

POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL

OCTOBER 29 – NOVEMBER 4, 2007

LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM

COMPILED BY: BOB SUNDSTROM

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

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL

October 29 – November 4, 2007

Leader: Bob Sundstrom

The premier site in the world for watching and photographing polar bears lies just outside the frontier town of Churchill, Manitoba. The autumn gathering of the immense white bears along the Hudson Bay coastline ranks as one of the top wildlife spectacles anywhere. Here, in just a few days, one can see scores of polar bears, the largest of all land carnivores, at very close range.

Hudson Bay's bears, which are the world's southernmost population of polar bears, gather outside Churchill to await the mid-autumn arrival of the pack ice. The "bay" is actually an inland sea, large enough in area to hold five each of Alaska and Texas, with plenty of space left over. As October gives way to November and the freeze-up becomes imminent, polar bears pace the shoreline, sniffing the air. Once back on the ice the bears may once again hunt seals, their primary prey.

VENT schedules its Polar Bears of Churchill tour in conjunction with the maximum concentrations of bears near Hudson Bay. On our 2007 tour, we saw 25 to 30 bears on each of the three full days we toured the shoreline region in a Tundra Buggy, for a total of over 80 polar bear sightings. We marveled at a mother bear with twin cubs. The two small bears, less than a year old, walked literally in their mother's footsteps across a frozen tundra pond. The watchful mother bear ultimately brought her young charges right alongside our Tundra Buggy, and all camera shutters clicked at full speed as the cubs peered curiously toward the humans inside the big white vehicle. The very same day we watched a bout of playful sparring between two sub-adult male bears, each 600–700 pounds. After a moment of circling one another, each sizing the other up, the huge bears stood face to face, shoving one another with their massive front paws. More shoves led to upright wrestling, almost a waltz, then hearty bear-hugs, and finally wrestling on the ground. As one bear lay on its back, the other playfully pounced, only to be bounced backwards off the other's upright legs. One ten-minute round of sparring led to a long break, as each bear sidled off and lay belly down on the ice. Even in the 15° F air, they needed to cool down before the next round.

Although polar bears typically don't feed much until the sea ice forms, one duo got lucky, and we were there to watch the aftermath. A woodland caribou had apparently wandered out along the shoreline and broken through the icy surface of the bay. By the time we reached the spot, two hungry male bears were negotiating over the now dead caribou. As one ate, the other watched and waited nearby, with its back turned. The wait was too much, and at last the second bear edged in for a share. Now, as each bear's jaws clamped down on either end of the carcass, a polar bear tug-of-war began. Finally, the bear that had been watching at last made off with a caribou haunch, and lay down to consume its hard-won portion.

Polar bears are certainly the top wildlife attraction of the season at Churchill, but we also enjoyed other fine encounters with wildlife. A fluffy, snowy white Arctic fox trotted close by our buggy, nibbling tiny fish out of the icy surface of a pond. A superbly camouflaged Arctic hare, all white except for black ear tips, peered out from a thicket of low willows. And we saw some terrific birds! We scoped a Gyrfalcon perched along the shoreline, and then watched the big falcon hunt ptarmigan, hovering over their willow thicket hideout until they flushed into the open. Our shuttle driver put us on to an unexpected treat: a Northern Hawk Owl, which perched atop small spruces

for scope study between bouts of rapid hunting flight low over the ground. The snowy landscape hosted flocks of Snow Buntings and coveys of Willow Ptarmigan. One group of ptarmigan walked out from the willows to right next to the tundra buggy, where their winter “snowshoe” feathered feet were clearly visible. Feeding near the shoreline were migrating Purple Sandpipers, while Common Eiders and other sea ducks dove in the bay and Hoary Redpolls bounded through willow thickets.

One final wonder helped make this an even more memorable tour. Our second night in Churchill brought a cool, clear sky—and with it the much hoped-for Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights. Broad arcs of greenish lights hung low on the dark horizon, then swirled upward in ever-changing patterns of clouds and flares and wispy strands. A magical moment on an exceptional tour.

Itinerary

- Day 1** Sunday, October 29: Arrivals and get-acquainted dinner in Winnipeg. Dinner and night in Winnipeg at the Hilton near the airport.
- Day 2** Monday, October 30: A morning flight to Churchill. After picking up the group at the Churchill airport, driver/guide Bill made a stop near the polar bear “jail” and the “Miss Piggy” cargo plane crash site of the 1960s. After lunch at Gypsy’s Bakery, Bill took us to Goose Creek Rd., where we were very fortunate to see a Northern Hawk Owl; and to watch near the bird feeders at Bill’s and another house. Then on to the Cape Merry area before a late afternoon check-in at the Tundra Inn. Later afternoon schedule allowed time to visit the Eskimo Museum and other sites in town before dinner. First of four nights at the cozy Tundra Inn in town of Churchill.
- Day 3** Tuesday, October 31: 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 Rick Madsen aboard a Tundra Buggy, exploring the tundra and near-coastal area east of Churchill. Areas covered today included Gordon Pt., coast nearby, Ptarmigan Alley, and almost to the Tundra Buggy Camp.
- Day 4** Wednesday, November 1: Our second day on the Tundra Buggy included visits to Tundra Buggy Camp, adjacent coastline areas, returning via Halfway Pt.
- Day 5** Thursday, November 2: A final day on the Tundra Buggy with Rick Madsen covered near-shoreline bear concentrations, followed by a drive out the Christmas Lake Esker road through the taiga and into the edge of the boreal forest. Returned to the launch site via the Hudson Bay coastline and Gordon Pt. Last of four nights at Tundra Inn.
- Day 6** Friday, November 3: After breakfast and some time to visit sights in town, shuttle driver Bill took us at 9:30 to the Churchill Airport. A late morning flight to Winnipeg arrived at 2 p.m. Afternoon free. Final group dinner at the hotel this evening. Night at the Hilton.
- Day 7** Saturday, November 4: Departures from Winnipeg.

WILDLIFE LIST

[unexpected sightings/rarities in *bold italics*]

MAMMALS

Polar Bear – Excellent bear viewing, with 25-30 bears observed each day. Highlights included a mother with small twin cubs born last winter, males sparring and wrestling, and the polar bear action in the aftermath of a caribou kill. Some bears came very close to the Tundra Buggy. Lots of great photo situations.

Arctic Fox – Great views of an all white fox very close to the buggy as it plucked tiny fish from the freezing surface of a tundra pond.

Arctic Hare – Michelle spotted a hare wonderfully camouflaged in the shrubby willows.

Bearded Seal – Swimming near shore with its head occasionally above water.

Red Squirrel – at Bill's house in Goose Ck. subdivision

BIRDS

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Common Eider – The most prevalent duck, primarily female/immature plumage birds seen. A few immature males and one adult male were scoped.

White-winged Scoter – one flew by near Cape Merry

Long-tailed Duck – a flock of four near Cape Merry

Red-breasted Merganser - flying by at Cape Merry and Gordon Pt.

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

Willow Ptarmigan – Great views of ptarmigan in white winter plumage, some close enough to see their feathery “snowshoes.”

Spruce Grouse – a male pecked at the ground very close to the buggy during the drive along the Christmas Lake Esker road

HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES

Bald Eagle – an adult near Churchill, a new addition to the tour list

Gyr Falcon – a gray adult first seen perched and later seen hunting ptarmigan

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Purple Sandpiper – surprising numbers, as flocks of up to 15 birds were seen feeding in the tideline along Hudson Bay

JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:

Ring-billed Gull - around the hotel in Winnipeg

Herring Gull – adults and immatures along the edge of Hudson Bay were a regular sight

Glaucous Gull – a few adults along the coastline

DOVES & PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon – in Winnipeg

TYPICAL OWLS

Northern Hawk-Owl – unanticipated, a real bonus for the tour since this owl is rarely seen here at this season

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Gray Jay – at several spots in the spruce forest

Common Raven - widespread around Churchill

LARKS

Horned Lark – a pair or two along the Tundra Buggy route

CHICKADEES & TITS

Boreal Chickadee – at feeders along Goose Ck. Rd.

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling - a few in Churchill

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

White-throated Sparrow – in the roadside shrubbery at the Winnipeg airport

Lapland Longspur – near Snow Buntings and Purple Sandpipers along Hudson Bay

Snow Bunting – in lovely winter plumage, with rusty highlights on mostly white bodies

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES”

Common Grackle – actually the rarest bird of the trip, since they are very scarce visitors to the Churchill area; seen near Bill’s house and feeders

FINCHES:

Hoary Redpoll – small flocks in the willows along the Tundra Buggy route

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow – in Churchill town