

Birding on Minnesota's Gunflint Trail



The Gunflint Trail in northeastern Minnesota is an outstanding destination for birding, providing opportunities to see rare and sought-after species along with a spectacular array of resident and migrating birds as well. The area offers an intriguing mixture of deciduous, conifer, and boreal forest, and is known for such species as Gray Jay, Spruce Grouse, Boreal Chickadee, Evening Grosbeak, Black-backed Woodpecker, Saw Whet and Boreal Owls and a brilliant variety of warblers.

The Gunflint Trail is within the boundaries of the Superior National Forest, which has been named by the American Birding Conservancy as a Globally Important Birding Area. With 155 nesting species, the Superior National Forest has the greatest number of breeding birds of any national forest.

Throughout the spring, birders discover a haven of migrating birds to be identified, noted, and admired. The male Common Merganser makes a cameo appearance for just a couple of weeks each year in May, and this rare opportunity attracts birders eager to see this tuxedo-clad gentleman as he makes his way north. Well over twenty species of warblers, and White-throated Sparrows and Ruby-crowned Kinglets call the Gunflint Trail home, and the time to see them bedecked in their colorful cool-weather plumage is just before the trees bud. Waterfowl concentrate on the smaller lakes that usher out the ice most rapidly, and while there is plenty of opportunity to see these birds at other times, seeing them in such numbers is unique to this time of year.

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During the warmer season, Bald Eagles soar overhead and sightings of these majestic birds and their massive nests are common. If the yodels and tremolos of Common Loons calling across open lakes sound eerily primeval, don't be surprised. These are among the oldest birds on the earth, with an ancestry dating back over forty-five million years.

Black-capped Chickadees are cheery and perpetually hungry; they will be delighted to stop by for dinner if you put a few seeds outside your cabin. Gray Jay, or Whisky Jack (AKA, the "camp robber"), will make daredevil dives for camp food of any kind. Great Grey Owls hunt for food at night, using an expert sense of hearing to hone in on prey.

During the late spring and early July, resident warblers are in full chorus. Among the many species that make this area home are Nashville, Magnolia and Mourning Warblers. Pileated Woodpeckers augment the rhythm section, hammering out their part from the tall treetops.

Great flocks of waterfowl, raptors and songbirds are winging their way south to warmer nesting grounds. A strong pair of binoculars aimed at the face of a full moon in the hours before midnight may reveal silhouettes of geese flying in formation. Day and night, you can hear honking and trumpeting as the summer residents migrate. Migrating Snowbirds appear with the first snowflakes, flying ahead of slow-moving vehicles. Dark-eyed Juncos make their way through the Gunflint Trail area, on their way south.

As winter arrives, Spruce grouse grow tiny scales on their feet, which act as snowshoes. Ruffed grouse bury themselves in the snow, as it begins to accumulate, to stay warm and out of harm's way. Pine Grosbeaks re-appear at feeders, along with Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Some years Redpolls and Siskins are abundant.

The spring Boreal Birding Festival and Fall Migration Classes are annual events that draw birders to the North Shore of Lake Superior and the Gunflint Trail area for three days of guided field trips, workshops, and presentations by experts in the field. Many people come year after year, adding to their life lists and enjoying another trip to the Northwoods.

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Black-backed Woodpeckers

Black-backed Woodpeckers are rare residents of coniferous forests in Northern Minnesota. They inhabit pine, spruce, and tamarack woodland, and their preference for dead and dying trees may create local concentrations of woodpeckers. Birders often visit recently burned-over areas of forest to look for Black-backed. Black-backed Woodpeckers flake the bark off trees, so a pile of bark flakes beneath a tree is a good sign to watch for. The Gunflint Trail is one of the best spots in Minnesota to look for these birds. At the 1998 Gunflint Boreal Birding Festival, most participants had a chance to see Black-backed near a well-protected nest site.

Warblers along the Gunflint Trail

Birders from around the world come to northern Minnesota in late spring and early summer to see and hear warblers on their nesting grounds. Twenty-six species of warbler are regularly seen in northeastern Minnesota, with many of them regular nesters. During breeding season, the species listed below may be seen along the Gunflint, or within easy driving distance of the Trail.

Tennessee Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler

Blackburnian Warbler
Bay-breasted Warbler
Black-and-White Warbler
American Redstart
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush
Connecticut Warbler
Mourning Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Canada Warbler

In addition, the Gunflint Trail runs along an area that has some of the very few Minnesota nesting records of Wilson's Warbler, and other species are possibilities as rare nesters or late migrants. There is no better place to learn and experience warblers in fresh breeding plumage, singing their spring songs.

