

# **POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL**

**OCTOBER 30 -  
NOVEMBER 6, 2005**

**LEADERS:  
BOB SUNDSTROM**

**COMPILED BY: BOB SUNDSTROM**

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**Leader: Bob Sundstrom**

When our group first arrived in Churchill, Manitoba on Halloween morning of 2005, we were surprised to see the ground free of snow. Snow had been predicted for days here at the southwest corner of Hudson Bay, but little had fallen. That afternoon we got to know the town area a bit, and the group walked a trail near Cape Merry, not far from the town. We nearly walked right up to a huge Arctic hare, conspicuous in its all white winter fur, as it sat among a field of ancient boulders rubbed smooth by glaciers and now covered in orange lichens. The hare seemed to be waiting for snow, waiting for its winter camouflage to arrive.

A few snowflakes began to fall as we went to dinner that night. After dinner, we walked out to two inches of snow on the ground. By morning, a full five inches of fresh snow had dressed the world in white, a color scheme that would apply to a whole range of wildlife we would see in ensuing days. We saw more stately Arctic hares, as well as some smaller snowshoe hares, both all white except for the tips of their ears. We watched an all white Arctic fox hunting in the mounded seaweed of the high tide line of Hudson Bay. The fox leaped into the air several times, coming down sharply on its front paws, hoping to dislodge a rodent from the layers of seaweed. Sights of Willow Ptarmigan were a daily pleasure, all white in their winter feathers, until they flared the black edges of their tails. Snow Buntings were also in their striking winter plumage, with rusty highlights on mostly white bodies. A couple of Snowy Owls perched nearly invisible against the white landscape. And on the last day, as we stopped in the Tundra Buggy to watch a couple of ptarmigan just in front of the vehicle, a new white bird suddenly appeared on the scene, flying at the ptarmigan. The white bird almost stopped in midair with the ptarmigan and a dense row of shrubby willows at its feet, then lifted on long, pointed wings, showing a white breast and dark dappling on a white back: a beautiful adult white-morph Gyrfalcon, perhaps the most magnificent bird of the Arctic.

Of course, the white wildlife celebrities we had come primarily to see were the wondrous polar bears, which concentrate here at this time of year awaiting the freeze-up of Hudson Bay. We didn't even have to go out on the tundra to see our first bear; late the first afternoon, as we were headed back toward the town of Churchill in a van, we had a front row seat for what almost seemed a polar bear rodeo. A big bear had walked in a bit too close to town for the conservation authorities' guidelines and, as we watched from a short distance, two helicopters tried to urge the bear away from town. The polar bear was ultimately sedated via a tranquilizer gun, and packed onto the bed of a truck to be moved away and later released on the sea ice. Our timing was impeccable, as we were able to walk right up to the truck and marvel at the enormous bear, which filled the truck bed to overflowing.

During our days on the Tundra Buggy (special vehicles which traverse the tundra on enormous tires), we had amazing luck and watched sparring, or play-fighting polar bears each day. Two bears, usually young males of at least 500 pounds, would carefully

approach one another, sniffing and mouthing one another lightly, then stand and face each other, bear-hugging and wrestling upright, soon to fall to the ground and wrestle like young cubs. After about ten minutes of wrestling, both bears would collapse on the snow or ice to cool down and take a snooze before the next bout of sparring. Camera shutters clicked and clicked during this wonderful study of animals at play, often very close to the Tundra Buggy. A couple of curious bears came right up to the Tundra Buggy, standing up with their dinner-plate-sized paws against the vehicle's side, offering a truly memorable face-to-face view of the world's largest terrestrial carnivore.

Not all the wildlife was white in color, as we also saw Northern Goshawk, King and Common eiders, both Hoary and Common redpolls, bright red male Pine Grosbeaks in contrast with the dark green spruces and white snow, and a very tardy Rusty Blackbird. Adding color one evening was a brilliant display of the Aurora Borealis, sending plumes of green light across the sky. And with surprisingly good amenities for a frontier town, Churchill made a comfortable base for one of the world's foremost wildlife viewing experiences.

### **Itinerary**

- Day 1** Saturday, October 30: Arrivals and get-acquainted dinner in Winnipeg. Dinner and night in Winnipeg at the Hilton near the airport.
- Day 2** Sunday, October 31: A morning flight to Churchill arrived in time for an early lunch at Gypsy Bakery, after which we toured the Cape Merry area with driver Kelly, before checking in at the Tundra Inn. Afternoon touring with Kelly covered the village road along the coast all the way to the polar bear "jail." Just before sunset, we had a front row seat for watching a polar bear too close to town being sedated and escorted out of town by the conservation authorities. First of five nights at the comfy Tundra Inn in town of Churchill.
- Day 3** Monday, November 1: After breakfast, we were shuttled out of town about twenty minutes to the Tundra Buggy boarding site. This would be our first of four full days with guide/driver Glenn Hopfner aboard his Tundra Buggy, exploring the tundra and near-coastal area east of Churchill. Areas covered today included Gordon Pt. and the Tundra Buggy Camp, and areas in between including tundra and Hudson Bay shoreline.
- Day 4** Tuesday, November 2: Our second day on the Tundra Buggy included visits to Halfway Pt., adjacent coastline areas, and Tundra Buggy Camp.
- Day 5** Wednesday, November 3: The third day on the Tundra Buggy with Glenn, included Gordon Pt., Tundra Buggy Camp, and other areas enroute. We returned to the buggy launch an hour and a half early from the buggy today in order to have time to visit the Eskimo Museum in Churchill and other spots in town. During dinner tonight, the *aurora borealis* blazed brightly above town.

**Day 6** Thursday, November 4: A final day on the Tundra Buggy with Glenn Hopfner included a buggy drive into the taiga and just to the edge of the boreal forest, with both white and gray morph Gyrfalcons seen enroute. Once again visited Halfway Pt. and Tundra Buggy Camp area. Last of five nights at Tundra Inn.

**Day 7** Friday, November 5: After breakfast, shuttle driver/guide Rhonda took us out Goose Ck. Rd. to check some residential bird feeders, and we were very fortunate to see both Hoary and Common redpolls, as well as Pine Grosbeaks, Boreal Chickadee, and Gray Jays. We then continued on to the Churchill Airport. A late morning flight to Winnipeg with a stop in Thompson arrived mid-afternoon. Final group dinner at the hotel this evening. Night at the Hilton.

**Day 8** Saturday, November 6: Departures from Winnipeg.

### **WILDLIFE LIST**

[unexpected sightings/rarities in *bold italics*]

### **MAMMALS**

**Polar Bear** - We saw bears on each day on the Tundra Buggy, with the greatest numbers concentrated near the Tundra Buggy Camp along the Hudson Bay shoreline. We had the great good fortune to see pairs of bears sparring (play-fighting) each day, and close enough to the buggy to get excellent photos. The four day tally was thirty-nine bear sightings, with some of them likely repeats of bears seen on previous days.

**Arctic Fox** – Great views of an all white fox hunting in the mounded seaweed of the high tide line of Hudson Bay. At one point it leaped into the air several times, coming down on its front paws, presumably to dislodge a rodent from the layers of seaweed.

**Bearded Seal** – one in the water, close in at Halfway Point

**Ringed Seal** – One was scoped as it slept on a large boulder, where it had been left high and dry when the tide went out. Others were seen with just their heads above the bay.

**Arctic Hare** – The first afternoon in Churchill, we were able to walk very close to a huge hare as it sat among the glacier-smoothed rocks at Cape Merry. In the same area were four and five more of these beautiful hares, entirely white except the black of the very tips of their ears and their dark eyes and noses. Others were seen from the Tundra Buggy, some at very close range.

**Snowshoe Hare** – Two all-white Snowshoe Hares were seen along Goose Creek Rd., where we had gone to check out the bird activity at some residential area bird feeders.

**Red Squirrel** - around seed feeders on Goose Ck. Rd. outside Churchill

## **BIRDS**

### **GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:**

**Canada Goose** – a flock of 40+ at Cape Merry; also seen by Dave in Winnipeg

**Greater Scaup** – six at Halfway Pt.

**Common Eider** – Present in considerable numbers, with 50+ seen one day. Mostly female/immature plumage birds seen, although a number of adult male birds flew by Halfway Pt.

**King Eider** – unexpected; two flew in at Halfway Pt., remaining there about five minutes

**Harlequin Duck** – one female/immature plumage bird

**White-winged Scoter** – two on Hudson Bay

### **EAGLES, HAWKS, FALCONS & ALLIES:**

**Northern Goshawk** – An immature flew across the taiga spruce tops parallel to the Tundra Buggy, then perched atop a spruce for a moment.

**Gyr Falcon** – It was a special treat to see both the typical gray morph and the more localized white morph of this majestic falcon species.

### **GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:**

**Willow Ptarmigan** – Seen daily on the Tundra Buggy, some close at hand. All were in full winter plumage, white (often with a slight pinkish cast), with black tail feathers, bills, and eyes. We watched ptarmigan in a very close encounter with a white-morph Gyr Falcon.

### **JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:**

**Ring-billed Gull** - prevalent around the hotel in Winnipeg

**Herring Gull** – adults and immatures along the edge of Hudson Bay

**Glaucous Gull** – a few

### **AUKS:**

**Black Guillemot** – an unanticipated species, we saw a number of nearly all white, winter plumage Black Guillemots along the bay coastline, especially at Halfway Pt.

### **OWLS:**

**Snowy Owl** –distant views of two birds

### **JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:**

**Gray Jay** - several along Goose Creek Rd. outside Churchill

**American Crow** – seen by Dave in Winnipeg

**Common Raven** - widespread around Churchill

### **CHICKADEES & TITMICE:**

**Boreal Chickadee** – one visiting a seed feeder along Goose Ck. Rd.

### **STARLINGS & ALLIES:**

**European Starling** - a few in Churchill near the grain terminal; also in Winnipeg

**SPARROWS & ALLIES:**

**American Tree Sparrow** – seen by Dave near the Winnipeg hotel

**White-throated Sparrow** – ditto

**Dark-eyed Junco** – ditto

**Snow Bunting** – Nice looks at Snow Buntings in their striking winter plumage, with rusty highlights on mostly white bodies.

**BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:**

**Rusty Blackbird** – a very late straggler, a male flew back and forth by the buggy not far from the Tundra Buggy Camp

**FINCHES:**

**Pine Grosbeak** – at least five crimson males and one female at Goose Ck. Rd. feeders

**Common Redpoll** – at residential bird feeders along Goose Ck. Rd.

**Hoary Redpoll** – at least one among Commons at the same feeders

**OLD WORLD SPARROWS:**

**House Sparrow** - Churchill and Winnipeg