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A Place Apart

The Sax-Zim Bog, south of Eveleth, is not the scenic north woods of popular perception, the towering pines and crystal-clear waters. This bog, or more specifically boreal peatland, encompasses more than 200 square miles of spruce and tamarack lowlands, which were once part of Glacial Lake Upham. Homesteaders tried to drain the bog at the turn of the 20th century but failed. The area's name comes from two ghost towns—Sax and Zim. But it is still crisscrossed with county and township roads, providing access to tamarack swamps (below, right); glacial wetlands where painted turtles sun on the rocks (below, left); and secret spots where stemless lady's-slippers grow (left).





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Birds Small and Great

Conifer lowlands (above) are abundant in Sax-Zim, which suits Connecticut warblers (below) just fine. Spruce and tamarack stands host several species of reclusive warblers, which usually nest in far-flung boreal forests that are inaccessible to birders.





Frozen open wetlands (above) provide perfect hunting grounds for great gray owls (below), which come to Sax-Zim in high numbers in winter. More than 450 great gray owls were counted in a single weekend during an irruption in January 2005.





Where Uncommon Bill Are Commonplace

Sax-Zim Bog draws birders from around the world seeking marquee species for their life lists. The bog is mostly boreal peatland, and so it hosts a number of northern forest birds with mostly Canadian ranges, such as boreal chickadees (left) and alder flycatchers. But Sax-Zim isn't all bog—hay fields and pastures in the uplands attract a different suite of species. Most notably, Sax-Zim's high grounds are home to the easternmost year-round population of black-billed magpies (below, right), a bird more typically found in the Dakotas and farther west. Upland sandpipers (below, left) patrol from the fence posts in these areas as well. Yellow rails lurk in the sedge meadows, which also provide feeding and nesting grounds for sandhill cranes.













Winter Grounds

Sax-Zim in winter may look desolate to the human eye, but the bog is a rich and plentiful feeding ground for several species that swoop down from the far north. White-winged crossbills (left, top) and pine grosbeaks (left, middle) feast on the seeds of spruce cones. Northern shrikes (left, bottom) search the open areas for small rodents to eat.



Sax-Zim's owls are the biggest draw for birders in winter. Snowy owls can be seen, and northern hawk owls are reliably found perched on treetops and telephone poles. But the most breathtaking find for birders may be the great gray owl (top), the tallest owl in North America at nearly 3 feet. "Most folks, when they see their first great gray, they whisper, 'Oh my god, oh my god,'" says Sax-Zim birding guide Sparky Stensaas. "After the bird departs, the high fives and hugs kick in. To many, the great gray is a mythical bird, one they never fully expect to see. So when the myth becomes reality, it's like a dream come true."



Year-round Residents

All year long, Sax-Zim Bog is a great place to see grouse, both sharp-tailed grouse in the brushlands and ruffed grouse (left) in the thickets. Sax-Zim is perhaps the best place in the nation to see black-backed woodpeckers (right). Blackbacks are birds of remote northern forests, but a larch beetle outbreak caused an irruption of these boreal woodpeckers a few years ago, and a resident breeding population has stayed year-round ever since. Northern hawk owls (bottom, right) are considered winter migrants in Minnesota, but they too have been staying and breeding in Sax-Zim in small numbers.

The chance to see a once-in-a-lifetime bird like a northern hawk owl draws birders from around the world to Sax-Zim. "I've had folks from Iceland, Norway, England," says Stensaas. "I even guided a group from a commune in Iowa. They live a utopian, back-to-the-land life in a peaceful valley, but they find the boreal birds of the Sax-Zim Bog good for their souls."





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