peanut butter in the main lodge where it can be seen from the dining room to attract both species. They say they'll start doing that soon, so hopefully both of those species will become reliable fixtures in the future.

One thing to note is that once you're on the trail, the only place you can buy fuel is at the Poplar Lake trail centre (and sometimes at White Pine lodge). However, on occasion I've found the trail centre to be closed and had to drive all the way back to Grand Marais to

fill up, so make sure you keep an eye on your fuel tank – or buy a fuel container and bring 20 litres with you.

#### Where to look

As mentioned above, the best wildlife watching is concentrated around the final 12 miles or so of the trail. For the last 5 trips (each lasting 3 days) I have focused my wildlife watching almost exclusively in this part of the trail. Not only are you more likely to see mammals on this stretch of the road, but when you do see them you're likely to get a longer view as there is less traffic to scare them off. That said, this is a boreal forest in winter and wildlife encounters are few and far between. The Serengeti it is not, so be prepared for many hours or days of driving and seeing very little. In fact, it's not too unusual to only see a red squirrel after a full day of driving up and down the trail. In order to alleviate the tedium and find out what animals are around, it's really helpful to learn your animal tracks. This isn't too difficult as there are only about 10 species likely to be walking through the snow at this time of the year, and I suggest studying up on this in advance. Seeing fresh lynx tracks in the area can provide you with that essential ingredient for mammalwatching: hope!

My technique is to simply drive slowly up and down the main road looking for wildlife. There are a number of side roads leading to private houses, but most of them are posted with 'no entry' signs. However, some side roads are accessible, and they are definitely worth trying. These include the road to the rubbish cans – the turnoff is about 1 mile west of the Seagull ranger post (I have seen lynx twice on this road), the short road to the Chik-Wauk museum, and the road to Sag Lake lodge.

#### Night or day?

Most of my best wildlife sightings on the Gunflint have been during the day. I have come across wolves, moose and red fox a couple of times at night, but frankly the hit rate is low. Because the vegetation is so thick, thermaling is difficult, and you're really just hoping that something will walk along or across the road. Snowshoe hares are the exception; you can quite easily find them with a thermal in the forest edge at night. While I haven't had much luck after dark, others have seen lynx on this stretch of road at night, so it's always worth a shot. Bear in mind that it can get really cold at night with the window down, so make sure you are bundled up and have good gloves. There is also no cell connection in this part of the forest, so in case you get stuck I suggest you keep some blankets or a sleeping bag in the car or carry a small emergency communication device like the Garmin Messenger with you (I believe most iPhones have satellite SOS signal capabilities these days as well).

#### Mammals seen:

Canada lynx (*Felis canadensis*)

I've seen lynx 4 times on the trail. On every occasion the sightings have been between the Seagull ranger station and the end of the trail. Three of the sightings were mid-morning and the other late afternoon and each time the lynx were first seen sitting or walking along the road. There are currently (as of February 2026) at least three lynx in this area, including a male, a female and her immature cub. None of them are particularly tame, so make sure you approach slowly if you want to get a good photo.

### Eastern wolf (*Canis Lycaon*)

Those of you keeping up with the seemingly ever-changing wolf taxonomy, will know that the species in these parts is the Eastern wolf, *Canis lycaon*, which has recently been split from *Canis lupus*, which means it will be a new species for most people. Wolves are common in this area and their tracks are all over the place, though actually seeing one can be trickier. There is usually at least one pair that hunts along the main road between the Borderland lodge and the trails end, and you can usually see their fresh tracks on the road each morning. I have seen them along the road close to the rubbish bins, next to Seagull fishing lodge and in the open area around Larch creek (shown as blue on the map). They can be quite wily and will step off the road and wait for a vehicle to pass. If you're not having any luck seeing them by driving along, I would suggest you park the vehicle at the eastern end of the long empty stretch of road that parallel's Larch creek and just wait.

### Moose (*Alces alces*)

I've seen them several times near Larch creek and on the side road leading to Lake Sag lodge.

### North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*)

There is otter sign along most of the waterways in the area. I've recently had luck seeing one in Larch creek and on Lake Saganaga.

Northern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus*) – comes to feeder to Borderland lodge

Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) – seen twice on this part of the road

Fisher (*Pekania pennanti*) – seen fresh tracks only

American marten (*Martes americana*) – seen tracks only but several lodges report them visiting feeders

Snowshoe hare (*Lepus americanus*) – common at night

American red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – common at the rubbish bins

Short-tailed shrew (*Blarina brevicauda*) – seen once crossing the road

Southern red backed vole (*Clethrionomys gapperi*) – seen once feeding in a tree

Map showing the final section of the Gunflint trail.

