Canada

Manitoba – Northern Owls

20th February to 26th February 2024 (7 days)



Snowy Owl by Lev Frid

Manitoba during winter may not sound much like a birding destination, but it is one of Canada's best-kept birding secrets. Every winter, sought-after northern owls – Snowy, Northern Hawk- and Great Grey and Owls, emerge from their usual haunts in the depths of the woods to hunt along forest edges, roadsides, and agricultural fields only a short distance from the capital city of Winnipeg. Manitoba's location in the north means that every winter provides chances to see these birds, and in some years their numbers can be astronomical! Add this to a backdrop of flocks of colourful winter finches and a suite of boreal specialty birds and it becomes a fantastic winter escape!

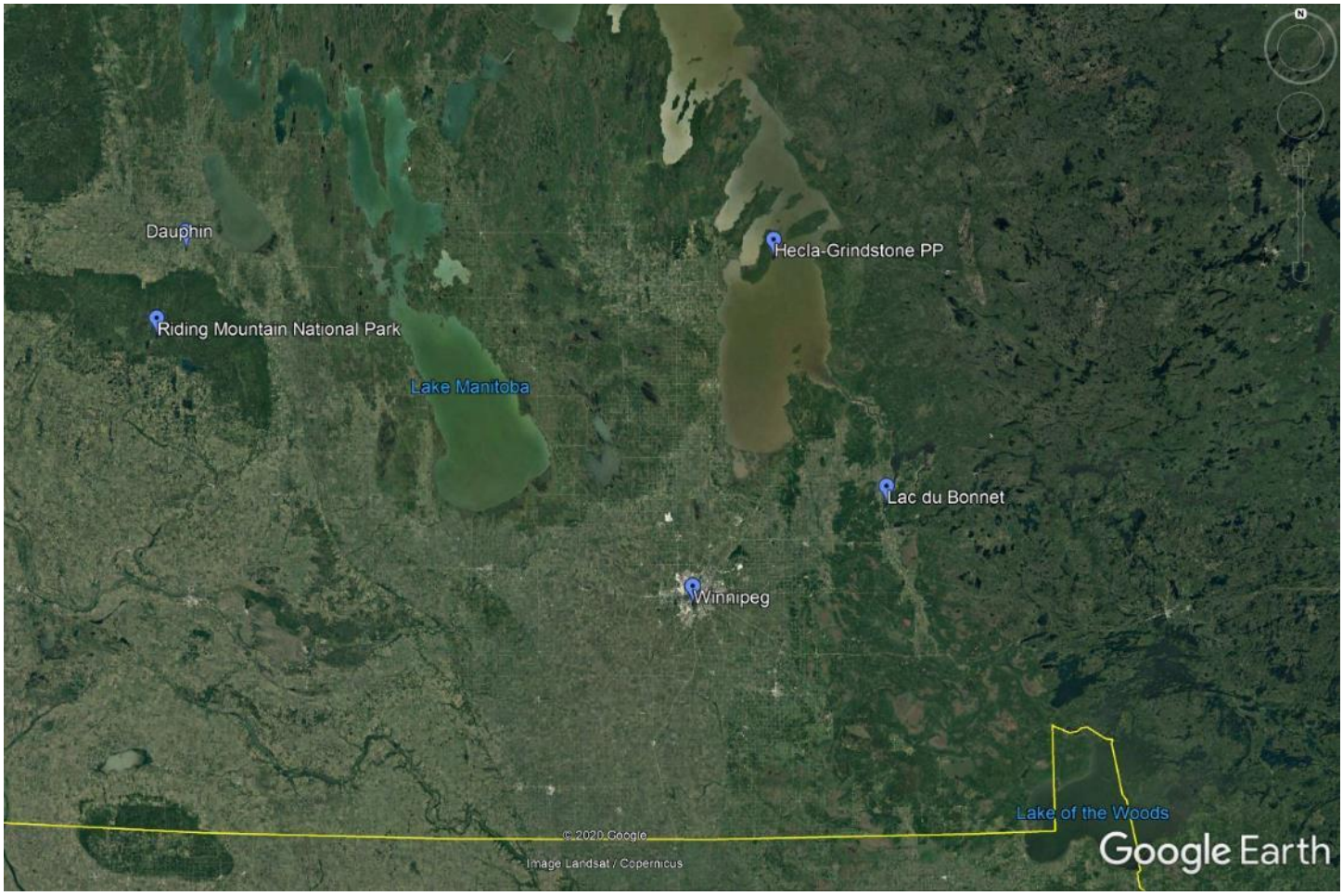
Our Manitoba tour takes us through open agricultural land where we will search for Snowy Owls in addition to Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur, Grey Partridge, Sharp-tailed Grouse, and others, and seek species such as Eastern Screech Owl and Bohemian Waxwing in suburban parkland, and Bald and Golden Eagles and Northern Goshawk overhead. We will work our way northwards to the vast expanse of boreal forest, where we will look for Northern Hawk, Great Grey and Boreal Owl as well as Red and Two-barred Crossbills, Common and Hoary Redpolls, Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskin, Boreal Chickadee, Canada Jay, and others.

We visit two boreal forest parks – Riding Mountain National Park and Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park, which offer unparalleled access into this landscape and its birds, as well as some excellent chances for elusive mammals - most notably Canada Lynx, as well as American Marten, North American Otter, Long-tailed Weasel, Gray Wolf, Red Fox, Moose and White-tailed Deer.

We have many chances to find our targets in a variety of locations, and we will be at the start of the breeding season for many of these birds, which will be singing and easier to find.

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arriva in Winnipeg**
Day 2	**Lac du Bonnet & surrounds**
Day 3	**Oak Hammock Marsh to Hecla**
Day 4	**Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park**
Day 5	**Hecla to Riding Mountain National Park**
Day 6	**Riding Mountain National Park to Winnipeg**
Day 7	**Final departures**



Birding sites in detail

Lac du Bonnet and surrounds. Today we will head east of Winnipeg to scour the vast boreal forest for our first northern owls. We will drive along quiet backroads through spruce bogs and marshes, looking for Northern Hawk-Owl and Great Grey Owl in particular, which in some winters can be found very close to the city! Every year is different, and these boreal wanderers concentrate in different parts of the province each winter. This will be our first of many opportunities to see these fantastic birds, and both species are unafraid of humans and often offer amazing, close-up views. We will also be keeping an eye out for Two-barred and Red Crossbill, Common and Arctic Redpoll, Evening and Pine Grosbeak, Northern Shrike, Ruffed and Spruce (rare) Grouse, Bohemian Waxwing and others. If we are lucky, we may spot the mighty Gyrfalcon, as there's almost always one wintering nearby, or if we are very luck, a day-roosting Boreal Owl in one of Winnipeg's city parks.



Great Grey Owl by Lev Frid

Oak Hammock Marsh. We will start the day at one of Manitoba's most famous parks, Oak Hammock Marsh. Driving slowly through a grid of marshes and agricultural fields, our target here is the incomparable Snowy Owl. In some years, these regal owls are very common, and in others less so. However, no matter the winter, there are always a few wintering in this area and our chances of encountering one are excellent. Often, we can find several birds, from pure white males to dark, speckled females – in some years one can see a dozen or more!

Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park. Situated in the heart of the boreal forest along the shores of Lake Winnipeg, Hecla-Grindstone National Park is a hotspot for both Great Grey and Northern Hawk-Owls. Both species breed in the vast spruce bogs and poplar woods, which are bisected by a long and quiet road, which we will be spend lots of time cruising.



Northern Hawk Owl by Lev Frid

Sometimes the owls can be found right in the hotel grounds! We will drive the road early in the morning, keeping an eye out for owls, and boreal species such as the rare Spruce Grouse, Pileated, Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers, Boreal Chickadee, Canada Jay, and a full suite of finches including Red and Two-barred Crossbills. Ice fishermen on the lake provide a great bounty of fish guts for numerous Bald Eagles.



Pine Grosbeak by Lev Frid

Spending a lot of time on the road means that some fantastic mammal-watching including a very real chance of seeing the ghost-like Canada Lynx as well as Gray Wolf, American Marten, North American Otter, North American Porcupine, Moose and White-tailed Deer. At night, we will try our first chance for the secretive and difficult Boreal Owl, which breeds in tall spruce woods.

Some nearby spruce woods hold Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers, whilst agricultural land often holds flocks of Sharp-tailed Grouse and the possibility of a Gyrfalcon or Snowy Owl.

Riding Mountain National Park. This is Manitoba's keystone park – a huge section of wilderness that plays home to healthy populations of Gray Wolf, Canada Lynx, Moose, White-tailed Deer, Elk, Fisher, American Marten and others. All the boreal bird species we have been seeking up to now can be found here, and in some years Great Grey and Northern Hawk-Owls can be common. In all years, however, it is an excellent place to look for Northern Goshawk, the rare Spruce Grouse and American Three-toed Woodpecker. This will be our best chance to try for Boreal Owl within the park's vast spruce forests.



Evening Grosbeak by Lev Frid

We will spend our time cruising a quiet back road, stopping at various good-looking stretches of habitat that we encounter. Any of the northern owls are possible here, and indeed in years when owls are absent from eastern Manitoba, they can be found here. Mammal-watching can be unparalleled, and the chance of encountering a Canada Lynx here is probably one of the best in the world. We will be keeping a sharp eye out for this pointy-eared cat on the roadside. Feeders around the small towns often provide great studies of Common and Hoary Redpoll, Pine Siskin, Evening Grosbeak and Pine Grosbeak.

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Moderate to easy.
Birding Ease		Most species provide decent visuals in open conditions. Low-density targets that may require repeated efforts.
Accommodation		Comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Little walking, mostly on flat ground with variable substrate (ice & snow).
Vehicles / Roads		Comfortable SUV vehicles. Lots of driving mostly on sealed roads, can be snow drifts and ice.
Photography		Good to very good, weather dependent.
Annoyances		Can be cold to very cold, lots of driving time.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 7;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

- Be prepared for some long drives. While there are fantastic birds sought on this tour, they tend to be quite spread out. To find our targets, we must cover a lot of ground which means significant time on the road.
- We expect all guests to rotate seating positions each day to ensure fairness.
- Accommodation is good throughout, and we expect most days to return to hotel rooms by 18:00 each evening. We may spend a little time out at night on just one or two evenings after dinner, to see what we can find in nocturnal hours.
- At this time of year, expect it to be cold to very cold. Temperatures close to, or below 0°C (32°F), and there is a good possibility of snow and/or rain. Wind chill factor can further reduce your body temperature. Please dress appropriately.
- Strong, warm, waterproof footwear that can handle snow and ice is required. Nearly all birding is roadside but occasionally we may walk on trails just off the road. Long underwear, and wind/rain proof outer layers are recommended.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour will depart from Winnipeg Airport. As day 1 has been set aside as an arrival day, you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude at Winnipeg Airport on day 7 after breakfast.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

Winnipeg James Armstrong Richardson International Airport (IATA: YWG) is the main port of entry and departure for this tour.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements. The following website provides detailed information about visa eligibility and assistance with online applications options where viable: Visa HQ for Travel

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.