

Spring Birding on the Gunflint Trail



The bright green of new growth, the smell of pine needles in the sun, and the songs of warblers in the trees—these are some of the pleasures of birding in spring along the Gunflint Trail in Northern Minnesota. The highlights of the quest for birds along the Trail are calling owls, nesting songbirds, and the chance to see and hear boreal birds more common farther to the north.

Some owls begin the nesting season before spring, but the chance to hear owls calling lasts into May. Barred Owls, Great Horned Owls, Northern Saw-Whet Owls are frequently heard after dark from resorts and cabins along the Trail, and the Gunflint Trail is one of the few places in the Midwest where one has a chance to hear Boreal Owls. Just pick a calm, dry night, step outside your lodging, and give a listen.

Nesting songbirds provide endlessly interesting sights and sounds in the spring. The varied mix of woodlands along the Gunflint Trail offers the chance to hear and see 26 species of wood warblers (18 species are relatively common), a group of birds sometimes referred to as “jewels of the forest” for their bright colors. From late May through the month of June, you’ll hear warblers singing in the morning almost anywhere you stop along the Trail. Listening and then watching for singing birds is the best way to catch a glimpse of warblers.

Continued on next page.

The Gunflint Trail is famous among birders for its boreal species—birds that are common in the inaccessible far north, but not usually seen in Minnesota. American Three-toed Woodpecker, Black-backed Woodpecker, Philadelphia Vireo, Boreal Chickadee, White-winged Crossbills, and Evening Grosbeaks are all species that can be found along the Trail. None of them is easy to find, but there are few places like the Gunflint Trail, where you have a chance looking and listening from a roadside or from near your cabin.

Spring singing is one of the high points of the birding year. In most songbird species, males begin singing as soon as they return from the south. They sing to attract mates, and once successful, they sing to define and defend their territories. Along the Gunflint Trail, this means that from May into July, the morning chorus of bird song is a deep pleasure. Learning the songs of various species is one of the best ways there is to connect with nature, but even if you don't know which song goes with which bird, the sound of birdsong can renew your spirit.

Birds can be quite particular about their nesting habitats, and this can help you find birds that are hard to find otherwise: look and listen for Canada Warblers along creeks where there are groves of mountain maple, for Black-throated Blue Warblers in older stands of sugar maples, and listen for the bright, complicated song of Northern Waterthrushes along riversides.

The Gunflint Trail has two distinct landscape zones, and these determine where to look for which species. The base of the trail, from Grand Marais up to around the middle of the trail, is a mixture of habitats, with fewer conifers. Look here for many of the wood warblers, and for Philadelphia Vireos and Evening Grosbeaks. Stops along creeks, rivers, and lakes can produce many species in this zone.

From the middle of the trail out to the end, the landscape is more boreal—rocky soil and coniferous forests. This is the place to look for rare woodpeckers, crossbills, and Boreal Chickadees. The end of the trail is also the site of the Ham Lake fire of 2007. Watching how the forest comes back from a fire is one of the wonders of nature, and there are several spots along the Gunflint Trail where it will be easy to watch this spring.

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Burned-over areas are also prime nesting areas for birds that use cavities; along the Gunflint Trail that can mean great opportunities to see six species of woodpeckers, American Kestrels, Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, and others. Look for areas with charred, standing trees, and then just watch for activities. These species will be active around nests in May, June, and July, when there can seem to be young birds everywhere.

Searching for birds along the Gunflint Trail in spring promises an engaging outdoor experience, along with the beauty of wildflowers, the smell of the spring forest, and the joy of getting outside in a beautiful, wild place.

Those wishing to experience spring birding with expert guides are invited to register and attend the Spring Boreal Birding and Northern Landscapes Festival. Please see: http://www.northhouse.org/birding/spring/index_spring.html
For general Gunflint Trail information, birding information, go to: <http://www.gunflint-trail.com/> or (1-800) 338-6932.

