

## **Gunflint Trail, northern Minnesota. March 2022. Charles Foley.**



The Canada lynx is undoubtedly one of the most iconic species of the north woods. Shy, cryptic, mostly solitary and generally nocturnal wherever they overlap with humans, they are often called the ‘ghosts of the forest’. That moniker stems in part because they are very difficult animals to see. It is not unusual for people to live in lynx habitat all of their lives and never come across one. The Gunflint Trail in the Superior National Forest of northern Minnesota has a healthy lynx population, and dedicated tours do often find them during the winter. I therefore assumed (perhaps naively), that if I did enough trips to the north woods and spent enough evenings driving around the snowy trails, I would one day come around a corner and see a lynx sitting in the road. I had tested that theory with 4 prior trips to the Gunflint Trail during the winter, but despite seeing plenty of other wildlife, I had never caught even a glimpse of a lynx. Part of the problem is that the Gunflint Trail is very long, and it’s hard to know which particular corners to concentrate on. So when two avid mammalwatchers, Andreas Jonsson from Sweden and Janco van Gelderen from Holland, reported having recently seen a lynx on the trail, I decided it was time for a 5th attempt. Andreas and Janco very kindly gave me details of where they had seen it, which helped narrow the search area. That said, they warned me that they had driven for 72 hours, and put over 3000 miles on their rental car, and seen one lynx at night for only a few seconds. I figured therefore that I would need to put in plenty of hours using a thermal scope to find one. Given that it is very hard to drive and look through a thermal scope at the same time, I needed a volunteer to work the scope in sub-zero temperatures for hours each night. Fortunately, I had planned for this well in advance and had produced a 15-year-old daughter for precisely this purpose. To be fair, Sierra didn’t require much persuading and happily agreed to join me for a weekend trip.

Leaving on Friday afternoon after school, we headed up north and got to the end of the Gunflint Trail by 10.30pm. After quickly ditching our bags at the lodge, we headed out again to drive up and down the trail. We focused on the northern part of the trail, between the Gunflint lodge and the end of the trail, which is where Andreas and Janco had seen their lynx. It was well below freezing and the whole area was covered in snow and ice. Sierra was on thermal scope duty, and we originally tried having her scan by standing on the front seat and looking out of the moon roof, but her eyes kept on tearing-up from the wind, so eventually we settled with her looking out of her open side window, which at least allowed her to keep somewhat warm. Sierra found a female Moose feeding in some shrubs and several Snowshoe hares hiding in the forest, but nothing else that night, so at 2.30 am we went back to the lodge.

The next morning we dawdled at the lodge before heading out at about 10 am to once again drive up and down the trail. We turned the car around shortly beyond the Seagull Ranger station, where Andreas and Janco had seen their lynx, and started driving back towards the trail end. Driving around a corner, we entered a long, straight section of snow-covered road, and far in the distance I saw something sitting on the edge of the road. 'Binoculars' I shouted to Sierra as I slammed on the brakes. There is always a moment between removing your eyes from whatever you're watching, reaching for your binoculars, lifting them to your eyes, finding the correct focus, alighting on whatever you're trying to find, and getting your brain to register what it is that you're actually seeing which appears to bend the laws of physics and enters some weird sort of time warp where everything slows down. And oddly enough, the rarer the animal you're trying to see, the slower everything becomes. This moment certainly seemed to last an awfully long time before my hands, eyes and brain coordinated to register the image of a mid-sized grey cat sitting by the road, and my mouth saying 'lynx'. Sierra said something along the lines of 'No way' and grabbed the binoculars from me to look for herself (where were her binoculars anyway?). The lynx moved off the road so I gunned the engine and drove rapidly towards the location where it had disappeared. As we approached we saw the animal leaping up the branches of a tree, in an apparent attempt to catch a bird. The lynx then climbed down from the tree and sat on the snow licking itself some 30 meters from us, quite unconcerned by the vehicle. After snapping a few photos and sharing some high-fives, we sat back and watched her, stunned by our good fortune. It was a female lynx and we marveled at her huge feet and owl-like face. After looking around for a while, the lynx started walking along the side of the road towards our car, eventually sauntering past about 7 meters away as we frantically took pictures. Turning the vehicle around, we settled in about 30 meters behind her as she walked along the road. This part of the trail has very little traffic in winter (we saw two cars all morning) so we were able to watch her hunting mostly undisturbed. However, at one point a car came fast around the corner and we held our breath as it bore down on her, but she calmly stepped to the side of the road and crouched down, while the car swerved out of her way and carried on. Clearly she was used to hunting along this road and avoiding traffic, but it did highlight how easily naïve animals could be killed by vehicles. Over the course of the next hour, we watched her unsuccessfully pounce on a vole running beneath the snow, climb another tree chasing after a bird, and have a prolonged stalking session which culminated in her chasing a Red squirrel up and down two trees before the squirrel was able to dart down a small hole and disappear.

After an hour she turned down a side road leading to some rubbish containers and she moved into some thicker bushes, scratching a small hollow in the snow before settling in to wait. The containers were also the stomping grounds of several Red squirrels (presumably the reason the lynx was there), which started a long and noisy chirping session directed at her.

However, with the cat showing no obvious signs of doing any hunting or going anywhere in a hurry, the squirrels quieted down. At this point we decided to leave her, and, utterly elated with how our day had developed, we headed back to the lodge. Shortly before we arrived at the lodge, we turned a corner and saw a female moose standing 20 meters away in the middle of the road. There was a moment of comedy where she tried to run but could not get any traction on the ice, so despite all four legs moving, she remained in the same spot, in good cartoon fashion. She quickly calmed down and went back to feeding on the salt that the road crew had spread on the road. She was clearly a resident animal and we saw her on two further occasions on the trip.

That evening we went out for a long night drive and saw a southern red backed vole climbing up a tree searching for food, a northern flying squirrel coming out of its nest, and about 10 more snowshoe hares. The latter are very handsome animals with their white coats and black ear tips, and there were signs of them everywhere - which bodes well for future lynx numbers. That said, without the thermal scope it's unlikely we would have seen any at all, as they have a tendency to hide in thick cover and produce very little eye-shine meaning they are very hard to find with a torch. We also saw two red foxes, including a handsome colour variant with a deep red coat with black markings, known locally as the 'cross fox'. A truly excellent day of mammalwatching!

The next day we headed to a different part of the Gunflint trail, mostly to see a different part of the forest reserve. Overnight there had been what the locals call 'freezing rain', and all of the tree limbs and needles were covered in a layer of ice crystals, giving the scenery a soft black and white hue. On our way back to the lodge in the early afternoon we took a side road close to where we had seen the female lynx the day before. As we passed the local fire station Sierra shouted 'lynx'! Sure enough, there was a sub-adult cub walking along in front of the fire station doors. Hardly believing our luck, we drove towards it, but it disappeared out of view into some trees. We continued down the road a bit to see if it re-appeared when we saw another lynx, this time a full-grown one, sitting in the road. And then another! This latest addition was also a sub-adult, and we deduced that the adult lynx was the female we had seen yesterday, and these were two of her cubs (Andreas had told me that a female with three cubs had been spotted in the area recently). We parked ourselves at the entrance to a car park and took pictures as the mother walked towards the car, passing within a meter of Sierra as she leaned out of the window. Holy smokes! The mother and cub started chirping to find each other and then each of them walked in a different direction, hunting as they went, while Sierra and I sat open-mouthed in the car, trying to process what we had just seen.

That was the end of our mammalwatching endeavours for the weekend, and even though we were teased by the sight of some very fresh wolf tracks in the snow, we saw no more animals before we headed back home. In the past two days we'd seen three different lynx on two different occasions, watching them for a total of two hours at very close range, and even seen the female hunting, which is a rare sight indeed. We'd also found a good number of the other northern mammal species including our first ever sighting of a moose in Minnesota. Given that on our previous visit to the area we had seen just one short-tailed shrew in 3 days of driving, our tally for this trip was nothing short of astonishing. In the US the long Minnesota winters are the butt of many jokes, but, as weekends like this prove, those long winter days can also be rather special.

Hunting for voles along the road.



Almost too close...



Lynx contemplating life.





Friendly local moose.



Southern red backed vole feeding up a tree.



The morning after freezing rain. This is actually a colour photo.

