

POLAR BEARS OF CHURCHILL

NOVEMBER 3 – 9, 2008

LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM

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The mid-autumn gathering of polar bears along Hudson Bay near Churchill, Manitoba rates as one of the top wildlife spectacles in the world. The tundra frontier near Churchill is undeniably the premier site in the world for watching and photographing the immense white bears. In just a few days here one can see scores of polar bears, the largest of all land carnivores, and often at very close range. The experience is unforgettable.

Churchill's polar bears are the world's southernmost population, and by this season they have begun to concentrate along the Hudson Bay coastline outside Churchill, anticipating the mid-autumn arrival of the pack ice. The immense "bay," truly an inland sea, is home to nearly 1,000 polar bears. As early November arrives and the freeze-up becomes imminent, polar bears pace the shoreline, sniffing the air. 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. The timing for our 2008 tour was ideal; we saw 40 or more polar bears on each of the three full days we toured the shoreline region in a Tundra Buggy, for a total of 129 polar bear sightings, a new tour high. We watched several mother bears with pairs of two-year-old cubs, the cubs literally walking in their mothers' footsteps. One female with a small cub born just last winter lay in the snow not far from the vehicle, while we enjoyed our picnic lunch of hot soup and sandwiches. Several times we were fortunate to see large male bears sparring and wrestling, and other bears walked right up to our tundra buggy to check us out, offering incredible chances for photos.

On two different days we watched sub-adult males—each probably over 600 pounds—engage in playful bouts of sparring and wrestling. 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, a few lazy haymaker punches, then massive bear-hugs. Soon both bears flopped onto one another on the ground, rolling with paws in the air, playfully nipping at each other's dense, white fur. After five minutes of nonstop action, both bears sidled off and lay belly down on the ice, taking a long break. Even in the 15 F air, they needed to cool down before the next round. One such round of sparring came to involve three bears at once, adding another element of slapstick.

Polar bears in action are what nearly everyone comes to see at Churchill in the fall, but other autumn wildlife holds its own attraction at Churchill. We saw red foxes on at least two days on the tundra, where their reddish brown fur stood out handsomely across the snow-covered landscape. We spied a huge Arctic hare tucked into a shrubby willow thicket, its white fur a close match for the snow covering the ground. Grouse-like ptarmigan winter in the same landscape, and we were fortunate to see both Rock and Willow ptarmigan. Both species were now in fresh white winter plumage, some with a distinct pinkish cast to their feathers, as they huddled under the willows or foraged across the snowy tundra. At scenic Halfway Point, where a long arc of boulders angles out into Hudson Bay, we watched a Snowy Owl flap slowly along the shoreline, then perch briefly to stare back at us with its intense yellow eyes. Long-tailed Ducks and Common Eiders flew in flocks by the point. Hoary Redpolls bounced in small flocks among the willows, and pale Snow Buntings fed near the tideline. A visit to some residential bird feeders in the spruce woods outside Churchill added a few more birds, including Boreal Chickadees, Common Redpolls, and the latest fall sighting on record for a Brown Thrasher.

Not all the tundra wonders were wildlife. The deep-rose Arctic sunrises and sunsets across the ruggedly beautiful white landscape were breathtaking, even more so when the picture included a huge bear ambling toward the horizon.

Itinerary

- Day 1** Monday, November 3: Arrivals and get-acquainted dinner in Winnipeg. Dinner and night in Winnipeg at the Hilton near the airport.
- Day 2** Tuesday, November 4: A morning flight to Churchill was diverted to Thompson, where we waited for blizzard conditions at Churchill to lessen. After a mid-afternoon arrival in Churchill, our shuttle driver took us directly to the Tundra Inn, as the wind and snow was still blowing. Dinner at Seaport Hotel. First of four nights at the cozy Tundra Inn in town of Churchill.
- Day 3** Wednesday, November 5: 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 to Polar Bear Point, the site of the Tundra Buggy Camp.
- Day 4** Thursday, November 6: Our second day on the Tundra Buggy included visits to Ptarmigan Alley and the nearby coastline, an drive into the interior on the Gordon Pt. Esker (where passengers took turns at the wheel of the buggy!), with a return to the Tundra Buggy launch via Halfway Pt.
- Day 5** Friday, November 7: A final day on the Tundra Buggy covered near-shoreline bear concentrations to Gordon Pt. and Polar Bear Pt. We departed the tundra early today to make up some of the visits missed during Nov. 4's blizzard conditions. After picking up the group at the Tundra Buggy launch mid-afternoon, driver/guide Paul made a stop near the polar bear "jail" and at several key habitat overlooks. We also visited the Eskimo Museum and post office and other sites in town before dinner. Last of four nights at Tundra Inn.
- Day 6** Saturday, November 8: Optional pre-breakfast outing to Goose Ck. subdivision bird feeders, back for breakfast by 8:20 a.m. 9:30 to the Churchill Airport. A late morning flight to Winnipeg arrived at 2 p.m. Afternoon free. Optional visit by some to Fort Whyte sanctuary. Final group dinner at the hotel this evening. Night at the Hilton.
- Day 7** Sunday, November 9: Departures from Winnipeg.

WILDLIFE LIST

[unexpected sightings/rarities in *bold italics*]

MAMMALS

Polar Bear – Superb bear viewing and photographic opportunities, with 40-47 bears observed each day, for a total of 129 bear sightings over three days on the tundra buggies. Highlights included mothers with pairs of two year old cubs, and a mother with a small cub born just last winter that lay in the snow not far from the vehicle. Several times we were fortunate to see large male bears sparring and wrestling, and other bears walked right up to our tundra buggy to check us out, offering incredible chances for photos.

Red Fox – seen on at least two days on the tundra, their reddish brown fur stood out handsomely across the snow-covered landscape

Arctic Hare – one sat well camouflaged in the shrubby willows, but quite close to us

Ringed Seal – a couple seen swimming on Hudson Bay

BIRDS

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Canada Goose – at the Winnipeg airport

Common Eider – a few flocks of female/immature plumage birds

Long-tailed Duck – a large flock at Halfway Pt.

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

Willow Ptarmigan – Excellent 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 group of 5 right on the buggy roadway the first day on the tundra

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Purple Sandpiper – a small flock flew by the buggy

JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:

Ring-billed Gull - around the hotel in Winnipeg

Glaucous Gull – a few immatures along the coastline

DOVES & PIGEONS

Rock Pigeon – in Winnipeg

TYPICAL OWLS

Snowy Owl – at Halfway Pt., a boldly barred immature flapped slowly along the shoreline and perched briefly to stare back at the buggy

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Gray Jay – at several spots in the spruce forest
Common Raven - widespread around Churchill

CHICKADEES & TITS

Boreal Chickadee – at feeders along Goose Ck. Rd.

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Brown Thrasher – a remarkable rarity for Churchill, especially for late fall; we found one coming to seed feeders in the Goose Ck. subdivision, which now accounts for the latest seasonal record for Churchill

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

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

FINCHES:

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

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow – in Churchill town and in Winnipeg

ADDITIONAL BIRDS

(seen by part of group on an optional 11/8 outing to Fort Whyte preserve near Winnipeg)

Cackling Goose – a Richardson's subspecies among much larger Canada Geese

Mallard

Black Duck

Redhead

Hooded Merganser

Ruddy Duck

Bald Eagle – flushing thousands of gulls and ducks

Herring Gull – immatures and adults among larger numbers of Ring-billed

Downy Woodpecker – near the feeder station where we held a short vigil

Hairy Woodpecker - ditto

Black-capped Chickadee

White-breasted Nuthatch – also coming to the Fort Whyte feeders

European Starling

Golden-crowned Kinglet

American Robin

Common Redpoll – fine, close views in the birches right behind the interpretive center