

POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL

OCTOBER 23–28, 2016

**LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM
LIST COMPILED BY: BOB SUNDSTROM**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL OCTOBER 23–28, 2016

By Bob Sundstrom

The Polar Bears of Churchill tour surely rates as one of the truly exceptional wildlife viewing experiences. Our group rendezvoused in Winnipeg and early the next morning flew north to Churchill in northern Manitoba, at the southwest corner of Hudson Bay. Within minutes after arriving in Churchill, the first Polar Bear of the tour had been spotted ambling along the edge of the tarmac—a remarkably quick first bear sighting.

With most of a day to explore the Churchill vicinity from a van and walk a bit on the Arctic landscape, we set out from the airport. We stopped at the Polar Bear “jail” (where problem bears are held until freeze-up) and the site of a downed plane from decades ago (where the first Red Fox and Arctic Hare of the trip were glimpsed). After lunch at Gypsy’s, we were driven to historic Cape Merry, into a landscape of beautiful, glacier-polished greywacke (a very hard, unusual sandstone). Here and elsewhere today we saw diverse sea ducks, including rafts of hundreds of Black Scoters and the first Common Eiders of the tour. Leaving Cape Merry, our driver stopped at the edge of town where we could walk out to the Hudson Bay shoreline next to a huge inukshuk (Inuit stone marker). Our timing was serendipitous, for soon a white Gyrfalcon came winging overhead, close enough to see even the tiny bits of black in the wingtips. This may have been a good omen for bird sightings for the tour, for we went on to see a good bit greater diversity of birds than most previous tours.

Now we had three full days to explore the tundra and the Hudson Bay shoreline east of Churchill, riding with an experienced and knowledgeable guide on a Tundra Buggy reserved just for our group. (A Tundra Buggy is something like an extra-wide bus set up on very tall, wide tires designed for driving designated routes across the tundra. It makes a Hummer look like an urban toy.) The tundra landscape was in fall color the first two days—green, gold, red, and brown—with lots of boulders artfully decorated with lichens. Late the second day, snow began to fall, so our third day on the buggy showed us a landscape of fresh white. Even the spruce trees were flocked with snow.

We saw Polar Bears each day from the buggy. Highlights included a mother with a pair of first year cubs, probably 10–11 months of age. The first day the mother and cubs were mostly recumbent on the tundra, but by the third day and in a newly snowy landscape, they were much more active and much photographed. On the first day on the buggy, we watched one bear for quite a while as it lounged in the seaweed mass at the high tide line. At one point it sprawled on its back, raising and waving its paws in the air, raising comparisons to what might be a form of Polar Bear yoga. At last the bear rose and—much to our astonishment—walked directly toward our buggy. Soon it reached the side of the vehicle, and it ambled slowly along the side as cameras clicked. Next it posed at the back of the buggy for more intimate photos, before walking back alongside the buggy, then under and out the other side.

On our second day on the Tundra Buggy, we had the opportunity to study two different color morphs of Red Fox as they hunted across the open landscape, close enough for good photos. First a “Cross” Fox appeared off the stern. This fox was warm auburn to rusty-brown on its front half, grading into a darker rump and nearly black tail with a white tip. “Cross” Fox is named for a dark stripe running down its back, intersecting another stripe to form a cross over the shoulders. Later

that morning we had an excellent study of a “Silver” Fox, a Red Fox with black head and shoulders, dark silvery torso, and black tail with white tip. The Silver Fox trotted back and forth along the edge of a frozen lake and through the shrubby willows, sniffing for prey. Suddenly it stopped with ears pricked, then leapt headfirst over a willow. The fox came up with a rodent in its jaws.

We had high hopes of seeing an Arctic Hare well at some point, although their camouflage and habit of sitting very still make them difficult to spot. On the third day aboard the buggy Luke drove us to an area of boulders near Halfway Point, where at last one of these large, white hares was spotted. It blended extremely well into the snowy background, all white except for the black tips of its ears, but it became more visible when it backed up against the dark gray of a greywacke boulder.

And there were some fine birds too. We saw coveys of winter-white Willow Ptarmigan, some glinting pale pink against the background. Lots of Snow Buntings foraged along the buggy roadway and in the high tide line of the bay, birds in the warm rusty-brown of winter plumage. Juvenile Black-bellied Plovers and White-rumped Sandpipers persisted as late southbound migrants. A flock of extremely pale Hoary Redpolls was an exciting find, as was a Northern Goshawk that flew by the buggy after flushing some ptarmigan from the willows.

Not all the tundra wonders were wildlife. The lichen-covered boulders and undulating fields of greywacke dusted with snow were fine elements of the landscape. A rose-colored Arctic sunrise comes to mind, as well as the sun struggling to pierce the silver cloud layer, still managing to light up half-frozen tundra ponds. The warm hospitality of everyone looking after us in Churchill made our stay even more pleasant. And our superb group of patient, friendly, and very observant travelers helped make the trip a memorable success.

ITINERARY

- Day 1** Sunday, October 23: Arrivals and get-acquainted dinner in Winnipeg. Dinner and night at Four Points Hotel at the Winnipeg airport.
- Day 2** Monday, October 24: An early morning flight to Churchill in good weather. Frontiers North driver Kerry toured us by the Polar Bear “Jail”, the Miss Piggy old plane crash site, then along the coast road before stopping at Gypsy’s for lunch. Early afternoon tour of Churchill River mouth area and Cape Merry, where we walked out to old fortification and scoped the area for birds. Another stop at the large stone inukshuk along the Hudson Bay shoreline, where a white Gyrfalcon flew over. After a visit to the Eskimo Museum, we checked in for the first of three nights at the cozy Tundra Inn in the town of Churchill. Dinner at Seaport Hotel.
- Day 3** Tuesday, October 25: 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 Luke aboard a generously sized Tundra Buggy, exploring the tundra east of Churchill as far as Ptarmigan and Polar Bear Point, the site of the Tundra Buggy Camp. Dinner at Seaport Hotel. Second night at Tundra Inn.
- Day 4** Wednesday, October 26: Our second day on the Tundra Buggy included visits to Gordon Pt., Ptarmigan Alley, and Polar Bear Point. Weather windy and snow blowing on and off, so wildlife activity more localized. Dinner at Tundra Inn restaurant. Third night at Tundra Inn.
- Day 5** Thursday, October 27: A final day on the Tundra Buggy took to Halfway Pt. and Gordon Pt., plus a drive into the interior on Christmas Lake Esker where we entered an area of

boreal spruce forest. After returning to buggy launch, we bused to Churchill Airport for a 5:30 pm flight to Winnipeg. Final group drinks and meal at Four Points Hotel.

Day 6 Friday, October 28: Individual departures from Winnipeg.

FIELD LIST

[unexpected sightings/rarities in *bold italics*]

MAMMALS

Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*) – We saw Polar Bears each day from the buggy, as well as one on the tarmac just after we had first landed in Churchill. Highlights included a mother with a pair of first year cubs, probably 10-11 months of age. We watched one bear for quite a while as it lounged in the seaweed mass at the high tide line. At one point it sprawled on its back, raising and waving its paws in the air, something like polar bear yoga. Finally the bear rose and walked directly toward our buggy, walked along the side and the back for intimate photos, then continued under the buggy and out the other side.

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) – On our second day on the Tundra Buggy, two forms of Red Fox were seen nicely and photographed. First a “Cross” Fox, which was warm auburn to rusty-brown on its front half, grading into darker rump and nearly black tail with white tip. “Cross” Fox is named for a dark stripe running down its back, intersecting another stripe to form a cross over the shoulders. Later that morning we had an excellent study of a “Silver” Fox, a Red Fox with black head and shoulders, dark silvery torso, and black tail with white tip.

Arctic Hare (*Lepus arcticus*) – After two days of careful searching of the landscape, Luke drove us to an area of boulders near Halfway Pt. where one of these large, white hares was spotted. It blended extremely well into the snowy background, all white except for black tips of its ears. This species and its sister species, Tundra Hare (*Lepus othus*), are the largest of the lagomorphs (rabbits, jackrabbits, hares). Arctic Hares have grayish fur in summer.

BIRDS

DUCKS:

Mallard – a few female plumage birds on the tundra ponds

Greater Scaup – rafts of scaup near the edge of Hudson Bay

Common Eider – first seen along the coast road and at Churchill River mouth, we saw at least a few eiders each day from the Tundra Buggy, mostly female/immature plumage birds, one of which we scoped

White-winged Scoter – a couple the first day near Cape Merry

Black Scoter – rafts of hundreds of scoters, mostly female/immature plumage, seen from the coast road and near Cape Merry

Long-tailed Duck – a scattering of female/immature plumage birds, some on tundra ponds not far from the buggy

Red-breasted Merganser – a couple diving repeatedly on a tundra pond

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

Willow Ptarmigan – Some find views and photo opportunities of ptarmigan in fresh white winter plumage, some with a distinct pinkish cast to their feathers. A few ptarmigan still showed a few brown feathers of summer plumage.

HAWKS, EAGLES & ALLIES

Northern Goshawk – flying by the buggy, this large accipiter was likely the cause of several ptarmigan erupting suddenly from the nearby willows

Golden Eagle – a distant perched adult, first seen flying away on very long wings

PLOVERS & SANDPIPERS:

Black-bellied Plover – beautiful juvenile plumaged plovers, scoped from the buggy

White-rumped Sandpiper – far north breeders, we saw juvenile birds on two days, including the white rump as they flew

GULLS:

Herring Gull – flying by at Cape Merry and vicinity

Glaucous Gull – a single adult near on a rock in Hudson Bay

FALCONS:

Gyr Falcon – One of the fine avian surprises of the tour was a white Gyrfalcon that flew right over the group as we stood near the town's inukshuk along Hudson Bay. The falcon continued flying over the town along the coast until out of view.

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Gray Jay – in the spruce forest

Common Raven - widespread around Churchill and on the tundra

LONGSPURS AND SNOW BUNTINGS:

Snow Bunting – each day on the tundra we were treated to nice views of winter plumage buntings – rusty brown and white – as they foraged on the ground and in the seaweed of the high tide line.

FINCHES:

Hoary Redpoll – Karen spotted these extremely pale redpolls from the buggy as they perched in a roadside patch of willows. With no streaking on flanks or rump and as pale as any birds that are ascribed to this species, these redpolls were truly “hoary.” The red forecrown and black chin was visible on those perched in the willows. The entire flock in the area seemed to total at least 40.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow – in Churchill town