

POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL

NOVEMBER 5 – 11, 2011

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Churchill, Manitoba, Canada is probably not at the top of many “most attractive late fall travel destinations” lists. But for polar bears, and for anybody who might want to see one of these amazing creatures, Churchill is a veritable mecca. Each fall, as temperatures plummet toward and well past freezing, polar bears start gathering in great numbers along the Hudson Bay shore near the little frontier town of Churchill. They are waiting for the bay’s icy waters to freeze over, so they can head back out onto the ice to hunt seals throughout the long winter. This incredible concentration of top predators in one spot makes Churchill—in fall—home to one of the best wildlife spectacles on the planet.

Vacationing in northern Canada in November, and in the middle of perhaps the largest concentration of top land carnivores on the planet, might sound a bit foolish, but the resourceful residents of Churchill have figured out how to make it not only safe, but surprisingly comfortable as well. Enter the Tundra Buggy. One of these amazing vehicles was our home for three full days out among the great white bears. Though the temperatures outside were well below freezing, we stayed quite comfortable in the buggy, thanks to its massive propane heater. The spacious back deck allowed us to get outside (and cool off!) while staying safely out of reach of the bears, which was reassuring when they walked right up to the buggy!

While we expected to see lots of bears out in the buggies, I think we all were quite surprised when our first encounter happened just minutes after we left the airport in Churchill. Bill, our local guide and driver, made it possible for us to get great looks at our first bear as it was ambling around right next to the runway! Not long after that we watched another bear as it raided a sled dog compound, stirring up quite a ruckus as it stole an easy meal. This is the kind of excitement that the local residents have to be prepared for at this time of year. If either of these bears had become a persistent nuisance, they would have been hauled off to jail—polar bear jail! The jail, the “Miss Piggy” crash site, and Cape Merry were all on our sightseeing agenda that first day in Churchill.

Of course though, it was our time in the Tundra Buggy that was the highlight of our trip. We totaled 65 bear sightings during our stay, along with some fantastic birds and smaller mammals. Our bear sightings were almost all of single bears resting in the snow, or on a rock, or in the seaweed piled along the shore of the bay, but a mother and cub provided our most interesting encounter. At first the two were sitting way out in the intertidal zone, so far away that it looked as if it were a single bear with two heads. Then, as we waited, they became curious and started to approach the buggy. Being upwind of us, they did not know that there was another bear just on the other side of our buggy. Apparently their scent was interesting enough to get the other bear up off his pile of seaweed for a closer look, and momma bear was not too happy to see the surprise guest. Immediately she turned around and quickly led her cub off to a safe distance. Rather than give chase though, the other bear decided to save his energy and nap some more, waiting for the bay

to freeze. In addition to bears we were delighted to see both Arctic and red foxes, as well as a very confiding Arctic hare, snow-white except for the black tips of its ears.

While it is to be expected that the bird list for this trip will be rather short, it's really about quality rather than quantity. And thankfully we had quality! White morph Gyrfalcon is perhaps the most emblematic bird of the High Arctic. They aren't common anywhere and they rarely inhabit areas that are easily accessible by birders. So it was very exciting when not one, but two white morph Gyrfalcons flew right past our Tundra Buggy. Soon we found them perched together on a tower, and we watched as a polar bear walked over to the tower and stood on its hind legs as if trying to get a better look at them.

My reason for saying that the white morph Gyrfalcon is “perhaps” the most emblematic bird of the High Arctic is that it's a tough call between that and the Snowy Owl. Snowy Owls also spend most of their lives well away from most human activity, and so are not often seen by birders. They are also quite unpredictable in their seasonal movements, being closely tied to fluctuating lemming populations. The Snowy Owl also has something going for it that the Gyrfalcon lacks: it's an owl. So it was no surprise that Snowy Owl ran away with the “favorite bird of the trip” vote at our last dinner. We had two perched birds at a fair distance on our second buggy day, but it was our last sighting, in the last minutes of our time in the buggy, that truly will be remembered. A Snowy Owl, just sitting down in the snow not far from our buggy, staring at us with those huge golden eyes—what a way to cap things off!

Itinerary

- Day 1** November 5: Arrivals and get-acquainted dinner in Winnipeg. Dinner and night in Winnipeg at the Hilton near the airport.
- Day 2** November 6: Morning flight to Churchill where we were met by our bus driver and in-town tour guide Bill Calnan. Bill entertained us with several stories of Churchill while we visited the Polar Bear jail, the Miss Piggy crash site, and Cape Merry. Dinner at the Northern Nights was followed by the first of four nights at the cozy Tundra Inn in the town of Churchill.
- Day 3** November 7: After breakfast at Tundra Inn restaurant, we were shuttled out of town about half an hour to the Tundra Buggy boarding site. This would be our first of three full days with guide/driver Kevin Burke aboard a Tundra Buggy, exploring the tundra and near-coastal area east of Churchill. Areas covered today included Gordon Pt., Ptarmigan Alley, Polar Bear Point, and the site of the Tundra Buggy Camp.
- Day 4** November 8: Our second day on the Tundra Buggy included return visits to Ptarmigan Alley and the nearby coastline, and Gordon Pt.
- Day 5** November 9: A final day on the Tundra Buggy began at Halfway Point, followed by a drive along the coast to Gordon Point before returning in time to visit the Eskimo Museum in town before dinner. Last of four nights at Tundra Inn.

Day 6 November 10: After breakfast Bill took us out to the Churchill River and the grain elevator then out to his house on Goose Creek Road where we spent some time watching his feeders. A late morning flight to Winnipeg arrived at 2 p.m. Afternoon free. Optional birding visit by some to Fort Whyte Alive sanctuary. Final group dinner at the hotel this evening. Night at the Hilton.

Day 7 November 11: Departures from Winnipeg.

WILDLIFE LIST

[unexpected sightings/rarities in *bold italics*]

MAMMALS

Polar Bear – Superb bear viewing and photographic opportunities, with a total of 65 bear sightings over three days in Churchill. Highlights included a mother with her cub, and multiple bears that walked right up to the vehicle for a sniff, offering incredible chances for photos.

Arctic Fox – A most exciting encounter as Kevin shouted “Arctic Fox!” right as we were almost on top of it. The buggy came to a stop just in time and the curious fox sniffed all around the buggy before running down the road and into the willows.

Red Fox – One was seen by Susan from the bus on our first morning in Churchill, then we all had great looks on our last morning as we found one by the grain elevators and one visited Bill’s feeders.

Arctic Hare – One sat out among the rocks near Cape Merry, affording excellent views.

Vole sp. – one seen scurrying along the buggy road

Red Squirrel – several at Bill’s feeders

Ringed Seal – a couple seen swimming on Hudson Bay were probably this species

Harbor Seal – one seen near Cape Merry

BIRDS

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Common Eider – several female/immature plumage birds

White-winged Scoter – a few distant birds on Hudson Bay and the Churchill River

Common Merganser – a single female/immature plumage bird on the Churchill River

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

Willow Ptarmigan – We had several good views of ptarmigan in fresh white winter plumage, some with a distinct pinkish cast to their feathers, as they huddled on the snowy tundra.

Rock Ptarmigan – a distant group on the first buggy day, then excellent scope views of a male on day 3

LOONS

Pacific Loon – a very distant bird was in the scope briefly for some

FALCONS

Gryfalcon – On our final buggy day we saw two white morph birds hunting together. We had distant scope views of them perched and we had them in flight right next to the buggy.

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

White-rumped Sandpiper – A single bird right next to the buggy was looking a bit ill.

JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:

Herring Gull – a few on our first day in Churchill

Glaucous Gull – several immatures along the coastline

TYPICAL OWLS

Snowy Owl – We had outstanding luck with this species, with two on each of our last two buggy days. The last encounter was the best and was a runaway winner of the favorite bird vote.

WOODPECKERS

Woodpecker sp. – we had a single bird in flight that was too distant to ID for sure, but was possibly a Three-toed

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Gray Jay – great views at Bill's feeders

Common Raven - widespread around Churchill

CHICKADEES & TITS

Boreal Chickadee – great views at Bill's feeders

FINCHES:

Hoary Redpoll – a few flocks flew past the buggy on our third day and briefly perched in the willows along the Tundra Buggy route

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow – in Churchill town and in Winnipeg

ADDITIONAL WILDLIFE

(seen by part of group on an optional 11/10 outing to Fort Whyte Alive preserve near Winnipeg)

Canada Goose

Cackling Goose – among much larger Canada Geese (probably “Richardson’s Cackling Goose, *B. h. hutchinsii*)

Mallard
Northern Shoveler
Green-winged Teal
Ring-necked Duck
Scaup sp.
Canvasback
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Pied-billed Grebe
Double-crested Cormorant
Ring-billed Gull
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Black-billed Magpie
Black-capped Chickadee
White-breasted Nuthatch
European Starling
White-throated Sparrow

American Mink
Muskrat
White-tailed Deer