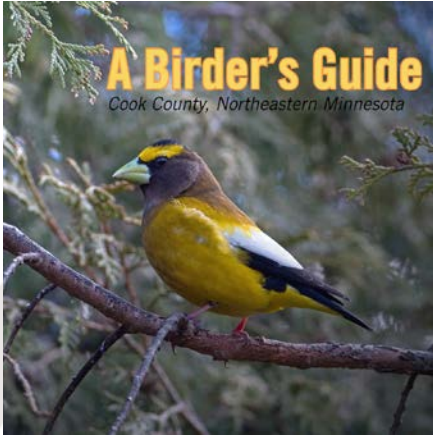


# A Birder's Guide to Cook County, Northeastern Minnesota

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This guide will help you find the birds of Cook County, one of the best birding areas in the upper midwest. The shore of Lake Superior and the wildlands of the northeast are natural treasures that are especially rich in birds. Descriptions of the localities can be found inside, along with information about how to make the most of your birding during each season of the year.

## Birding around the year

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**Spring:** The migration is always most exciting along the shore of Lake Superior. Spring migration is smaller than fall, but spring specialties include Tundra Swan, Sandhill Crane, Gray-cheeked Thrush, American Tree Sparrow, Harris' Sparrow, Lapland Longspur and Rusty Blackbird. Boreal species like Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Owl and Northern Saw-whet Owl begin nesting during spring, which can begin as early as March and extend until June.

**Summer:** In summer the excitement moves inland where specialties include Common Loon, American Black Duck, Bald Eagle, Ruffed Grouse, American Woodcock, Black-billed Cuckoo, Barred Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Whip-poor-will, Olive-sided, Yellow-bellied, and Alder Flycatchers, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Winter and Sedge Wrens, 20 species of warblers, Le Conte's Sparrow, and Evening Grosbeak. The summer breeding season extends from late May through early August.

**Autumn:** the fall migration along the North Shore of Lake Superior is not to be missed! Beginning with the sight of thousands of Common Nighthawks in late August, the sheer quantity of birds moving down the shore makes this area a world-class migration route. Most songbirds come through in August and September. Raptors can be seen in September and October, especially on days with westerly winds. Sea ducks begin arriving in October, which is also the biggest month for rarities of any kind. The fishing operation in Grand Marais attracts thousands of gulls in late fall.

**Winter:** the number of species is much lower during this season, but the species that remain are among the most sought-after birds. Forest specialties include Northern Goshawk, Ruffed Grouse, Spruce Grouse, Snowy Owl, Northern Hawk-Owl, Barred Owl, Great Gray Owl, Boreal Chickadee, Northern Shrike, Gray Jay, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, Red and White-winged Crossbills, Common and Hoary Redpolls, and Evening Grosbeak. These birds are most likely to be seen along the inland routes in this guide. Winter can begin as early as November and extend into March or April.



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## Bald Eagles

Bald Eagles are one of the biggest success stories in bird conservation. Nowadays they can be seen in Cook County at any time of the year. Bald Eagles are scavengers who like to be near water. In the summer, they nest near lakes. During migration they are often near the shore of Lake Superior; on days with westerly winds, they can be seen gliding high above the bluffs. In winter, a few will stay around the Grand Marais harbor as long as there is open water.

## Using this guide

The location of each site can be determined by the (road name, fire number) code given after each description. The fire numbers will appear as blue rectangular signs on each road. Find the road on your map, then watch for the correct fire number sign as you travel the road to be certain that you are in the correct location. Fire numbers are also used in the street address for buildings, and the numbers increase as you move away from Grand Marais.

## Points of Interest

- A. **Sugarloaf Cove:** A nature center interprets the unusual geological formation and rare plants at this site. (9096 west highway 61)
- B. **Father Baraga's Cross:** A monument commemorates the life of a nineteenth century historic figure; this is a great place to scan the lake. (7870 West Highway 61)
- C. **Thompson Falls Trail on Bally Creek Road:** Take the short hike on the west side of the road to the waterfall. (Bally Creek Road, 1 mile south of Eagle Mountain).
- D. **Eagle Mountain Trail:** from the parking lot, hike 3.5 miles to the summit of Minnesota's highest point. (931 The Grade)
- E. **Pincushion Mountain Trails:** from the wayside at the top of the hill above Grand Marais, follow a network of trails into the forest. The wayside is a good hawk watch site during fall migration. (820 Gunflint Trail)
- F. **Honeymoon Bluff:** Enjoy the view of Hungry Jack Lake from the overlook. 429 Clearwater Road.
- G. **Cross River Landing:** walk to the small, quiet lake near the road. (10736 Gunflint Trail)
- H. **Portage Brook Overlook:** view a stream surrounded by Northwoods wetlands. (2436 Arrowhead Trail)
- I. **Horseshoe Bay Landing:** Stop and scan the beauty of Lake Superior. (5280 East Highway 61)
- J. **Mt. Rose Trail:** from the National Monument, hike to the top of nearby Mt. Rose.
- K. **Mt. Josephine Trail:** from the rest stop, enjoy a panoramic view of Lake Superior; from the trail a spectacular view of the northern forest.

## Birding Routes

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**Gunflint Trail (County Road 12).** The Gunflint Trail, starting at Grand Marais and ending near Sea Gull and Saganaga lakes in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, leads deep into the heart of the boreal forest. For birding highlights, stop at the spots noted in this guide but in the summer and winter, the

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birding can be good anywhere. The forest along the lower half of the road runs through more conifers, which host more of the boreal specialties, such as the Boreal Chickadee, the Spruce Grouse, and the Black-backed or Three-toed Woodpecker.

**Highway 61 from Grand Marais to Oberg Mountain.** Starting in the harbor at Grand Marais and running southwest along the shore to USFS 336 and Oberg Mountain, this is another great fall route. It is also popular in the summer, with stops along the way to view breeding birds on their nesting grounds. Likely sightings include the Black-throated Blue Warbler, and over 15 species of nesting wood warblers.

**Shoe Lake Road.** In the summer and winter, from Grand Marais, drive up the Gunflint Trail (County Road 12). Stop at the South Brule River to bird, and just beyond there, turn right on the Greenwood Lake Road (USFS 309). In four miles, at the three-way intersection at Assinika Creek, turn left on the Shoe Lake Road (FR313) and follow it through one of the wildest spots in Minnesota to the Arrowhead Trail. Follow the Arrowhead back to Lake Superior. Along this route, you may find almost any species that inhabits northeastern Minnesota, including area specialties like the Black-backed Woodpecker, and in the summer, the Winter Wren and the Alder Flycatcher.

**Caribou Trail.** Beginning on the shore just east of Lutsen, follow the Caribou Trail (County Road 4) north to The Grade (County Road 170). Drive east and return to Grand Marais via County Road 158. Along the way, visit Thompson Falls and climb Eagle Mountain, the highest point in the state of Minnesota. In late winter, stop along this route to listen for owls.

## Birding Locations

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1. **Taconite Harbor.** Follow the road down to the boat landing on Lake Superior. The grassy clearings and parking lot often attract Short-eared Owls, Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs or American Pipits in October. 8324 West Highway 61
2. **Oberg Mountain.** Black-throated Blue Warblers nest at the crest of this bluff in the sugar maples. In June/early July, listen for their slow, rising “zhe, zhe, zhe, zhe, zhee” song. These warblers spend their time in crowns of trees, so hope for a glimpse from the trail as you look into trees growing below you. 6201 West Highway 61, then Onion River Road.
3. **Caribou Trail.** This road leads through a diverse collection of northern Minnesota habitats. During the breeding season, try different habitats to hear a variety of songs. In winter, watch for Ruffed or Spruce Grouse along the road. In March, April and May listen for owls.
4. **Spruce Creek Ponds.** The shallow ponds here can attract a wide variety of species. This is unusual habitat along the North Shore, so this is one of the best spots to find migrating shorebirds, waterfowl and rails. The grassy areas may attract longspurs, Horned Larks and meadowlarks in October. Park at the gate and walk in to the ponds and grassy openings. 4183 West Highway 61
5. **Bally Ski Loop.** In June and July, as well as migration (May in the spring, August through October in the fall), hike these trails through a range of northern habitats. Listen anytime for the loud “churr” sound of the Evening Grosbeaks – big yellow-and-black finches. 393 Bally Creek Road

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6. **Cut Face Creek Wayside & Good Harbor Bay Wayside.** In the fall, the bay here is the most consistent spot in Minnesota for Long-tailed Ducks. Watch for large rafts of dark-and-light ducks, and for the spiky tails of the males. This is a good spot for other ducks too. 2762 West Highway 61
7. **Recreational Park & Sweetheart Bluff.** In fall migration, the campground is a great spot to look for songbirds that stop for a rest. In October, the open ground in the campground almost always has flocks of longspurs or Horned Larks. Hiking trails lead up the bluff and along the lake.
8. **Grand Marais Harbor.** During migration, the harbor has seen a dazzling variety of birds. Scan the large flocks of Herring Gulls for rarer species, scope the water for waterfowl, and keep your eyes on any land birds around you. Any species of migratory bird could end up here! Bald Eagles are almost always present, and River Otters often play here.
9. **Artist Point & East Bay.** Artist Point is the miniature forest on the point to the east of the harbor. In fall, this is a good spot for Brown Creepers, Golden-crowned Kinglets and sparrow species. From the rocks on the lake side, scan the lake for loons, grebes and other divers. The East Bay is also well worth scanning during migration for loons and ducks. Look for scaup, scoters, Long-tailed Ducks and mergansers.
10. **The Fen by the Radio Towers.** The fen trail leads from the parking area and passes through a variety of habitats. In early summer, it is worth trying for Philadelphia Vireo and Wilson's Warblers here. Take the Old Ski Hill Road (County Road 64) off the Gunflint Trail to the parking lot. The fen trail can be found across the road from the parking area, heading west to the fen.
11. **Trout Lake Road & Kimball Lake.** Wherever this road passes through groves of sugar maples, listen for Black-throated Blue Warblers, Philadelphia Vireos and other deciduous-tree-loving species during breeding season. Look for American Wood-Pewee, Wood Thrush and Red-eyed Vireo. Gunflint Trail to County Road 140.
12. **Moose Viewing Trail.** The almost solid conifer forest here makes it a good place to try for Boreal Chickadee anytime of the year. (Listen for their nasal "chick-a-schneer, schneer," but look quickly, because they are more shy than Black-capped Chickadees.) it's a good place to look for moose too. 1319 Gunflint Trail.
13. **South Brule River.** Three-toed Woodpeckers have nested along this parking lot. During summer, from the snowmobile bridge on the other side of the Gunflint Trail, watch and listen for Least and Alder Flycatchers, Swamp Sparrows, Northern Waterthrushes and Eastern Phoebes. 1319 Gunflint Trail
14. **Shoe Lake Road.** This road leads through one of the most remote areas of Minnesota. Both lynx and a wide diversity of birds have been seen on this road. Look for Black-backed Woodpecker, Gray Jay and Golden-crowned Kinglets year-round.
15. **Lima Mountain Road Loop.** This road and the Lima Grade are famous boreal birding spots. In the dense coniferous forest, listen for Boreal Chickadees and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers in the summer. Check the burns and open areas for Black-backed or Three-toed Woodpeckers. Watch for Spruce Grouse, especially around the triangle formed where the Lima Mountain Road and Lima Grade meet. In spots where the river approaches the Lima Grade, look for River Otters. 6109 Gunflint Trail



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16. **North Brule River.** Southeast of the river, explore the road construction storage area (an old CCC camp) for nesting birds in June and July. Look for Blackburnian Warblers, Blue-headed Vireo and Northern Waterthrush. Across the highway bridge, northeast of the river there is another parking pullout. The first Boreal Owl nest in the lower 48 states was found here in 1978 and the Boreal Owls have been heard singing here again in recent years. 6160 Gunflint Trail
17. **East Bearskin Campground.** This is a good, easy place for a birding hike. Listen for the mewing or scolding chatter of the resident Gray Jays any time of year. During migration, scan the lake for ducks. 194 East Bearskin Road.
18. **Hungry Jack Road.** This has proven to be another good boreal forest road. During migration and summer, a wide range of northern species can be found here. In winter, try for finches, Pine Grosbeaks, large black-and-red finches (females are young and gray), call with a sweet whistled sound. County Road 65
19. **Old Gunflint Trail.** You might want to take the time to drive this side-loop along the new Gunflint Trail. Both roads run through similar northern habitats, but it is easier to stop here. In winter, look for Ruffed Grouse eating buds in the tops of aspen trees. 8233 Gunflint Trail
20. **Gunflint Lake High Cliffs.** These trails lead through a variety of northern habitats. Access the trail from the overlook parking lot. This is a good spot for Barred Owl and for woodpeckers, including Downy, Hairy, Pileated, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Northern Flicker. Look for nests from late May through early August. Some of the lodges have trail maps for this area. 9435 Gunflint Trail
21. **Magnetic Rock Trail & Kekakabic Trail.** The Magnetic Rock Trail leads a quarter-mile into the boreal forest and beyond that into blowdown and prescribed-burn areas. The Kekekabic, which also shows a forest habitat in transition from the blowdown in \_\_\_\_\_, is a major hiking trail that covers 37 miles to Ely and passes by numerous lakes. Both of these trails are good spots to look for Black-backed Woodpeckers and other northern species, including Spruce and Ruffed Grouse. 11040 and 11005 Gunflint Trail.
22. **Seagull Guard Station Cut/Burn Area.** This has been a good spot to try for Black-backed or Three-toed Woodpeckers. Listen for the sounds of these birds flaking bark off partially dead trees in the blowdown areas. Some years, Northern Hawk-Owls have come here in the winter. 11456 Gunflint Trail
23. **Moose Pond Road.** Scan the lagoon here in spring, summer or fall for ducks and shorebirds in summer, watch for the peaked, blackish heads of Ring-necked Ducks. 12355 Gunflint Trail
24. **Trail's End Campground.** The tall pines here often host Bald Eagles in spring and summer. (they have nested here some years). There is also a good spot for Great Blue Herons and moose. Gray Jays are common here year-round, and in winter this is a good spot to listen for the chattering of finches such as crossbills, redpolls and Pine Siskins. 12559 Gunflint Trail
25. **The Marsh on County Road 60.** One of the only large cattail marshes in Cook County can be scanned from the road. At dawn during breeding season, listen for the pumping sound of American Bitterns, the oinking of Virginia Rails or the winnying of Soras. The marsh is private property, so please stay on the road. 1470 Gunflint Trail then County Road 60 for 2.3 miles – 392-475 County Road 60.



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26. **Croftville Road.** Park at one end of this short loop and hike the road in the spring or fall. You might find migratory songbirds of almost any kind in the trees of Croftville. During late autumn watch for mockingbirds, solitaires, and sparrows. 1558 East Highway 61.
27. **Five Mile Rock.** Five Mile Rock often hosts Bald Eagles, Double-crested Cormorants and Herring Gulls. This is also a good spot to scan for waterfowl. Look for Long-tailed Ducks and scoters, among many other species. East Highway 61.
28. **Kadunce River Wayside.** Park here to scan Lake Superior or to hike up the scenic river gorge. Belted Kingfishers may nest in the sandy banks along the river. Bald Eagles sometimes sit on the ground at the mouth of this and other North Shore rivers. 2980 East Highway 61.
29. **Paradise Beach.** The rocky islands off Paradise Beach are the best spot in Minnesota to look for scoters – big, black diving ducks. Use a scope or binoculars to scan far out from shore especially in late autumn. 3500 East Highway 61.
30. **Hovland Dock and Area.** Scan the bay for ducks and check along the road for migrants in May and from September through November. All property except the dock area is private land so please be respectful by staying only on the area around the dock. On the bay, look for loons, grebes, goldeneyes, and other waterfowl. 4914 East Highway 61.
31. **National Monument & Encampment Area in Grand Portage.** In spring and summer watch the open field – unusual habitat in Cook County – for Brown Thrashers and other brush-lovers such as Gray Catbird and Clay-colored Sparrow. The dock behind the stockade is a good place to scan Lake Superior. The stream east of the stockade has willows and buckthorn that attract birds. This is the starting point for the Grand Portage Trail.
32. **Grand Portage Trail.** This nine-mile historic footpath is a National Designated Historic Trail. It extends northwest through a wide variety of habitats, including (about five miles from the lake) a large marsh. Most of the forest is deciduous.
33. **Bay Road.** The large bay is visible from anywhere along this road. In migration, land birds often stop along the shore here. Bald Eagles can be seen here as long as there is open water. In May and from September through November, look for migrating waterfowl, loons and grebes.
34. **Sewage Ponds off Upper Road.** Sewage ponds, which are important migration habitats in spring and fall are rare in Cook County, so don't miss these ponds. Watch for waterfowl, shorebirds, and gulls. The sewage ponds are private land and part of the Grand Portage Reservation. We have obtained permission to direct birders to this property with the understanding that they will not abuse the access privilege. If you have a group of more than 5-6 people, please call Grand Portage Lodge to ask if your group can be accommodated.
35. **Voyageur Dock Area.** The dock area provides another good spot to scan Grand Portage Bay from the east side. Look for Bald Eagles year-round; in May or during the fall look for loons, grebes, ducks, geese, and swans.
36. **Grand Portage, Highway 61 (pullout at Mount Josephine).** The overlook is a great vantage above Wauswagoning Bay. The view is spectacular and in the spring and summer you can hear many birds singing from here. 8920 East Highway 61.



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# Superior National Forest named One of America's Globally Important Bird Areas

In recognition of its efforts to conserve wild birds and their habitats, the Superior National Forest has been named by the [American Bird Conservancy as one of 100 Globally Important Bird Areas](#). With 155 nesting species, the Superior National Forest has the greatest number of breeding birds of any national forest.

The Superior National Forest is featured in the American Bird Conservancy's book, *The American Bird Conservancy Guide to the 500 Most Important Bird Areas in the United States* published by Random House in 2003. The book contains detailed site descriptions and species information for 500 important bird areas as well as illustrations of some of the representative birds.

## Birding Code of Ethics

1. Promote the welfare of birds and their environment.
2. Respect the law and rights of others.
3. Ensure that feeders, nest structures, and other artificial bird environments are safe.
4. Group birding, whether organized or impromptu, requires special care.

Please follow this code and distribute it and teach others.

This Code of Birding Ethics has been developed by the American Birding Association (ABA). For a more complete version of this Code: <http://aba.org/>

**Pick up a road map of Cook County at one of our information centers.**

**Tofte Info Center**  
7136 West Highway 61  
Tofte, MN 55615  
Phone # (218) 663-7804

**Grand Marais Info Center**  
116 West Highway 61  
Grand Marais, MN 55604  
Phone # (218) 387-2524