

POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL

NOVEMBER 5 – 11, 2013

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TOUR REPORT
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By Brian Gibbons

VENT hosted the first commercial Polar Bear watchers in Churchill in the 1980s. Nearly every year since, scores of clients have enjoyed the antics of the aggregating Polar Bears on the shores of Hudson Bay. This year was no exception; we witnessed 20 bears a day loafing, sleeping, sparring, and generally biding their time. During the three days we were aboard the Tundra Buggy, the bay went from being completely open to having large amounts of grease and pancake ice. One adventurous bear even made it a quarter-mile out on the ice before returning to shore to wait a few more days. The unique geography of the western Hudson Bay and the counter-clockwise current ensure that every year the Churchill area is the first to freeze. Bears have been aggregating here for millennia, waiting for the freeze to liberate them from months of fasting. We witnessed some amazing scenes of not just bears, but also Arctic Fox in its stark white winter pelage, various forms of Red Fox, Arctic Hare, Gyrfalcon, Snowy Owl, Willow Ptarmigan, and some hearty eiders.

On our first morning in Churchill we visited bird feeders in the spruce forest, where Boreal Chickadees and Gray Jays gathered seeds. Driving around town, we knew we were too late for the great variety of birds that the Arctic summer entices north to Churchill, but a few hearty residents entertained us. The bird of the day and perhaps the trip was the juvenile white-morph Gyrfalcon that hung in the wind over the dunes at Cape Merry on our first morning—a stunning creature trying to flush a ptarmigan. In the afternoon, the Parks Canada Visitor Center and Eskimo Museum were our main targets as we meandered through town. That evening we caught a glimpse of the setting sun—at 4:00 p.m.

The next morning we were bundled and ready for the Tundra Buggy. Our first Polar Bears of the trip were sparring, but as we raced closer at 15 mph, they had exhausted themselves and lain down; after a while they began sparring again, and a third bear wandered into the fray—an amazing start to the tour. Then a curious bear wandered to the buggy, walking underneath it, then finally finding us on the back deck with just a metal grate separating large carnivore from puny omnivores. This was a magical experience with the beast just inches from our feet, or noses if you chose (perhaps JP was the only one). After seeing more than 20 bears, we had to head back to the launch. We were delayed by a beautiful mother with its adorable one-year-old cub tucked into its hip.

Thinking that Day One would be impossible to top, we did just that in our first couple of hours. Gordon Point hosted a mother and cub, a lone female, and an Arctic Fox that was being chased by a gorgeous Silver Fox (dark morph of Red Fox). This had me scrambling from one end of the buggy to the other trying to get photos of everything. In the middle of all this action we noticed a female with two cubs swimming from the end of Gordon Point back to the mainland, presumably to escape the other three bears on the point! This took more than an hour to play out, and I was exhausted by the end of the action.

On our final day, with Hayley at the helm, we made a decidedly bird-oriented trip to the tundra. We still watched the wonderful bear activity, but we were looking for birds. Sandra spotted a beautiful heavily mottled juvenile Snowy Owl early on. Then Hayley declared she would find us the ptarmigan and we enjoyed multiple Willow Ptarmigans at point-blank range. We even observed them nibbling on willow buds, the food that will sustain them through seven months of frigid, long winter nights. Interrupting our birding were a few Polar Bears that wandered past and sniffed the buggy. A white Gyrfalcon was cruising the willows of Ptarmigan Alley with designs that were different from ours. This, our third day aboard lucky Tundra Buggy 13, was our coldest. Ice had been forming and had reached more than a quarter-mile offshore; the pancake ice was solidifying into a sheet that the bears could wander out on. The grease ice encouraged the Common Eiders to move to more open water. In a few more days the ice would be in and the bears gone! Our final bears, glimpsed by some, were a ghostly mother and cub that appeared in front of the bus, only to quickly disappear back into the blizzard.

Thanks to all of you for traveling to Churchill with VENT. I look forward to our next adventure together.

Photos can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10202652106247624.1073741842.1346971205&type=1&id=a905eb4694>

Waterfowl	Anatidae	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	Female-plumaged birds, Churchill River and Gordon Point
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	One in a small stream, a very late bird
Pheasants, Grouse and Allies	Phasianidae	
Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>	A few seen very well on our last day on the Tundra
Gulls, Terns and Skimmers	Laridae	
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	Distant bird seen flying near Gordon Point
Owls	Strigidae	
Snowy Owl	<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	Excellent find by Sandra, a juvenile bird
Falcons and Caracaras	Falconidae	
Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	A couple wonderful sightings of white birds
Crows, Jays and Magpies	Corvidae	
Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	At the bird feeders our first morning in Churchill
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	The most common bird
Chickadees and Tits	Paridae	
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>	At the bird feeders our first morning in Churchill
Starlings	Sturnidae	
European Starling (I)	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Around Churchill
Siskins, Crossbills and Allies	Fringillidae	
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	A few flyovers from the Buggy
Old World Sparrows	Passeridae	
House Sparrow (I)	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Around Churchill

MAMMALS
Squirrels, Prairie Dogs &
Marmot

Red Squirrel

Rabbits & Hares

Arctic Hare

Dogs

Arctic Fox

Red Fox

Bears

Polar Bear

Seals

Ringed Seal

Sciuridae

Tamiasciurus hudsonicus

Leporidae

Lepus arcticus

Canidae

Canis lagopus

Vulpes vulpes

Ursidae

Ursus maritimus

Phocidae

Phoca hispida

At the bird feeders our first morning in Churchill

A distant animal on our last day aboard the Buggy

Several great sightings, chased away by Red Fox

In town and out on Gordon Point

Wonderful views of Sparring males, loafing, Mothers and cubs, and a few testing the first bit of sea ice

A distant animal off Gordon Point