

# **POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL**

**NOVEMBER 2 – 8, 2009**

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Leader: Steve Hilty  
*(with Tundra Buggy driver Kevin Burke)*

Without question, Churchill is THE premier site for observing and photographing polar bears. This area is more accessible than any of the other 18 circumpolar bear populations, and the bears themselves are more concentrated at this time of year. Looking back, now that I am home, and autumn leaves are falling, the entire polar bear and Churchill experience, to me, seems almost surreal. It was as if, in some sense, I were a time-traveler visiting another place at another time.

Our group arrived in Churchill as cold winds swept across the snowy landscape. Within minutes of departing the airport we parked in front of the Polar Bear Prison (where bad bears that visit Churchill are sent to do 30 days in solitary) and were informed by Manitoba Conservation employees that a helicopter lift was imminent. Moments later, a bear tranquilized with telazide and in a rope sling was hauled out to a nearby landing site. The bright green dot on his back, marking him as an offender that has been chemically subdued, seemed incongruous. While we waited, a “wild” polar bear ambled out of the low willows, slipped beneath an airport “No Trespassing” sign, and was summarily driven off by a uniformed officer firing flares and poppers. Five minutes passed and someone saw another bear across the road below the airport. It too, was frightened with flares and poppers. The helicopter arrived, a cable was attached to the still tranquilized bear, and within minutes it was whisked off to wilderness 25 minutes northwest of Churchill. The bear was unlikely to return. I felt as if I were watching “live” television—only this was real life drama.

Somewhat whimsically dubbed a “Tundra Buggy,” the monstrous white machine we were riding in was, in truth, a large creaky aluminum box positioned atop fat tires five-and-a-half feet high and three feet across. It lumbered across the snow-blown tundra, and rarely exceeded five mph. I knew this was the season when polar bears gather along Hudson Bay’s south shores, awaiting freeze-up so they can move onto the ice to hunt seals, but I could not have imagined just how many bears gather here. At first, in fact, we didn’t see much, mostly a vast, flat landscape checkered with patches of stunted willows, wind-blown snow, and shallow, meter-deep lakes that looked like they were already frozen solid. But soon there were bears—a lot of bears—and by day’s end we had sighted at least 39 of them, most within a mile of the Hudson Bay shoreline. There were males, females, a female with two cubs, and a female with a collar. Two bears came alongside our vehicle. At one point an Arctic fox streaked past, running fast with busy tail streaming, then abruptly stopped and nervously peered at us twice before disappearing. A flock of distant Willow Ptarmigan flew toward the ice-hobbled shore. Later someone spotted a ptarmigan, snowy-white with black eyes and bill, immobile in a thicket beside our buggy. By afternoon we’d seen more than 40, including a flock of at least 32 rapidly pecking tiny

buds from willows and walking on little feathered “snowshoes.” On our return to Tundra Buggy base camp, someone spied a small animal running, squirrel-like, across a large frozen lake. We stared...squinting, as it continued, making its way toward a willow thicket along the western shore...and toward a polar bear ambling alongside that thicket. “It’s a pine marten,” our driver yelled. “The first I’ve ever seen out here in the open in 24 years of Tundra Buggy driving!” And this marten, perhaps young and naïve, seemed to have a death wish. It stopped a few yards short of the willows, stood on its hind legs, and looked back in the direction from which it came. Remarkably, it was unaware of the bear. The marten dropped to the ground, stood again, and only at the last moment seemed to become aware of the bear, now closing fast. With tiny feet visibly slipping on the ice, the marten made a desperate leap into the willow thicket and disappeared, just ahead of the bear. Now the bear stood and peered into the thicket. Twice it stood—then pounced, but without success. Still it prowled the ice-bound shoreline and we assume the drama continued. But, by now the sun was low in the south, the sky flame-red, and distant ravens were making their way to roosts.

On our second day in the Tundra Buggy, the cold Hudson Bay wind was sharp. The morning temperature in Churchill registered 3 degrees F, and we felt the cold bite of the wind (the wind chill was -28). The bears knew it too. Wind piled ice against the shore and bears were making their way onto the frozen bay, stretching dinner plate-sized paws on newly-formed ice to test its strength. Numbers of bears along the shore were down sharply from yesterday, but we saw them far out on the bay ice, some at the limit of vision on the distant icy horizon. A Gyrfalcon, powerful in the wind, flew past the Tundra Buggy. Later a small flock of Snow Buntings, scraps of debris buffeted erratically in the wind, flitted past and were quickly lost to sight. We registered 19 bears today, half of yesterday’s total. Among them, however, was a young male that paced beside our Tundra Buggy, looking up, uncomprehending, as a platoon of bazooka-sized camera lenses bore down at close range. A more circumspect female with two cubs made her way across the tundra and into a willow thicket, cubs in tow. Bears sniffed the wind, and moved north, toward life-giving ice. Their months-long fast would soon be over. We returned to Churchill this evening beneath a pair of “sundogs” flanking the sun. It was a brisk walk to the Gypsy Bakery diner tonight.

The next day, a brief detour to the “Tundra Buggy depot” provided our second Gyrfalcon sighting. Later a flock of Hoary Redpolls, pale overall and with white rumps visible, fluttered in stunted willows. With warmer temperatures, bay ice in retreat, and open water prevailing, our bear count increased again. Although several bears were close, it was a mother bear and her unwashed cub that offered the most endearing photo opportunities, and entertainment, of the day—with the cub posing atop an ice hummock, peering out behind his mother, and doing his potty in the snow. But the excitement didn’t end. Our lumbering, creaking Tundra Buggy, which several people enjoyed driving this afternoon, suffered a steering malfunction on a stream crossing and we limped slowly back to base, just in time for an early departure for the Eskimo museum.

Our five days in Churchill provided a glimpse of a world relatively few people have experienced firsthand. It may seem like an eternal cycle of ice and bears and long dark winters followed by brief warm summers, but we know better now. The Arctic is changing, perhaps less so here than in the High Arctic, but it is changing nevertheless. The polar bear itself is but a brief actor on this northern stage, having appeared in the fossil and genetic record no more than 250,000 to 300,000 years ago. We know that it likely evolved from large “kodiak” type bears on some of the Aleutian Islands and was once considerably larger than it is today. For most of the polar bears’ existence on earth, ice ages have predominated, being punctuated by a few relatively brief warmer inter-glacial periods. We are in one such inter-glacial now. But climate and climatic change are delicately balanced.

Climatologists tell us that several factors, among them the wobble of planet Earth on its axis, and hence its tilt, as well as the variation in Earth’s orbit (from almost perfect circle to ellipse) resulting from planetary alignments, changes in solar luminosity, and many other factors, could be poised to plunge our planet into another ice age (recent warmer inter-glacial periods typically last only about 10,000 years and we are very close to this point again). Against this backdrop the footprint of mankind now intervenes. Over the past century our activities have conspired to greatly increase atmospheric CO2 levels and planetary warming is now evident, especially in High Arctic areas. Will the next climatic shift result in warmer or cooler temperatures? We cannot predict the future with certainty, but evidence suggests warmer temperatures may prevail. A prolonged warming trend (at least in geological time) might well doom the polar bear and much of the Arctic ecology as we know it today. Change, in fact, may already be at hand. A hunter recently killed a “polar bear” whose DNA imprint was not that of a polar bear but almost exactly intermediate between that of polar bear and grizzly bear. Are grizzlies moving north with a warming planet? If so, then this may be a glimpse of the future. But, for now, we may count ourselves fortunate to have witnessed this great Arctic drama, one that unfolds each autumn on Hudson Bay’s shores. This is the Arctic that we know today and I feel privileged to have been able to experience it with you.

#### **ITINERARY:**

**Day 1.** Arrival in Winnipeg with get-acquainted dinner and night in Hilton.

**Day 2.** Morning flight to Churchill followed by visit to Polar Bear Prison, the rocky coastline, lunch and afternoon drive around Cape Merry, greater Churchill, and Goose Creek road (spruce forest) to check bird feeders.

**Day 3-5.** Day trips in Tundra Buggy.

**Day 6.** Morning drive (icy road) down Goose Creek road to recheck bird feeders (Yea! Boreal Chickadees). Mid-day flight to Winnipeg. Afternoon free although a few people organized, among themselves, a late afternoon trip to Fort Wythe (not a scheduled VENT activity). Final Dinner and champagne celebrations for bears and new birds.

**Day 7.** Morning flights, for most, to home destinations.

## MAMMALS:

**Polar Bear:** excellent bear sightings with approximately 39, 19 and 36 bears, respectively, seen on each of three days in tundra buggy. Two bears also were seen on arrival as well as the tranquilized one that was transported by helicopter to a "new home." Several bears were right beside the Tundra Buggy and photo opportunities abounded. But, as driver/guide Kevin noted, each day and indeed each season is different.

**Arctic Fox** – one seen running fast near Hudson Bay shore, then stopping twice to peer back at our vehicle. A little "ghost" with black eyes and nose and short round ears.

**Red Fox** – one seen near airport the first day we arrived at Churchill.

**Bearded Seal** – two to three distant ("dark spots") in open water near Churchill.

**Red Squirrel** – at the Goose Creek "subdivision" bird feeders. Hyperactive, almost silly, and endearing, all at the same time.

**Pine Martin** – one running across a large frozen lake, ultimately almost into the jaws of a polar bear. High arctic drama for a few moments.

## BIRDS: (only ca.16 species!)

### **GEESE AND DUCKS**

*Common Eider* - one female-plumaged bird off shore behind town center in Churchill. Difficult to observe in cold wind.

*Black Scoter* – ca. 3 birds, probably this species, also behind town center in Churchill and also distant and difficult to see well.

### **Gallinaceous Birds**

*Willow Ptarmigan* – two distant flocks; fabulous view of a single point-blank beside buggy; and a flock of at least 32 also very close to Tundra Buggy. Almost 50 total, all in one day.

### **Hawks**

*Gyr Falcon* - two seen in flight, the first apparently a dark phase or a young bird, the second a nice adult gray phase.

### **Sandpipers**

*Dunlin (?)* - possibly a Dunlin seen by some along Hudson Bay shore, but bird too distant for positive identification. [one had been seen about two weeks earlier in this area]

## **Gulls**

*Glaucous Gull* - one or two seen daily from Tundra Buggy. All were immature birds in ca. their second year.

## **Woodpeckers**

*Hairy Woodpecker* – one male at Goose Creek feeders.

## **Crows, Ravens**

*Common Raven* – daily at Churchill where it is, by far, the most common bird; large roost (on cold nights) at enclosed city waste disposal site; we saw at least 20-40 daily.

*Gray Jay* – pair at Goose Creek feeders.

## **Chickadees**

*Boreal Chickadee* – family of ca. 4 at feeders at Goose Creek subdivision.

## **Starlings**

*European Starling* – 2-3 seen on two occasions in Churchill.

## **Finches and Sparrows**

*Common Redpoll* – group of 4-5 in bushes beside Tundra Inn motel on first morning before departing for tundra buggy ride.

*Hoary Redpoll* – flock of ca. 8 in willows; seen very well (fairly close) from Tundra Buggy.

*White-crowned Sparrow* – 1 at Goose Creek feeders, both trips.

*Snow Bunting* – flock of ca. 8 second day on Tundra Buggy.

## **Weaver Finches**

*House Sparrow* – a few (up to 10) around hotel in Churchill.

Those that visited the **Fort Wythe** Winnipeg marshes late afternoon on November 7 found: Canada Goose, Cackling Goose (small form of Canada Goose); Mallard, Northern Shoveler; Greater Scaup; Bufflehead; Hooded Merganser (none in breeding plumage); Gray Partridge; Herring and Ring-billed gulls; Rock Pigeon; Black-billed Magpie; European Starling; and Black-capped Chickadee; one person saw a Fox Sparrow; also seen were several White-tailed Deer, a muskrat and a cottontail (by some)