

Canada & the United States, winter 2009-1010

Contributed by Jos
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With plunging temperatures and a general exodus of birds, the northern extremes of the American continent are not perhaps amongst the most obvious of destinations for a winter birding trip. However, for a few select species, the season is at its prime - and naturally it was for these that I had planned my visit.

The result was five Snowy Owls, one Boreal Owl, another 24 owls of various species, a good section of raptors, Grey Jays and Boreal Chickadees, two WOLF, a flock of 117 Harlequins, a 'Waxwing Double' and numerous other northern specialities.

Concentrating on four main areas and groups of birds, my journey took me 5700 km through spectacular winter landscapes in both Canada and the north-east of the USA. Main localities visited included:

- The Niagara River - one of the best spots in the world for early winter concentrations of gulls, a total of 19 species recorded. Also, as neighbouring waters freeze, influxes of waterfowl.

- Algonquin Provincial Park - a stunning locality, expansive forests rich in boreal bird species, plus good chances of mammals.

- Amherst and Wolfe Islands - renowned wintering grounds for owls and raptors, particularly Amherst.

- The Atlantic Seacoast - mostly Cape Cod and Plum Island in Massachusetts, but also Cape May and New York.

Wintering seaduck, alcids, grebes and divers, as well as raptors, owls and passerines. With temperatures as low as minus 10 C in New York and minus 23 in Algonquin, the region was experiencing conditions considerably colder than usual, but I was actually very lucky with the weather - with the exception of freezing rain on Wolfe Island, other days were either sunny or at least bright. A trip of this nature does, however, run real risk of being severely impacted by adverse weather, either disrupting birding or simply leaving sites unreachable. Indeed, had I planned my itinerary differently by just a few days, the trip would have been memorable for reasons other than birds - heavy snow and blizzards hit almost all localities either in the days preceding my trip or immediately after I left. DAILY LOG. Birds and Birding. 18 December. Bumpy Journeys. Nothing like an eventful start to a trip! After adventures boarding the flight in Vilnius and problems authorising my credit card to pick up a rental car in New York, I was out on the open roads, assuming nothing more could go wrong. It was 6.00 p.m. local time, I settled down for the long drive ahead, admiring the views of the passing Manhattan skyline and clicking on the radio ...oh heck, every station was talking of a massive snow storm approaching, the likes of which had not been seen since 2003, motorists advised to stay off the roads, etc! With the storm tracking in from the south, it seemed the natural option to try and outrun it, so northward I went, driving into the night towards Canada. An Amtrak train was already reported stuck, its passengers thereafter stranded for more than 24 hours, but the road I took was clear. Seven hundred kilometres north, now in the early hours of the morning and a full 30 hours since I left home, I decided a rest was in order. I crossed the US-Canada border at Niagara Falls, then slept in the car for a couple of hours to await sunrise, time for the birding day to begin. What a journey! 19 December. Niagara River. Alive with the aerobatics of tens of thousands of birds, the Niagara River attracts one of the greatest gatherings of gulls in the world. With turbulent waters keeping the river ice-free, vast flocks congregate in early winter, the species mix commonly totalling a dozen or more species, including up to 10% of the global Bonaparte's Gull population. Add to this, impressive concentration of waterfowl and the entire 56 km of river becomes one of the true legendary winter birding localities in all North America. And into this I began my first day's birding. A mild minus 5 C and a light dusting of snow on the ground. Parked just upstream of the falls, encrusted layers of ice coating road, tree and building alike. Slipped and slithered to the river, stood a moment in awe at the spectacle - clouds of spray rising from the lip of the mighty falls, an incessant roar of water and literally thousands of birds carpeting shingle islands and rocks. Superb stuff, began scanning through - Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls absolutely everywhere, tens of thousands of them, plus flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls hawking the waters at the fall's edge, most dainty and agile. Amongst the hordes, here and elsewhere on the river, would hide selective specials - a couple of Thayer's Gulls had been reported, a lone California Gull and a dozen or so white-winged gulls, the task of the day to seek them out. Little effort required for the Great Black-backed Gulls dotted amongst the flocks, only a little to find a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls, a scarce bird at the local level. Then hard graft time kicked in, settling beneath a rock wall to start the bird-by-bird search, island after island of birds to check! Many pleasant distractions - a total of 20 Hooded Mergansers, a trio of American Wigeons and the first of many Black Ducks on the trip - then, after an hour of river gazing, the first jackpot of the day. Initially resting on a far shingle bank, there it was, a first-year Thayer's Gull amongst numerous Herring Gulls. A new species for me, I was just congratulating myself and double checking the finer details of identification when suddenly, presumably the result of an unseen falcon, the entire sky was alive with gulls and up went the Thayer's Gull - several splendid close-range fly-bys, then off it drifted, into the mists of the falls and I lost the bird. Not having heart to start my scans again, I left and decided for a quick walk in the woodlands of the nearby Dufferin Island. Ambushed within seconds by Black-capped Chickadees, cheeky chaps all too happy to use a stretched palm as a mobile food tray. A most enjoyable hour in the wood, the dozen or so chickadees jumping all over me, grabbing sunflower seeds and generally being right little characters. Equally tame, White-breasted Nuthatches, a few Northern Cardinals and Dark-eyed Juncos, plus two Downy Woodpeckers. Nice though these were, I was itching to venture yonder, to the Niagara River Gorge that stretches northward from the falls. With the waters churning and a soup of small fish, these lower reaches of the river truly are the gull hotspots of the region. First stop, the Whirlpool, a 90 degree turn in the gorge forcing the river into a violent spin, the resultant eddies and whitewater a magnet to thousands of

Bonaparte's Gulls. From the top of the gorge, with a bird's eye view, amongst the swirls of graceful gulls, a lone Little Gull hawked. A few kilometers further, the Sir Adam Beck Generating Station loomed, the huge turbines offering fish sliced and served to the waiting frenzy of gulls. A tough task indeed here, amongst the tens of thousands of mixed gulls, an occasional California Gull frequently lurked on rocks below the dam wall - search high and low, I could not find this Ontario rarity, but rather easier to pick out, the first white-winged gulls of the trip, a single Glaucous Gull and four Iceland Gulls, taking the day's total to nine species so far. Blue Jays flitted across the road, American Crows on a grassy embankment, it was now mid-afternoon and time to travel the few kilometres more to Niagara-on-the-Lake, the meeting point of the river and the mighty Lake Ontario, over 300 km in length and effectively an inland sea. And sea it might have been, the waters were alive with seaduck - in rafts from the rivermouth to horizon, flocks of White-winged Scoters, Greater Scaup and Long-tailed Ducks, all bobbing in their hundreds, an impressive sight for an inland locality. In amongst them, 150 or so Common Goldeneye, a few Redheads and the first divers of the trip, or loons whilst I was travelling, a single Great Northern Diver, with a Red-throated Diver beyond. Only a couple of days short of the winter solstice, the evening was already beginning to draw in, not so bad it gave good excuse to catch up with some much needed rest, but first there still awaited one last treat, the nightly flight of Bonaparte's Gull from the river to Lake Ontario for roost. Quite a magical sight, a sudden arrival, then a single spiralling cloud of birds, rising and falling, hugging the river till spilling out across the lake. Counts were pretty difficult, hundreds passing, the flocks bulging into thousands as dusk fell, but doing my best, I'd say that 26,000 Bonaparte's Gulls passed that evening, a splendid finale to the first day. 20 December. Niagara River. Niagara, day two. First stop, a return to Dufferin Island to search out land birds - Black-capped Chickadees and White-breasted Nuthatches as friendly as ever, both taking food from the hand. Several Downy Woodpeckers, a flock of American Goldfinches and a Brown Creeper too, the latter one of only two seen on the trip. Nearby, in the district of Chippawa, garden feeders added an excellent selection of birds - a Red-bellied Woodpecker on a suet feeder, later to be replaced by a Downy Woodpecker, dozens of Black-capped Chickadees zipping in and out, then two smart Tufted Titmice. Also an American Tree Sparrow amongst the House Sparrows, several Northern Cardinals hopping about, a Mourning Dove and a flock of nine American Robins. Then it was back to the river, today's route taking me south along the scenic Niagara Parkway, following the river all the way to Lake Erie. The river wide and serene, gulls gave way to flotillas of duck, numbers growing ever higher as Erie neared. Common Goldeneye and Goosander in the early kilometres, flocks totalling some hundreds, but as the journey progressed a most exquisite duck began to appear. First a pair, then odd individuals here and there, then flocks of a dozen and more, splendid Bufflehead, a top class duck. Also, congregations of Greater Scaup and Redheads, plus amongst numerous Canada Geese, a total of 18 Tundra Swans at the river's edge. Land birds too, occasional Blue Jays, small scatterings of American Tree Sparrows in riverside scrub, plus another Red-bellied Woodpecker and, feeding on grass with European Starlings, one Northern Flicker. As Lake Erie approached, the sight that appeared was a feast for the eyes - to the backdrop of Buffalo City on the U.S. side, Buffleheads galore! In rafts of thousands, bobbing amongst ice, this was really a staggering sight, the birds slowly drifting on the current, then wheeling back in arcs across the sky to return to their original location, one of the highlights of the day. With that I decided to return to the bubbling waters of Sir Adam Beck, attempt number two on the California Gull. Seen thousands in California, but adding another species to the gull fest did appeal, so a bright sunny afternoon, just a few degrees below freezing, saw me back at the generating station, peering down at the maelstrom of gulls. And peer at them I did, all to no avail, five corking Iceland Gulls congregated on a bank, two Lesser Black-backed Gulls sat on rocks, but the gull mass failed to reveal its hidden Californian guest, dip number one! Behind, a flock of 35 American Robins busied themselves on wooded grasslands, an American Kestrel sat on power lines and I decided Dufferin Island deserved another visit. Armed with more sunflower seeds, yet again most popular with the Black-capped Chickadees, I took an evening stroll. Dark-eyed Juncos rooting about, a lone Song Sparrow at a path's edge, a Winter Wren, one more Tufted Titmouse, the final birds of the day. 21 December. Transit Day. Leaving the waters of Niagara, today was to see me travelling the 400 km north to the wilds of Algonquin Provincial Park, home to boreal specialities and the eagerly-awaited centrepiece of my trip. On route, naturally time to enjoy a few birding stops, primarily along the southern shores of Lake Ontario. Started with a morning scan over the bay at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Bonaparte's Gulls streaming towards the river, pods of White-winged Scoter on the lake. Two little blobs bobbing in the surf turned out to be Slavonian Grebes, stacks of offshore birds Red-breasted Mergansers. With an Iceland Gull loafing on the beach, it was then time to head east along the shores. Initially turned inland, touring lanes and byways for wintering raptors and passerines - not enormously successful, the tally merely totalling six Rough-legged Buzzards, a couple of American Kestrels and passerines limited to the odd American Robin, a single Northern Mockingbird and one flock of American Tree Sparrows. Back on the lake, the vast rafts of many hundred White-winged Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Greater Scaup, peppered with Goldeneyes, Red-breasted Mergansers and Bufflehead, suggested the Fifty-Point Conservation Area was an area surely worthy of a longer pause, but I was eager to move on, arrival at Algonquin area before dark was desirable. The drive from Hamilton round to Toronto would better be done with eyes closed, an industrialised urbanisation of little appeal, the only birds of note European Starlings in wheeling flocks. From Toronto northwards, however, an immediate transformation - snowfields abutting pine forests, all most scenic and much the essence of Canada. Leaving Lake Ontario, the temperatures began to fall and the snow began to get deeper - by the time I reached Huntsville, 200 km north, already it was minus 12 C. A quick stroll along the river revealed little other than a few Mallard on the shrinking pools of ice-free water, so I stocked up in the local supermarket and headed on, next stop the quaint Wolf Den, a rustic log-built hostel a mere stone's throw from the delights of Algonquin. Home for the next three nights, the temperature was already approaching minus 20 C, a crisp crunch rising from the deep snows. 22 December. Algonquin. Algonquin Provincial Park, 7725 km² of boreal forest. It was 7.00 a.m., minus 23 C and ahead of me lay a 13 km hike through snows up to a metre deep, destination Wolf Howl Pond on the Mizzy Trail, a prime locality to find boreal specialities, namely Spruce Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee and Grey Jay. Wrapped from head to toe several layers thick, this was going to be an endurance test -

hopefully I would find the birds before freezing to death! Carving 4km off the trek by finding an access road open, I parked the car and glanced around, a fairytale world of sparkling ice crystals floating in the air, pines heavy laden in snow and a sun just rising, yet to impact on the morning chills. A rustle in the trees, snow dislodged from a branch, out popped my first birds of the day - a pair of Grey Jays! Related to Siberian Jays, adorned in delicate ash grey tones and fluffed out against the cold, these quaint birds were one of the major targets of my entire trip and I had high hopes of photographing them, but it was not to be with this pair. With the sun still weak and the birds mobile, I watched the birds a while - atop a tree, on the ground, then off they flew, to stands of spruce off yonder to continue their forage. I let them go and began my trek. An hour on, with temperatures barely rising and a Common Raven the only bird seen, I reached a lake, a frozen expanse of snow-covered ice with a stunning backdrop of ancient spruce withered and stunted. Under blue skies, I flopped down in the snow to admire the views - in the morning stillness, a distant woodpecker tapped away, but otherwise total absolute silence, a pristine day in a pristine environment. Tracks of animals zigzagged the crisp snows, Elk, White-tailed Deer, Red Fox, martin-type animals, a mosaic. A while later, a gronk of a Common Raven overhead, then a sudden nasal zeek azeek azeek, chickadees approaching! Out I bounced from my snow pile, just in time to give two rocket-propelled Boreal Chickadees a passing glance as they shot from one spruce to the next, barely pausing before hitting the next, then the next, then gone! Given that my hot pursuit mode in this deep snow amounted to little more than a trudge, I stood no chance of finding them again, but set off regardless. However, no more than two hundred metres further, I stopped for a pause to peer around and then nearly fell over backwards into the snow - not three metres away, all smartly lined up on the branches of a fallen spruce, five fantastic Grey Jays sunning themselves, all fluffed up and looking most grand, true gems of the frozen lands. Tossing them a few sunflower seeds, down they popped for their free breakfast - a high point of the trip, me hunkered down in the snow, the Grey Jays hopping all around, frequently just a metre distant. Onward I trudged, the snow ever deeper, the going ever harder. Not many kilometres covered, not many birds seen, but still totally satisfying. Four hours on, however, with still no Spruce Grouse or Black-backed Woodpecker to report, I began my return. Ambushed by another gang of Grey Jays, this time six strong, a handful of sunflower seeds paid my way, then on I continued. Boreal Chickadees appeared again, two landing in a spruce immediately adjacent - no interest in sunflower seeds whatsoever, the birds also seemed fairly intent on a rapid exodus, views however far more satisfying than the earlier wizz-bys. As they exited, calls of Pine Grosbeaks filtered down from conifers nearby, I scanned in vain, not a bird to be seen. Three kilometres further, having retrieved to my car, it was back down the snow-cruised track I drove. A winter skeleton of birch and oak was replacing spruce forest, a bird was on the track directly ahead, a grouse no less! Not a Spruce Grouse it turned out, but a splendid male Ruffed Grouse, a closely allied species and quite ample compensation in my book. Slowly I edged the car forward, the grouse stood atop a mound of snow, quite majestic and most photogenic. A splendid end to the morning's trek! Refreshed by coffee and warmed by the car's heater for the duration of my 15 km drive, next stop was a brief pause at the Mew Lake campsite - hardy folk these Canadians, even at these sub-zero conditions, resilience or perhaps insanity had brought a few out to camp, brrr! Kind folk too, an impromptu feeder had been established at one camp - plenty of birds flitting in and out. I stopped to photograph, three Grey Jays, a half dozen Blue Jays and at least 20 Black-capped Chickadees too, plus one American Red Squirrel. Left the campers to it, my destination was the visitor centre, another 15 km to the east and locality of another feeding station. Though the centre is closed mid-week during the winter, staff let me in and showed me the terrace out back - a splendid vista over vast bog and various forest types. Nearer, and of more immediate interest, were action-packed feeders alive with American Goldfinches, at least 80 buzzing about. Though the year was poor for 'winter finches', occasional Pine Grosbeaks and Evening Grosbeaks had been reported at these feeders, so I began another chilly vigil. Two hours I waited, American Goldfinches constant companions, both Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers visiting the suet, Black-capped Chickadees by the bucket load, plus a lone wintering White-throated Sparrow hopping in the undergrowth. No sign of a grosbeak of any description, but plenty of jay action both Blue and Grey Jays ever present, five of the latter. The day was approaching its end, I decided to visit one last destination, the Opeongo Road, another favoured locality of Black-backed Woodpecker. A few kilometres I walked, one Pileated Woodpecker flopped over, a bunch of Black-capped Chickadees attracted in a stunning Red-breasted Nuthatch, but the chills were beginning to set in, soon it would be time to head home for the night. Up to my knees in snow, the temperatures plummeting, I don't know what made me glance to the right, but there not 40 metres away, the spirit of the forest - an Eastern Grey Wolf standing, just standing and watching. Most awesome, this was immediately elevated to one of the top moments of 2009, an expected highlight to end the day. Algonquin was living up to my expectations. 23 December. Algonquin. Dawn, again minus 23 C. I returned to Mizzy Trail to retrace my footsteps of the day before. I was not the first, a Wolf had already taken the trail, the fresh tracks overlying mine of the day before! I tracked the path of the Wolf for 2 km, he then took a left, I continued on. Passing the Grey Jay hotspot of the day before, I pushed ever further, deeper virgin snow, hopes still high of a Spruce Grouse. One hour on, no birds so far. Another kilometre and much the same - a flock of Black-capped Chickadees the first birds to break the winter silence, an overhead Common Raven shortly after. A final kilometre and I vowed to turn back, hard graft this travelling through deep snow. I stopped to listen, hoping to hear maybe a woodpecker calling, perhaps tapping pure unadulterated silence, not a creak of a tree, not a rustle of leaves. Crystals still floated on the air, snowscapes sparkling, a magnificent landscape regardless of lack of birds. But then, absolutely amazing, I squinted at the shape approaching - another Wolf! Trudging through the snow towards me, framed by spruce but still far off, I was elated, lightening sticking twice. I hoped to step off the trail before he saw me, but in the deep snows it was no so easy. The Wolf saw me, stopped and gazed. I managed a couple of distant photographs, then into the trees he strolled, forever back into the shadows of the deep forest. I truly felt privileged. Time to turn back. A long walk to the car, three Grey Jays on the way, another at the car. No Boreal Chickadees on this day and moreover neither Spruce Grouse nor Black-backed Woodpecker, I would try again at the Opeongo Road, location of the previous day's Wolf sighting. By midday, high clouds were edging in from the

north and temperatures were up to about minus 8 C. Another hour and a light snow began, flurries would last till dusk. On route to Opeongo, a stop at Spruce Bog added yet more Grey Jays, plus a Hairy Woodpecker and, sauntering through the forest, another mammal for the trip list - the rather misnamed Fisher, a large arboreal mustelid. And then came the day's end, a five kilometre walk down the Opeongo Road - snow beginning to fall a little heavier, a wind beginning to whip up. Again saw a Pileated Woodpecker, yet more Grey Jays, plus two trumpeting Red-breasted Nuthatches. Day two at Algonquin was over, a second Eastern Grey Wolf on the trot, but no Spruce Grouse and no Black-backed Woodpecker. 24 December. Algonquin & Presqu'île. I thought I had found a Spruce Grouse! Sunrise at Spruce Bog, a mere minus 16 C, in the depths of a spruce grove, a shape dislodging snow on a branch, a quiet unfamiliar call. As much as I manoeuvred, I could get no more than occasional glimpses of a movement, on I circled, edging through the deep snow trying to get a silhouette against the sky. A quarter hour I followed this 'bird', sure I was about to see my Spruce Grouse … and then I saw it, it was an American Red Squirrel!!! So my last morning at Algonquin, I sent a couple of hours wandering around Spruce Bog, photographing the squirrel, a couple of Grey Jays and other common birds, then I thought I'd give it a last half hour at Opeongo Road before leaving to head down to Lake Ontario. Arrived at a small junction where Black-capped Chickadees had grown accustomed to being fed, threw them a few sunflower seeds, then marvelled as a Red-breasted Nuthatch flew directly in and started feeding from the hand, a White-breasted Nuthatch also. It was almost 10 a.m., time for a last wander. 20 minutes up the track, a very distant tapping. Supposed it would be just another Downy or Hairy Woodpecker, but trudged off anyhow, sinking through deep snow in the process. Laboured and crunched ever closer, the tapping from some dead trees just ahead … and then, there it was, a fantastic Black-backed Woodpecker, a female. What a beauty, close views and photographs as it worked the trunks, a fitting finale to my days in Algonquin. I turned and left Algonquin, two-and-a-half days of magic - no Spruce Grouse, but I wasn't complaining: two Wolves, one Ruffed Grouse, several Boreal Chickadees, Grey Jays by the dozen and the female Black-backed Woodpecker, I could not really have hoped for more. Three hours and 230 km later, I was back on the shores of Lake Ontario, rather further west than before and now about to have a quick look around Presqu'île Provincial Park, a small peninsula jutting out into the lake, famed for its migration in spring and autumn. At this season, however, its fame lay with what lurked within its woodlands. In the prior month or two, Barred Owls had begun to appear in numbers quite unprecedented, quite possibly up to a dozen scattered through the growths of mighty maple and occasional conifer. A good start with an immature Bald Eagle flying over just as I arrived, then a quick look at the feeding station at reserve headquarters, a Sharp-shinned Hawk scattered the various Downy Woodpeckers and Black-capped Chickadees, a bunch of Mourning Doves sat on the grass, but now it was time to get down to business, find the owls. Motoring around to Jobes' Wood, I was rather taken aback to discover just how extensive these woodlands were, rather vast and I only had a couple of hours to fulfil my task! So, into action, I began a random walk, checking in particular the denser areas and all the conifers. Soon unearthed a Hairy Woodpecker, but the owl remained elusive. Near an hour and I was back in sight of the car, a last group of trees to check, I strolled over and a flurry of wings, up on a branch down peered an owl, a most splendid Barred Owl, success! Watched him a while, got a few photographs, then edged away, the owl left to watch me go. Rather pleased with that, I decided to also have a look at the bay, the waters here yet to completely freeze. With a scope a requisite, many of the birds were rather distant, but amongst the 150 or so Mute Swans, I soon located the bird I sought, a single Trumpeter Swan floating along. Also several Redhead, a couple of dozen Greater Scaup, about 80 Long-tailed Ducks and, even more distant, two more Trumpeter Swans, the latter not expected. Overall a good ending to the day, made slightly better by three Purple Finches at a feeder along the road and two Northern Shrikes as I exited. And with that, it was off to Kingston to find my accommodation for the next four nights. Yippee, it was Christmas Eve and I was in place for an excellent Christmas Day ahead. 25 December. Amherst Island. Christmas Day, Amherst Island. Renowned for winter raptors and owls, Santa Claus was going to be kind today! Hardly surprising, in the pre-dawn hours of Christmas morning, I was the only car on the 6.20 a.m. ferry across from the mainland. Onto a dark deserted island I disembarked 20 minutes later, through the sleepy village of Stella and out towards the eastern point of the island. I arrived too early! With morning coffee from the flask, peering into dark fields that I hoped would later hold a Snowy Owl, I waited first hints of dawn. Slowly, darkness fell to shadows, streaks of light beginning to etch across the horizon, I turned on the car and began a patrol, almost immediately flushing a wader from the roadside, a rather chubby bird. As I'd yet to see a wader of any description on this trip, I was rather pleased to see it dropping down again … I stopped the car and clambered out, straining to scan in the half-light. Saw nothing for a while, but then up it went again, the distinctive silhouette of an American Woodcock, rather far north of its usual mid-winter range. To the woods, it was time to begin the day's birding. A copse of deciduous trees with occasional junipers and stands of cedar, several species of owl reside on occasion - I desired Long-eared Owl and Saw-whet Owl, with Snowy and Short-eared Owls to follow later. Trotting off down a rutted icy track, the task was immense - check every conifer for possible roosting owls. Not much for the first hour, plenty of empty trees, plus a 'help yourself' box at a busy feeding station to allow passing birders to top up the assorted feeders. Duly obliged, soon a couple of Downy Woodpeckers dropped in, again bunches of Black-capped Chickadees taking food from the hand. Carried on checking the trees, moving down to the next section, a copse of fairly dense conifers. Bingo, a roost of 19 Long-eared Owls, multiple orange eyes peering down, the owl glut now beginning. Zigzagged through the conifers, the Long-eared Owls constant companions, but regrettably no Saw-whets to report. By now mid-morning, I decided a return to the eastern point was in order, home of the big white one. Meandered over, a couple of Northern Harriers and a Rough-legged Buzzard serving as distractions, then pulled up on a verge to begin a walk down the coast. Off yonder, an Osprey platform, its inhabitant obviously far to the south at this season. However, even from the car, a suspicious white blob adorned the top, surely a Snowy Owl wouldn't be quite so easy! It was, a quick scan with the binoculars and there sat a splendid female in all her glory. What a super way to spend Christmas morning, coffee in hand, Snowy Owl in scope, sun overhead, Santa had done his stuff. Coffee downed, so began my

walk. Not in the spirit of the festive season, the Snowy Owl waited until I was looking the other way before deciding spread its wings and take to the air. One minute it was atop its pole, next nowhere to be seen! A kilometre on, I spotted the bird again …distant and beyond fences, I was not going to get better views. However, barely had I strolled another 100 metres and I suddenly became aware of a pair of eyes watching me! On a snowy tuft of an island, surrounded by ice, a second impressive Snowy Owl, a mere 50 metres or so from me, simply awesome. Another female, I crouched on the ice and enjoyed the moment, just sitting there, me watching her watch me. Then she upped, powered across a snow-covered meadow adjacent, arched and returned, settling upon a fence post not more than 100 metres from my position. I felt most honoured and, after a few photographs, retreated to leave the Snowy Owls to their winter wonderland. I decided a quick return to the owl woods would be next. Long-eared Owls all still in place, still no sign of a Saw-whet, but a neighbouring pasture looked most inviting - and sure enough, ten minutes of walking and I found yet more owls - two Short-eared Owls, one of which proceeded to quarter the meadows. The owl tally for the day now stood at an impressive 23 birds! With the day bright and skies mostly blue, the remainder of the day was spent exploring the rest of the island, notching up quite a few raptors in the process - no less than 12 Red-tailed Hawks, five Rough-legged Buzzards, three Northern Harriers, an adult Bald Eagle and four American Kestrels. Also two Rusty Blackbirds and a few Purple Finches at a garden feeder, plus a Raccoon asleep up a tree. Christmas Day had indeed lived up to my expectations. More than satisfied, I returned to the mainland on the evening ferry, back to Kingston. 26 December. Wolfe Island. With weather systems criss-crossing the region, it was inevitable that sooner or later I'd suffer a direct hit - on Boxing Day I did! Freezing rain overnight had left roads treacherous, but a brighter outlook at dawn had tempted me onto Wolfe Island, sister to Amherst, but twice the size. Also known for its wintering raptors and Snowy Owls, plus occasional buntings and longspurs, I was hoping for a re-run of the previous day's excellent adventures. Wolfe Island however was the big disappointment of the trip - not only did the weather turn most foul, but the western half of the island has now been effectively destroyed, a wind farm of at least 85 turbines blighting kilometre after kilometre. An absolute disgrace given the importance of the island to raptors, Snowy Owls and passage geese, the so-called 'green revolution of wind power' yet again revealing its ugly potential to deface and ruin landscapes and wildlife. Somebody in the Canadian planning authority needs to be hung up! Much disheartened, and not in the least cheered by the onset of a very cold rain, I skirted through the area as quickly as possible. A flock of 13 Snow Buntings rose from the track, 25 American Tree Sparrows fed in withered scrub. At the far side of the island, a short walk in a woodlot provided the highlight of the day - struggling to maintain balance as water flowed across ice-crusting snow, tracks of Wild Turkey and White-tailed Deer angled off up the slope. Perhaps scurrying from my approach, an unfortunate end was nigh for one creature immediately ahead. I saw not the animal on the ground, nor the kill, but labouring into the air, a Great Horned Owl flew up from very near, carrying what I presume to be a rat in its talons. On a branch it paused, an impressive brute, then on it flew, disappearing into woods further back. A most fortunate stroke of luck, this is usually a most nocturnal of owls, but there it was, my 5th species of owl in less than 48 hours! From there, a quick look over the St Lawrence Seaway - one immature Bald Eagle and a few Tundra Swans - then I deserted the west of the island and drove up to the east, still free of wind turbines. In deteriorating weather, the rain now lashing down, it was a day for birding from the car. Or sense would have dictated, I did make one mistaken foray into another woodland, where I managed to disorientate and ended up walking several kilometres, arriving back at the car cold and dripping wet, also virtually birdless. With heaters on full blast, by now early afternoon on this water-drenched island, a quick tour of the eastern end added a couple of flocks of Wild Turkey, an adult Bald Eagle on the ice and a bay full of Common Goldeneye, Greater Scaup and Redheads. Two Northern Harriers, an American Kestrel and two Red-tailed Hawks completed the day's raptor totals. 2 p.m., I decided to give up for the day and headed back. On the mainland, a brief pause at a bay west of Kingston provided the first Ring-necked Ducks and American Coots of the trip, as well as a very pale Iceland Gull, 35 more Tundra Swans and a few American Wigeon and Buffleheads. Back to my digs I went, Boxing Day over. 27 December. Return to Amherst Island. Clearing skies had led to freezing fog overnight, the resultant roads much akin to an ice rink. Consequently, the 20 km from Kingston to ferry jetty were hardly the ideal race track, I boarded the ferry exactly 30 seconds before it raised doors and set sail! Once on the island, first stop the owl woods again. Quickly located a Long-eared Owl, then started the search for other species, still hoping for Saw-whet. About 90 minutes in, two Ruby-crowned Kinglets started calling, then agitating, I went to seek the cause - soon found it, a superb Boreal Owl sitting tight against a trunk about 2.5 metres from the ground. Owl species number six, excellent! A little while later, encountered the Long-eared Owl roost again, then decided it was time to explore elsewhere, first going to have a look at the Snowy Owls again. 11 a.m., the eastern end of the island, a weak sun breaking through the fog. In the mists, rising and falling, a sight most evocative - ghostly silhouettes, a fence line, a leaning birdhouse, a shape. As mist swirled, shape transformed, it was now one of the Snowy Owls, an atmospheric moment that will long remain etched upon my memory, truly a nice image. Onward, with the sun slowly winning the battle, a flock of 28 Snow Buntings flitted across a frozen pool, touching down and feeding on the ice. Assorted duck and Canada Geese dabbled on the shores of Lake Ontario, but another Snowy Owl I could not locate. By midday, with the mist finally dissipating, I arrived back at the car. Taking advantage of the improved visibility, I did a quick scan around. Wow! Three Snowy Owls together, two on the ground, one flying over the point, plus an adult Bald Eagle spooking the Gadwall flocks and a ringtail Northern Harrier sat on a post, not a bad haul! After the bad weather of the day previous, it seemed all was up and about, enjoying the sparkle of a sunny day now emerging. Across the island as a whole, raptors were rising, Red-tailed Hawks and Rough-legged Buzzards commonplace, Northern Harriers equally so. Another stop in an extensive woodland in the west located only a single Long-eared Owl, but the highlight of the afternoon was the discovery of a pasture proving most popular with raptors. Rank grassland obviously teeming with mice and voles, the small field was a buzz of action, with as many as five Northern Harriers zigzagging, dropping every now again to snatch a hapless rodent, along with several Red-tailed Hawks and Rough-legged Buzzards. With the afternoon drawing in, I settled here and waited sunset - a pleasurable end to my

island experience, harriers floating across skies, White-tailed Deer trotting past. I should however have returned to the owl woods - I later heard that other birders had located a Saw-whet Owl, my failure to do so depriving me of an seven-species Owl Grand Slam! 28 December. Ottawa and Westward-Bound. Part One of the trip over. Today was the big drive, near 1000 km over to the Atlantic Seaboard - not the easiest of routes, with snow affecting most of the journey and roads a slippery mess. Adding a couple of hours or so to the trip, a detour up to Ottawa took me north of the falling snow and allowed me to explore the Rideau River, reported haunt of Barrow's Goldeneyes this winter. Familiar friends en-route, a flock of 55 Bohemian Waxwings feeding on an ornamental juniper, most welcome and opening up the possibility of a 'waxwing double' on this trip. An hour later, I arrived in Ottawa to sunny skies, crisp crunchy snow and temperatures of minus 8 C. With most of the Rideau River frozen, the small stretch through Strathcona was alive with birds - Mallard on the ice, Common Goldeneye abundant on the flowing waters. And in amongst them, almost the first bird seen, one cracking male Barrow's Goldeneye, with one more male about 50 metres downstream. Another of the trip's main targets, these were far more distinctive than I had expected - not only the bulging forehead and white crescent in front of the eye, but also a flank pattern that isolated birds even to the naked eye. Enjoyed these birds for an hour, seeing also a Northern Goshawk, but not locating a female Barrow's Goldeneye, and then continued my long drive. With time on my side, I also made a detour and crossed the St Lawrence Seaway into the USA at Cornwall Dam. Here, according to literature, I might see flocks of thousands of mergansers and Goldeneyes in early winter, along with a variety of gull species unsurpassed in the local area. Clearly the 28th December is not early winter - I saw a grand total of 13 Common Goldeneyes, one Goosander and one Bufflehead, no gulls! Not quite the spectacle I had expected, but just not a wasted journey, did add several Wild Turkeys, one Northern Shrike, a couple of American Tree Sparrows and nine Snow Buntings. Through deteriorating conditions, onward I travelled - New York State, Vermont, New Hampshire and finally into Massachusetts. Late evening, 944 km and 17 hours after leaving Kingston, I arrived on Plum Island, locality for the next day's birding. 29 December. Plum Island & Cape Ann. Dawn at Plum Island, minus 10 C, clear skies and a cold strong north-westerly wind blustering in a wind chill factor of severe magnitude - much of today's birding would be done from the car, the scope on a window mount, warm and cosy. Frozen marshes, sculptured dunes, huddles of Black Duck and Canada Geese in the lee of encrusted embankments, Plum Island was indeed a dramatic locality, but birding was going to be a challenge. Scoping the salt march, a thousand lumps of ice masqueraded as Snowy Owls, but one by one I discounted them all, the early highlights falling to seven Shore Larks and a Lapland Bunting shuffling on a gravel patch, three Hooded Mergansers and a dozen or so Fish Crows wheeling overhead. I fancied a seawatch, but chose to endure the ice-blast a little later and instead continued up the island, dunes to my left, salt marsh to the right. Much scoping, many lumps of ice, still no Snowy Owl. At the island's end, it was time for that seawatch - found a relatively sheltered spot, shared by a male Merlin, then scanned the sea. Moderately quiet, a Slavonian Grebe, a few Common Eider, a couple of White-winged Scoter, no point braving the cold, I would check the sea again later. Back to the marshes, I spied a lump of ice rather brighter than usual. Stopped and did a double-check, a splendid male Snowy Owl facing into the wind, a pure white beauty on a small mound. Another few hundred metres and more birds, Snow Buntings by the road, American Tree Sparrows adjacent, a scan across the marshes then revealing Snowy Owl number two, this time a female. No abatement in the wind, but the next chosen spot for a seawatch was rather more productive - with me wrapped in numerous layers, beneath a dune I found a spot to slump, the splendid vista of the sea before me. Sanderlings padded up and down the beach, a Great Northern Diver loafed offshore. Just beyond the surf, a pod of seaduck revealed themselves - Black, White-winged and Surf Scoter all in a mixed flock, Common Eider and Red-breasted Merganser added extras. Just beyond, a Red-necked Grebe, just to the right a Slavonian Grebe, all welcome returns on this chilly morning. With the wind ensuring my hopes of locating passerines were fanciful, I decided it was time to move on, the day's second destination being Cape Ann, an hour or so to the south. Arrived in the early afternoon, a quick tour of the fish harbour in Gloucester town drawing a total blank on white-winged gulls, but the hours that followed were quite fantastic. Following Atlantic Road, hugging the rocky coastline and via numerous small fishing ports, the birding was good, the frequent stops resulting in birds such as Black Guillemot, Long-tailed Duck and all three scoters, plus Great Cormorants, Great Northern Divers and a Purple Sandpiper. However, the absolute highlight came towards the end of the afternoon - having stopped in a small port, I scanned the waters merely revealing a few Common Eiders and a Great Northern Diver. Almost as an after thought, however, I decided to clamber up the snow-covered boulders that marked a breakwater, the choppy waters of the Atlantic on the other side. A Song Sparrow resided in the lower levels, hopping out to feed in scrub, but the prize beyond was the bird I had most desired to see here - not just one, but a bunch of them, 12 Harlequin Ducks, eight of them stunning males in full dress. This was a real highpoint, I have twice seen these exquisite seaducks before, but never an adult male, and here now I had a whole flock of them to enjoy. Risking a broken leg, down the icy rocks I waddled, reached the shore and perched atop a slab of frozen seaweed, the Harlequins all bobbing on waves just metres distant, superb. With that, the day's birding was drawing to an end, ahead of me lay a two hour drive to the town of West Yarmouth, a nothing special kind of place, but a splendid base for exploration of Cape Cod, my aim for the following two days. 30 December. Cape Cod. First day on Cape Cod, the jewel of the Massachusetts coast. A hundred kilometres of sand sculptured by the sea, this peninsula arcs out into the cold North Atlantic and offers some of the best winter birding to be found in the entire north-east of the United States. Scoters, eiders, grebes, auks and more, all find home in the rich waters, riding the seas beyond the dunes, sheltering in small fishing ports and bays, a winter paradise. Provincetown Harbour, my morning's start was just exquisite, a surprise feast of birds at close quarters. In the lee of the spit, sheltered to a degree from blustering winds that whipped in from the North Atlantic, it was birds galore - flocks of Black Brant and Black Duck on route in and at the harbour itself, a bevy of gulls and seaduck, many bobbing between the jetties themselves. Superb views, Common Eiders, Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Goldeneye all floating barely a stone's throw away. Parked up and admired the collection - a couple of Great Northern Divers close in, a male

borealis Common Eider amongst the numerous dresseri, the resident race. After an age admiring and photographing, I looked off the other side of the jetty, scanning the extensive harbour, many Buffleheads, a few Long-tailed Ducks and one chunky auk aside a few Red-breasted Mergansers, all rather distant. Short, squat, sharp contrast of blacks and whites, relatively stubby bill, its identity was immediately apparent, a Brunnich's Guillemot, a.k.a. Thick-billed Murre to the locals. Slowly drifting in, this auk eventually gave views quite reasonable, the first of the day's target birds to fall. Behind me, a Cooper's Hawk came swooping in and landed on a dock crane, a nice bonus. Next decided to head out to Race Point, generally considered to offer the best sea watching in the entire Cape Cod area. Race Point was dramatic to say the least - staggered over the dunes only to get smacked in the face by a wind blasting in straight from the Arctic! Barely able to stand, let alone scan with a telescope, this was going to be a futile effort - met a birder there, his windswept face telling the story as much as his words, he had barely been able to identify anything, even birds just off the shore. I took his word for it and departed, heading to Head of the Meadow, a small coastal overlook where you could watch the sea from the car, thus affording shelter. A superb spot, birds whizzing by, some distant unidentifiable dots, others much closer. Choppy seas left many birds playing hide and seek, one moment on view, the next lost to the waves. Scans soon revealed Great Northern Divers riding the surf, a few Red-throated Divers too, whilst beyond numerous auks trundled past, mostly Razorbills, but also the odd Common Guillemot. Hoped for Little Auk, and hoped in vain, but two Atlantic Puffins briefly appearing upon a crest of a wave was a fairly good record for the Cape. Also mixed flocks of scoter (White-winged, Surf and Black), occasional Long-tailed Ducks and a Red-necked Grebe. Sat it out for a couple of hours, all the time Kittiwakes and Northern Gannets streaming north, then decided to explore the elsewhere on the Cape. Heading south, I popped into the village of East Orleans. Here, a local garden had gained some fame in local circles - seemingly intent on braving out a northern winter, two thousand kilometres north of where it should have been, a female Painted Bunting had taken a liking for the feeding station in this small garden. Found the feeders, didn't find the Painted Bunting. Did however see a good range of birds nevertheless - a Sharp-shinned Hawk overhead, several Tufted Titmouse, a Carolina Wren, a Red-bellied Woodpecker, bunches of White-throated Sparrows, Black-capped Chickadees as numerous as ever. Late afternoon, the sun still bright, the wind dropping considerably, I arrived at Chatham, the southern end of the Cape Cod peninsula. A truly spectacular sight was waiting - in a patchwork of estuarine channels and sandbars, Common Eiders in numbers simply incredible. Huge flocks in all directions, diving in the turbulent riptides, carpeting sand banks, flushing in clouds when unseen raptors spooked them, a conservative estimate put the immediate population at about 15,000 birds, a most atmospheric setting to finish the day, the sights and sounds of these birds to a setting sun. 31 December. Cape Cod. Cape Cod, day two. No wind, bright but overcast, perfect conditions for sea watching on the Cape. Returned at dawn to Head of the Meadow, a surge of birds pushing north - impressive numbers of auks in particular. Did spot counts over several fifteen minute periods, extrapolating up - totals over three hours amounting to 19,200 Razorbills and 5400 Gannets, all north. Amongst the masses plenty of Kittiwakes, a minimum of four Brunnich's Guillemots and a good selection of birds settled on the sea. Scanning either way, diver counts reached about 30 Great Northern Divers and 40 Red-throated Diver, with an additional passage of about 30 per hour of the latter, also moving north. Overall, a good morning on the sea, additional birds including 40 Surf Scoter, at least 80 White-winged Scoter and, both just off the surf, two Slavonian Grebes and a couple of Red-necked Grebes. Common Seals also bobbing about in the waves, at least 20. On the radio, forecasters spoke of massive storm heading in from the north, set to hit within 48 hours and potentially to dump a half metre of snow. I expected to be much further south by then, but in the meantime it was back to Provincetown Harbour for another gander at the birds around the jetties. Brunnich's Guillemot still present, so too all the seaduck and divers. Scanning out across the extensive harbour, plenty of Buffleheads, scattered Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Goldeneye, then scoped the distant breakwater - one male Harlequin Duck, comparatively rare on the Cape, sat upon the rocks, whilst just adjacent a Purple Sandpiper provided company, both welcome extras. One coffee later, taking advantage of the lack of wind, I tried Race Point again - as close to a mill pond as it is ever likely to get, viewing was no problem, but bird numbers not excessive. An unidentified whale breached, never to surface a second time, a few Razorbills drifted about and Great Cormorants winged past, but otherwise it was Common Eiders that were of most note, a flock of about 600 on the waters just south of the point. By now midday, with hints of snow in the air, I left the point. A quick stop at Wellfleet Sanctuary produced little, a return to East Orleans again failed to result in the Painted Bunting, but birds recorded included two Dark-eyed Juncos, four Tufted Titmouse, a Carolina Wren and, the first of the trip, three Yellow-rumped Warblers just west of Chatham. Roads were being shut down in preparation for New Year celebrations, nearby Boston was readying itself for a firework spectacular. Temperatures hovered around the freezing point, the highest they had, and would, reach on this trip. I called the day quits, time for the warmth of my hotel. 1 January. Return to Plum Island and Cape Ann. New Year's Eve, 750,000 people were packing into Time Square, New York City. I had opted not to join them, instead spending the night 280 km further north, preparing for a 5 a.m. start to 2010 and a 200 km drive north, returning to Plum Island. So, a light snow dusting the ground, I arrived at Newburyport at 7.30 a.m. on New Year's Day, the dawn bright and sunny. First birds of the day, first birds of the year, House Sparrow and European Starling! Set about locating Newburyport Jetty, which turned out not to be in Newburyport itself, but at the mouth of the Merrimack River. A few Common Seals about, a couple of rafts of Common Eider. Walked out to the seashore, about a kilometre, and found there a flock of about 40 Common Eiders. Started scanning them and there he was, the cause of my return, one immature male King Eider, not in the most spectacular of plumages, but a King Eider nonetheless, a good bird to start the year on. Great Northern and Red-throated Divers beyond the beach too, Black Scoters common. With that, the New Year twitch over, I decided to head down to Cape Ann, a superb all round birding destination. With the skies remaining bright all day, it was a good decision - birding on the rocky headlands around Andrew's Point was superb. Stealing the day's crown, staggering numbers of Harlequin Ducks bobbed off the coast, an impressive 117 on a three or four kilometre stretch, the lion's share smart adult males. Several Razorbills, unfortunately no Little Auks,

and all the expected extras - Great Northern Divers, Slavonian Grebes, Surf Scoters, White-winged Scoters, Black Scoters, the list went on. Spent most of the day exploring nooks and crannies, little bays each with birds, then mid afternoon returned to Gloucester to begin a search for white-winged gulls. Again none in the fish harbour, nor along the docks in East Gloucester, but I had suspicions about one road labelled 'private'. I was sure gulls wouldn't respect such a sign and nor did it seem were many local persons, all wandering along to admire the views over the bay. A kilometre up the road, a pool opened to the left, a large expanse mostly frozen over, but with open water in the centre. And upon the ice, stacks and stacks of gulls, I had found their secret roost. A quick scan and indeed there sat white-winged gulls, an exceptionally pale Glaucous Gull sticking out like a sore thumb! Out with the scope, soon I was savouring a feast - immediately adjacent to the Glaucous Gull, two Iceland Gulls, a little further to the left, another. And another, and another, Iceland Gulls every few metres - the flock containing no less than seven in total, all immatures of various ages. A lot of scanning through and eventually a Thayer's Gull materialised too, a distinctive bird and a very pleasing bonus, only the second Thayer's of the trip. Something flushed them, up they all went. Five minutes of circling, some drifting off, down they came again, about half returning. Both Thayer's and Glaucous Gulls had departed. So too was it time for me to leave. In the bay, four Gadwall and a lot of Buffleheads. Still no white-winged in the harbour, but atop the church spire, a Peregrine Falcon tucking into a late lunch. It was now 4 p.m., heavy snow was on the forecast, I had to hit the roads, near 700 km to cover by dawn. 2 January. Cape May. A long drive overnight, the jump taking me to the legendary Cape May - in season, one of North America's greatest migration hotspots. Naturally, January is not 'in season', but still the relative mildness of the locality, the southernmost point of my journey, would ensure a good day's birding, lapping up wintering species that fear to linger further north. After a snooze at a service station some way north, I rolled into Cape May just as the sun began to climb, beginning the day aside the famous lighthouse, imagining the legions of birders that had passed previously this way, most on warmer days than this. Still some degrees below freezing, the two key lakes - Lighthouse Pool and Lily Pool - were largely ice-free nonetheless. Attempting in vain to find shelter from the wind, the birding began - Tundra Swans at the water's edge, a Pied-billed Grebe in the lea of reeds, a collection of dabbling ducks off yonder. Amongst those ducks would be a few bonuses, but before scanning, the first of day's many raptors sailed over - labouring into the wind, a Bald Eagle spooking birds as it went, closely followed by a Northern Harrier, then wobbling its way into the sky a Turkey Vulture. A Red-shouldered Hawk added to the collection, all splendid stuff. Then to the ducks. Following a trail round the pools, a hide offered the shelter so desired and also a perfect vantage point to scrutinise the dabblers. American Wigeon the bulk, a few Northern Shoveler and Pintail floated beyond, but the prize soon revealed themselves - European Wigeons! Vagrants to the eastern U.S. seaboard, three birds had been present at Cape May for some weeks, but as I scanned through, it was soon apparent there were in fact four - a male and two females in one flock of American Wigeon, another male a little further to the right. Next I had plans to visit the nearby Lily Pool, but I was soon stopped in my tracks - on a small lawn aside a scrubby line of bushes, birds bouncing everywhere! On the grass, dozens of White-throated Sparrows, masses of American Robins and, looking most splendid in their red dress, Fox Sparrows of the iliaca race. Using the car as a hide, I spent a good half hour with these, the antics of birds ever livened by the gangs of European Starlings also present and the flitting of at least thirty Yellow-rumped Warblers, the latter equally happy on the grass as in bushes. Eventually, dragging myself away, I quickly popped over to Lily Pool to see Ruddy Ducks and Hooded Mergansers, plus five Ring-necked Ducks and numerous Black Duck. A Sandhill Crane, elusive but wintering in the area, had been seen the day before, so next headed off to marshes just east. Totally frozen, saw next to nothing on the deck and certainly no Sandhill Crane, but the hour was now 10 a.m., the sun was high and with it, ranks of vultures rising, Turkey Vultures, Black Vultures, both in impressive numbers, circling frozen meadow, a marsh locked in ice and reedbeds crippled by frost. Another Northern Harrier winged its way past, a few Tundra Swan too. Still the wind hindered birding, marshland sparrows and passerines would be foolhardy to raise their heads, so I decided to visit 'The Beanery' woodlands a couple of kilometres inland. Bliss, the wind barely penetrated, the trails that crossed the area would surely offer a few passerine possibilities. Two hundred metres in, a flock of birds - on the woodland edge, White-throated Sparrows abundant, one or two Fox Sparrows too, but of more interest, a lot of birds foraging within the forest swamp, hopping from stump to stump and exploring clumps on the frozen ground. A couple of Rusty Blackbirds walked their way through, Carolina Chickadees appeared and a Carolina Wren foraged. A little further, as the woodland opened to meadow, Black Vultures, a score and more, passed over, whilst nearer to hand, a dozen American Pipits fed in furrows, strolling between stalks and new growth. Birding here was good, Cape May had already added a dozen species to the trip list, but the wind was really chucking a spanner into the works for a few of its specialities - chances of Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sparrows in particular seemed thin. Onward nevertheless, the extensive reedbeds and marshes at Jake's Landing offered the best hope for these birds. Extensive reedbeds they were - nothing whatsoever to slow the wind, it played its best across the marshes, my eyes watered, a solitary Song Sparrow grovelled on a track, no sparrow with a brain in its head was going to pop up today. Another Bald Eagle appeared, accompanied by Red-tailed Hawks. I however saw little reason to linger, instead deciding to squeeze one last location into my day. So my last stop of the day, Forsythe National Wildlife Reserve. Arrived at 3.30 p.m. and, with the car needing to be in New York at 6 p.m., I had barely an hour to enjoy this place - more the pity, Forsythe totals 19,000 hectares of bird-rich salt meadow and marsh. In hindsight, I really should have spent the whole afternoon here - the twelve kilometre Wildlife Drive offered unparalleled viewing opportunities across the wetlands and an excellent array of species. Still blowing an unholy wind, but the birding was excellent - Great Blue Herons sheltering beneath banks, Tundra Swans on pools, flocks of dabbling ducks commonplace. In deeper channels, Ruddy Ducks and Hooded Mergansers bobbed, whilst mudflats adjacent provided the only calidrids of the trip - a mass of about 50 Dunlins, a single Western Sandpiper amongst them a somewhat surprise. All too soon I would have to get moving, but still time to enjoy one of the ornithological highlights of Forsythe - the flights of Snow Geese. To a backdrop of Atlantic City and to a setting sun, down they winged, masses

settling on the marshes, it was time for me to leave, 600 Snow Geese a lasting memory, Tundra Swans adjacent. A Northern Harrier drifted over, I exited. An hour or so later, the lights of Manhattan lit the sky, over Staten Island I went, dropped the car at JFK, then headed downtown. Urban birding for the next two days, New York City. 3 January. Jamaica Bay. New York, New York, a mesmerizing city, quite wonderful, though I honestly cannot say why I like it. For today, I was to escape the skyscrapers, congested streets, hooting taxis and aromas of street food, my destination was Jamaica Bay, 3600 hectares of wildlife haven in the shadow of JFK Airport. Previously visited in August 2008, when the site teemed with migrating waders and waterbirds, my visit on this day could not have been a greater contrast. A truly wild day, a biting wind cutting in from the north-east and morning temperatures of minus 8 C, with a wind chill making it feel much colder. Most pools long-since frozen, just the brackish bay remained ice-free - a lot of Snow Geese and Black Brant dotted about, a few Canada Geese too. A Northern Harrier edged in, Buffleheads rode the waters. A chilly walk around West Pool, exposed to the full blast of the wind, was virtually birdless - a few hardy American Tree Sparrows, another Northern Harrier and that was about it. Sheltered from the wind, infinitely kinder on fingers and nose, the best of the birding was in the old gardens, tangles of dense shrubbery that stretch north from the reserve headquarters. A migrant hotspot in season, I had hopes for a Cedar Waxwing or other occasional passerine. No waxwing was to appear, but in the relative warmth of the weak sun, birds abounded - at least 50 White-throated Sparrows in flocks rooting through the leaf litter, a couple of dozen Yellow-rumped Warblers flitting in bushes. Also a few American Robins and Northern Cardinals and a very forlorn looking Great Blue Heron stood aside a small frozen pool. Best of the day however, single Grey Catbirds and Rufous-sided Towhees, both new birds for the trip. By mid-afternoon, flurries of snow rolled in, the wind got ever stronger. Back to Manhattan I went, time to stroll the streets. 4 January. Central Park. Alas, the day had arrived, my final day in America, my trip reaching its conclusion. Staying in downtown Manhattan, the grand finale would be the superb Central Park, a 600 hectare oasis just north of Broadway and a stone's throw from the towering blocks and seething masses that make up this grand city. Sending city folk scurrying, the day dawned a chilly minus ten. It was however, a bright sunny day, the wind had vanished and I looked forward to the birding possibilities ahead. I swallowed a coffee, tucked in a scarf and trotted off through the streets, past Columbus Circle and into the park. Already a few hardy joggers on the outer trailways, I hurried on, my destination the Ramble, the semi-natural woodlands in the centre of the park. On the way, Grey Squirrels ran across lawns, Northern Cardinals appeared aside shrubbery, then a most impressive sight - carpeting a frosted hillside, a flock of about 70 American Robins, hopping across the grass, feeding on adjacent berries. Resplendent in the sunshine, these birds were fantastic, a good few minutes were spent on my belly photographing the birds as they hopped close. Eventually I reached the Ramble, next task was to find the feeders that are well-stocked. Fifteen minutes of wanders and there I was, sat on a bench, a dozen assorted feeders hanging before me and stacks and stacks of birds gathering. On the feeders themselves, American Goldfinches, Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers and a gaggle of House Finches, but underneath an even greater concentration of birds - in a heaving flock, shuffling through the undergrowth, no less than 120 White-throated Sparrows, smart birds indeed. Amongst them, a single Fox Sparrow and, arriving as soon as I chucked a few sunflower seeds, a splendid Rufous-sided Towhee. An hour passed, I took many photographs of the sparrows and assorted birds, Blue Jays came and went, Northern Cardinals added a splash of colour, a Dark-eyed Junco shuffled in, Common Grackles strolled in the undergrowth. Many good birds, but still I had hopes for a few birds more. After a late morning pause, returning to my accommodation for check-out and coffee, I returned to the park for my final session. It could not have begun better - in the mature trees adjacent to Strawberry Fields, a woodpecker appeared on a low branch. One quick look and there it was, one of my main targets for the day, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker edging up the tree. Very nice it was, an immature, its scaly plumage a treat in the sunshine. From there, I decided to walk up through the park to see if the Reservoir was free of ice. It was, and upon it a good range of birds - American Herring Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, Great Black-backed Gulls, but better still a raft of ducks at the northern end. 160 Ruddy Ducks and 12 Hooded Mergansers the highlight, 28 Northern Shovelers and a Canada Goose as extras. I slowly walked the perimeter, a couple more Ruddy Ducks at the southern end. It was now mid-afternoon, my day was nearly over, I did not really expect many more birds, but still harboured desires for one more special - a bird I had previously seen in Central Park, but one that was still eluding me. Berry bushes I needed, my very slow exit from the park took me zigzagging south, my last hope. And then, success. In a splendid area near an Egyptian obelisk, a small hillside was totally covered in berry-laden bushes. American Robins hung off branches, European Starlings flocked in, but one of the first birds I actually looked at was the star I sought, a Cedar Waxwing. Not only a grand bird in itself, but thus granting me the 'Waxwing Double' - Bohemian Waxwings in Ontario, this Cedar Waxwing at the very last gasp of my trip. Superb. Off I skipped, happy to leave the park on this high. Never say its over till it's over! Two more bonuses before I reached the chaotic bustle of Manhattan - first, in swooped one of the park's resident Red-tailed Hawks, settling on a branch above a fast food vendor. Stupendous views, this young bird just sat glaring at the ground beneath, no doubt intent on rats lurking in the undergrowth. Dozens of pictures later, I continued my way. Past the mini zoo and, a mere 50 metres or so from the streets, I took a little detour - folks were feeding Mallards on a small pool, I still has a half pocketful of seed, so thought it time to dump it. Walked down, then out popped my eyes - amongst the Mallard, a gaudy male Wood Duck, what a surprise, a final addition to the list of birds on this winter trip to North America. Shopping time, oh how I dislike this activity! Down through Time Square, past the Empire State Building, many blocks more, the cold was beginning to bite. Darkness fell, I dodged into a shop or two, picked up the things I wanted. It was then time to return to my accommodation, pick up my bags and head for the airport. And then shapes beneath the tables of a street café - Grey Catbirds! Amazing, usually a bird of shrubbery and dense tangles, here were three hopping about in the dark beneath tables right on Broadway, just about the busiest street in New York! And with that, it really was the end of the trip. 11 p.m. local time, I boarded a plane, nine hours later touching down in Eastern Europe, no change there, still snowing and sub-zero! **** Photographs to be added ****