

# Churchill Birds, Bears and Belugas | Trip Report

## July 9 – 15, 2022 | by John Carlson



**With guide, John Carlson and participants Amber, Betsy, Bub, Claire, Donna, Fred, Janet, Kit, Lori, Mark, Siegmund, Terry, and Woody.**



### **Sat., Jul. 9**

### **Arrival in Winnipeg Manitoba**

Participants met this evening at our hotel in Winnipeg located near the junction of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers, an area known as The Forks. It was fitting that we all met here prior to our journey since The Forks has been a meeting spot for travelers for over 6000 years. A few of us that arrived early enough wandered to the nearby Forks Market for dinner. The Market was originally two adjacent stables for competing rail companies and has been transformed into a collection of restaurants with ample outdoor seating on the banks of the Assiniboine River. All of us met up at our hotel later in the evening and after quick introductions and a review of our itinerary for the following day we all turned in for a good night's rest.

### **Sun., July 10**

### **Assiniboine Park Zoo | Fort Whyte**

Our morning began with a bus ride to the Assiniboine Park Zoo just east of our downtown hotel. We met up with our tour guide for the day and enjoyed a wonderful and informative trip through the zoo. The Journey to Churchill exhibit at the zoo was an appetizer for what was to come later in the week (and was a way for me as the guide to cheat a bit and have a guaranteed Polar Bear observation for the trip!). We were treated to an underwater show from a young male Polar Bear who was playing with a toy in the tank while we observed him



from an underwater viewing tunnel. Watching him so at home in the water certainly gave me an appreciation for some of the observations of wild Polar Bears we made later in the week. We were treated to a quick discussion from one of the Gray Wolves trainers at the zoo where we learned about their history and care. Other northern hemisphere animals such as the Bison, Stone Sheep, Amur Tiger, and Steller's Sea Eagle made an appearance as we made our way through the exhibits. At the end of our tour, we were treated to a description of the research and conservation work the zoo is involved with, ranging from the conservation and restoration of the tiny Poweshiek Skipperling to research on the massive Polar Bear to assist in their management and conservation. After a quick lunch at the zoo cafeteria, we made our way back to the bus and made our way to our afternoon adventure at Fort Whyte.

Fort Whyte is a 660-acre reclaimed urban green space. The area was dubbed "Fort Whyte" after a top Canadian Pacific Railway official who battled to take control of the site from a rival railway in the late 1800's. A former clay mine, it is now a wonderful environmental education facility with a couple of colonies of Purple Martins at the entrance. Our tour was centered around the role that the voyageurs played in the history of the area and our guide provided us with a good overview of that history. We also were able to all fit into one large canoe (14 people!) for a tour around one of the restored lakes. We observed our only reptile for the trip while in the canoe -a couple of Painted Turtles were lounging in the pondweed as we paddled by. American White Pelicans flew above us, and an Eastern Phoebe foraged along the shore along with a few Yellow Warblers. Both Warbling and Red-eyed Vireos were singing in the wooded areas around the center. By then it was a full day, and we were ready to head back to the hotel. After a short rest we met at the restaurant in the hotel for a wonderful dinner to celebrate our first day together and our impending departure to points further north – Churchill and its birds, bears, and belugas!





**Mon., July 11**

## **Flight to Churchill | Cultural Tour to Cape Merry and a visit to Miss Piggy and the Polar Bear Jail.**

We boarded our bus for the Winnipeg airport and got checked in to our charter flight to Churchill. We were delayed for a couple hours so we took advantage of the opportunity to do a bit of birding around the airport. We managed to find a Bald Eagle perched in a nearby tree and an American Kestrel and a Swainson's Hawk foraging in the airport grasslands. We also heard and saw the only Western Meadowlark for our trip here. We eventually boarded the plane and headed north. It was interesting watching the landscape below us change from the gridded land patterns and agricultural fields to muskeg and boreal forests with only the rail line to Churchill disrupting the fascinating landforms we were enjoying from above. The view of icebergs lining the shore of Hudson Bay let us know we were soon landing at Churchill.

We met Heino, one of our Lazy Bear Lodge guides, at the airport and then jumped on a van for our first tour of the Churchill area. After a quick look at the Granary Ponds, we continued out to Cape Merry. The north wind that had blown all the icebergs up against the southern shore of Hudson Bay was a bit brisk after our warm days in Winnipeg. While Heino was giving us a description of the historic artifacts found on Cape Merry we were treated to our first views of Beluga Whales in the mouth of the Churchill River – they were everywhere we looked. A few birds made appearances too. A few Bald Eagles were playing around across the mouth of the river, stirring up the Arctic Terns apparently nesting there. A few Whimbrels flew past, and rafts of Common Eiders and their chicks were found along the rocky coast. A gathering of gulls at the tip of the cape were a bit far away to really pick out anything different than the Herring Gulls we had already identified flying past. White-Crowned Sparrows moved around in the low vegetation and a few Common Redpolls popped in for a quick visit. We made our way back to the van and then continued down the Coast Road to the southeast. Another stop found us at the local beach where we lined up to take our photo at an inukshuk (stone markers built by First Nations people to convey information in an otherwise featureless landscape) with Hudson Bay in the background. A large flock of Bonaparte's Gulls cruised past, and the ever-present Arctic Terns patrolled the beach looking for their next meal. Beluga Whales continued to surface out in the bay wherever we looked and the reason they were there



was apparent in the wrack at the high tide line. Spawned out and dead Capelin, a small forage fish in the smelt family, were mixed in with the seaweed on the shore. The Belugas show up to feast on the spawning Capelin. In the distance, an inversion of hot and cold air layers above the bay resulted in the optical illusion of large cliffs of ice out in the bay.

We continued down the coast to visit another local landmark- the wreckage of a C-46 cargo plane that crashed trying to return to the airport after experiencing engine trouble in 1979. It is now known simply as Miss Piggy. The original red and white paint scheme has been replaced with a large mural as part of an impressive public art project started in 2017 called SeaWalls Churchill. SeaWalls Churchill was an effort by eighteen artists from all over the world who volunteered their time to paint a series on murals on empty buildings all over town. Our next stop was at the facility known as the “Polar Bear Jail,” (officially known as the Polar Bear Holding Facility) a special building where polar bears that are considered troublesome or dangerous are isolated before they can be relocated away from town. This building also hosts an impressive mural of a sleeping Polar Bear. After a discussion with Heino regarding the reason for the facility and its operations, we headed to the Lazy Bear Lodge to check in, grab dinner, and get settled in for the week.

## **Tues, July 12                      Churchill Granary Ponds | Hudson Bay Coastal Tour**

What a day! After our breakfast at the lodge, we gathered up our binoculars and spotting scopes and headed northeast down Kelsey Boulevard to a local birding patch known as the Granary Ponds. An old railroad bed served as our path to observe birds associated with the ponds and the surrounding vegetation. Green-winged Teal, American Widgeon, and Mallard were the waterfowl we observed here. We also had a Long-tailed Jaeger make a quick flyover. Spotted Sandpipers foraged along the shoreline, and we had a good opportunity to compare Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs standing side by side. There were a couple of Herring Gulls and their chicks not far from their nest built on top of a boulder in the middle of the ponds. There were also few Red-necked Phalaropes foraging in the shallows along with a Stilt Sandpiper and a couple of Short-billed Dowitchers. A Fox Sparrow popped out of the willows for a quick look, and we finally tracked down a singing Lincoln’s Sparrow as well. While we had our scopes trained on the shorebirds, a small group of redpolls flew into the vegetation near us. One male perched out in the open for us to view. Although initially identified as a Common Redpoll the pushed-in-face look and un-streaked underparts apparent in the photos of the bird led to a corrected identification of a Hoary Redpoll. Yellow Warblers also darted in and out of view in the vegetation along the shoreline and we never went long without finding an Arctic Tern. We also tried to emulate a choir and sing Mark Happy Birthday! We then made our way to the shore of the Churchill River and found a couple of Red-



throated Loons amidst the constant presence of Beluga whales surfacing all over the river and then slowly made our way back to the lodge for our lunch prior to our Hudson Bay shoreline excursion.

The afternoon found us gathered up at the Lazy Bear dock on the shores of the Churchill River. Prior to our evening excursion we all found an immersion suit to fit and like small herd of orange Gumby figures we waddled our way down the dock and boarded the boat. After getting our safety briefing, we headed out into Hudson Bay. We initially made our way along the shoreline around the point on the opposite side of the river where we found a few pods of Belugas to observe. Our boat captain Wally maneuvered the boat so that we could get good looks at the whales as they were foraging around us. Some of them came quite close to the boat. Many Bald Eagles were perched along the shoreline and up in the trees in the area.

After our Beluga encounter, we set out across the lower part of Hudson Bay for the mouth of the Seal River, about 30 miles away to the northwest. Our route took us through a large patch of slowly rotting small icebergs each carved into miniature sculptures by the waves and sun. Pomarine and Long-tailed Jaegers sailed above us looking for Arctic Terns to steal a fish from and we saw numerous flocks of waterfowl flying in the distance. As we approached the mouth of the Seal River, we were able to identify Mallards, American Black Ducks, Long-tailed Ducks, Northern Pintails and all three scoter species, White-winged, Black, and Surf, in the mixed flocks flying by. We also had Red-necked and Common Loons circle the boat. One Double Crested Cormorant also made an appearance flying past. The ever-present Arctic Terns were also observed.

As we slowed down and started scanning the shoreline, a couple of white spots appeared out of the shimmering distance. Bears? We slowly motored towards the spots, and they gradually revealed themselves to really be bears. Polar Bears to be exact. Captain Wally navigated us through the shallows to eventually get close enough to see two Polars Bears feeding on a Beluga Whale they likely captured in the shallow water as the tide went out. One bear, probably a male, was quite large and he and another smaller female bear were feeding side by side. Then we noticed another bear peeking out of the shoreline shrubs and another two bears barely visible as they lay in the nearby water. What is that? A white wolf? A smaller white animal moved across the opening in the shrubs behind the feeding bears. A quick look at the photos revealed it was a Polar Bear cub, not a wolf. But





then, a few minutes later, an actual Gray Wolf emerged from the shrubs and worked its way around the feeding bears, looking for a chance to steal a meal. Apparently, this was only the second time that our Captain had observed a Gray Wolf and a Polar Bear together in this area. Six Polar Bears all gathered in this one spot for a feast. After watching the bears for what seemed like a long time, we had to start making our way back to Churchill before the tides left us stranded at the mouth of the Seal River like the unfortunate Beluga. A quick glance at our watches revealed that even though the sun was still above the horizon it was rather late at night. The sun slowly sliding below the horizon to the north on our way home lit up the calm Hudson Bay in a pink and orange glow offset by the powder blue icebergs. One last bird observation on our way home was a large, pale Glaucous Gull perched on one of the icebergs.

### ***An Exhortation to Patience***

*This beluga leaps  
Too soon! He's stranded inshore  
Where lazy bears wait.*

-Amber Wong

## **Wed., July 13                      Prince of Wales Fort Zodiac Trip**

The tides dictated our activities on the water and that resulted in an early morning after a late night. Wednesday morning found us all gathered at the Lazy Bear docks again. Our early morning plan was to venture out in Zodiacs for a trip across the Churchill River to visit the Prince of Wales Fort and then see some more Belugas in the Churchill River. All of us loaded up into the Zodiacs and we headed straight across the Churchill River to land at the Parks Canada facility along the shore. After landing we proceeded up the walkway to the ramparts of the Fort and we climbed a short ladder to the top of the inner walls. As our group made its way to the back of the Fort, we peered through the cannon portals to see further down the point. Woody immediately exclaimed "There is another Polar Bear!" Indeed, there was a bear about 250 yards away. We watched him from the walls of the Fort for a short time until he started to walk towards us and Heino immediately directed us back towards the Zodiac landing spot. Once we were all onboard the Zodiacs, we motored out along the point to see the bear from a different perspective. We found him again rather quickly and it was soon apparent that he had recently



killed a Beluga Whale and was feeding on it. We were able to watch him wrestle with his kill in the shallow water for a quite a while from a safe distance. Our plan to be on the water observing Belugas was short-circuited by our time with the Polar Bear. It was an ok trade for sure. Upon the completion of our tour, we all headed back to the lodge for some much-needed rest after an intense and long two days. Some of us took advantage of the unscheduled afternoon to explore the museums in town or join a kayak tour in the Churchill River to see the Beluga Whales up close. We closed the evening with another enjoyable dinner at the Lazy Bear Lodge.

## **Thurs., July 14                      Shores of Hudson Bay and Twin Lakes**

Our van and driver arrived at the Lodge and we boarded for our day's adventure. Today we were heading inland to the boreal forest and fen near Twin Lakes. Our hosts/driver/guide/photographers were Angela Mak and Bill Wong, owners of the Iceberg Inn. We all loaded into the van and headed east along the Coast Road once again. Along the way we were fortunate to spot a silver headed Pacific Loon on a small lake along the road as well as a few (hah) Arctic Terns. Our first stop was at the end of Four Mile Road along the shore of Hudson Bay at the mouth of Eastern Creek. This was a wonderful spot. As we moved along the coast a large mixed flock of waterfowl took off from the shore. A couple of Whimbrels were along the shoreline and on a small island in the creek were 5 Hudsonian Godwits, our best look at this species. The air was filled with Arctic Terns that were nesting nearby. A couple of Baird's Sandpipers were foraging along the shoreline. A pair of Semipalmated Plovers and their chicks were also located nearby and after reviewing photos of one of the plovers we realized it was banded, likely from a long-term study on Semipalmated Plovers in Churchill. The band information has been submitted to the Bird Banding Lab.

We continue down the road to the Churchill Northern Studies Center for a quick stop before continuing through the boreal forest down the Twin Lakes Road. Our next stop was at the beginning of a marshier area known as The Fen. Here we found several Rusty Blackbirds in their shiny black breeding plumage and another Hudsonian Godwit perched on the top of a dead spruce. A pair of Parasitic Jaegers sat out on taller clumps of vegetation. We continued down the road until we could see the Twin Lakes on either side of the road. A stop here revealed a Common Loon on one of the lakes and several wildflowers in the opening in the forest including Arctic Raspberry and Raup's Indian Paintbrush. This was by far the day with the most bugs and our white van seemed particularly attractive to the large horseflies locally known as Bulldogs. Our bug nets certainly came in handy. We gathered up and continued down the narrow road through the shrubs to our terminal stop at the southeast





side of one of the easternmost Twin Lake. Although we were there mid-day we did manage to find a Blackpoll Warber, a singing Tennessee Warbler and some of us got quick looks at a couple of unusually shy Canada Jays. We retraced our route back to town, lamenting that we still had not found a Willow Ptarmigan, one of our target species, when one appeared at the side of the road. A quick stop and we managed to get a short look at the bird before it moved into the undergrowth and trees.

Angela got us back into town in time for our dinner reservations at the Seaport where we enjoyed dinner and a homemade birthday cake for Mark since we didn't get to celebrate on his real birthday. After dinner Angela took us back out to Cape Merry and we got to spend a bit more time wandering around that landscape, and we soon realized that the cold wind we experienced the first day when we visited the cape might have been preferred over the bugs that showed up when there was no wind. Some of us opted to head back to the lodge but a few of us remained with Angela to witness the sunset and enjoy a quiet evening listening to the sounds of the Belugas singing and surfacing on the river.

### *Spring*

*Permafrost wakes, twists  
And heaves its mossy blanket  
Like a cranky child.*

-Amber Wong

**Fri., July 15**

## **Tundra Crawler Tour of Bird Cove | Churchill to Winnipeg**

This morning we packed up all our belongings and headed out for our last excursion with Lazy Bear Lodge before heading to the airport. Our adventure today took us along the coast to an area known as Bird Cove. As soon as we arrived at the cove we had a small flock of Sandhill Cranes fly past while we were transferring to our tour vehicle. This morning our tour vehicle was a Tundra Crawler, a specially designed vehicle built for Polar Bear viewing. We didn't find any Polar Bears, but we were able to drive a network of roads around the cove and observe a few birds from the vehicle. There were a number of Whimbrels flying around and along the shore. During one of our last stops we were able to observe a pair of Tundra Swans. They were not attending to any





cygnets this year and they had likely failed at their breeding attempt for some reason. Arctic Terns continued to escort us around the cove and there were also a number of Herring Gulls around. We looked hard to find another ptarmigan, but couldn't find one.

### ***Wishing for Cygnets***

*A tundra swan pair  
Preen their sad ghostly feathers  
Playing the long game.*

-Amber Wong

We transferred back to our buses and headed off to the airport where we boarded our plane back to Winnipeg. Once again the clear skies gave us wonderful views of the northern Manitoba landscape as we made our way away from the wild, unbroken wilderness back into the gridded landscapes of southern Manitoba. Upon arrival we gathered our belongings at the airport and crossed the street to our hotel. We enjoyed one last delicious meal together which included our artist-in-tour Amber revealing her haikus about our week (which are included in this trip report) before heading our separate ways home.

*Photos by John Carlson*