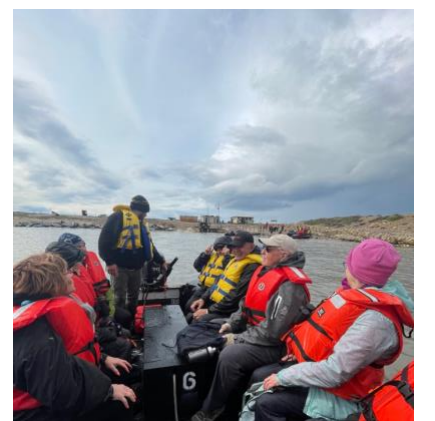


Churchill: Birds, Bears and Belugas

July 9 – 15, 2023 | Trip Report | by John Carlson



With Naturalist Journeys Guide John Carlson and participants Betty, Connie, Dee, Dennis, Ed, Gary, Heidi, Helen, Jim, Karen, Lisa and Susan



Sun., 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. All of us met up at our hotel early in the evening for quick introductions and a review of our itinerary for the following day. 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 10 Assiniboine Park Zoo | Fort Whyte

Our morning began with a bus ride to the Assiniboine Park Zoo just east of our downtown hotel. A quick bus trip through Winnipeg brought us to the zoo entrance and we made our way 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 few of the Polar Bears who were playing with a toy in the tank while we observed them from an underwater viewing tunnel. Watching them so at home in the water certainly gave us an appreciation for some of the observations of wild Polar Bears we made later in the week.

Other northern hemisphere animals such as the Snowy Owl, Arctic Fox, Bison, Stone Sheep, Amur Tiger, and Steller's Sea Eagle made an appearance as we made our way through the exhibits. During our lunch at the zoo cafeteria, we entertained by more Polar Bears on the other side of the large glass wall that allowed us to look into the bear exhibit. After lunch we made our way back through the zoo and boarded our bus for a short trip to 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. Although it was a bit breezy, we managed to find a few Purple Martins in the array of nest houses at the entrance to the grounds amongst all the House Sparrows. Lisa led us to a Cooper's Hawk nest she had found during an earlier visit to the site and a few of us sampled the Saskatoon Berries that were ripening along the trail. We also managed to find an assortment of waterfowl on one of the lakes including a Northern Shoveler along with a couple of Eastern Phoebes foraging near the shoreline. A Swainson's Hawk flew over in the wind during our walk as well. By then it was a full day, and we were ready to head back to the hotel. A few of us 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 and it hosts a wide variety of dining options that we were able to choose from.

Tues., July 11 Flight to Churchill | Cultural Tour to Cape Merry | Visit to Miss Piggy and the Polar Bear Jail

We boarded our bus for the Winnipeg airport and headed to the airport to join our charter flight to Churchill but prior to our departure we were able to find a view of the Radisson Hotel in downtown Winnipeg and with the help of the spotting scope and the knowledge of Jim's observation from the day before we were spot a Peregrine Falcon perched on an antenna at the top of the building. Once we got to the airport, we were delayed



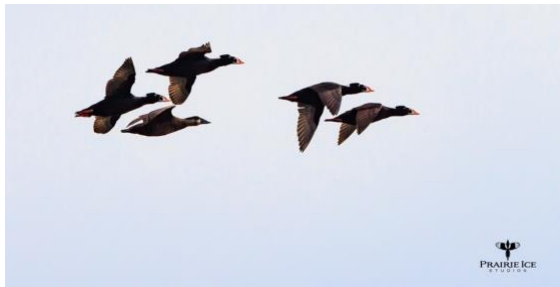
for a few hours due to computer issues, but we eventually boarded the plane and headed north. When we were able to peer through the clouds it was interesting watching the landscape below us change from the gridded land patterns and agricultural fields to muskeg and boreal forests with only the rail line to Churchill disrupting the fascinating landforms we were enjoying from above.

We met Deacon and Adrian, two of our Lazy Bear Lodge guides, at the airport and then jumped on a van for our first tour of the Churchill area. Our first 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 Deacon regarding the reason for the facility and its operations 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 of murals on empty buildings all over town. After our stop at the crash landing, we made a bit of a detour from our original plans and headed further east of town to check on a report of a mother Polar Bear and her cub of the year. We couldn't find the bears on our way out of town, but we did see a Tundra Swan with a couple of cygnets and a female Common Eider in a pond along the road. After we turned around and headed back to town, we were able to spot the two Polar Bears tucked into the low willows along a boulder ridge. We pulled over and watch the female bear nurse her young cub. He eventually got his fill and poked his head up above the willows to take a look at all of us looking at him. Had we not gotten delayed getting out of Winnipeg, we likely would have missed this encounter so there was eventually a silver lining to our wait at the airport. We returned to town and made a quick tour through town and out to Cape Merry before returning to the lodge to check in and enjoy a rather late dinner.

Wed., July 12

Birds and Bears Along the Coast | Hydro Road | Hudson Bay Coastal Tour

What a day! After our breakfast at the lodge, we gathered up our binoculars and spotting scopes, boarded the bus and headed east out of town. As we approached the spot along the road where we had observed the Polar



Bear mother and her cub the day before, we spotted them again. This time they were much closer to the road. We pulled off to the shoulder and got to watch them wander along the beach away from us, only to have them turn around and come back towards us and then cross the road and head inland right in front of us. We all got wonderful views of the attentive mother and her young cub. After enjoying that show for bit we headed further east to the Churchill Northern Studies Center, research for ongoing arctic research. Along the way were able to observe a nice group of Pacific Loons on a lake beside the road. After a quick restroom break at the research center, we retraced our route and then headed south along the Churchill River on the Hydro Road (named of the powerlines that deliver electricity to Churchill from hydroelectric generators further south). We made a stop at the weir across the Churchill River, and we were able to find a couple of Rusty Blackbirds along the shore, and an American Crow, and a Merlin in the nearby forest. Lots of Green-winged Teal were also in small ponds along the road. We returned to the lodge for a quick lunch and then boarded the bus again. This time we headed out towards Cape Merry to the Lazy Bear dock facilities where we donned our life jackets, boarded Zodiac boats, and headed across the mouth of the Churchill River to the Prince of Wales Fort. We arrived at the Parks Canada dock and received a briefing from the Parks Canada staff about the history of the fort and preceded up the walkway towards the entrance to the fort. Unfortunately, shortly after we arrived the skied opened and it began to pour rain.

By the time we got back in our zodiacs and headed out on the water the rain had begun to ameliorate and we were treated to an amazing show of Beluga Whales. We were surrounded the entire time we were on the water. Small gray Beluga calves were riding the hips of their mothers and surfacing along with them, older but still gray colored whales were also evident and what seemed to be thousands of white whale backs were constantly moving through the area around the boats as they foraged for spawning Capelin, a small sardine-like fish. Above the surface of the water there were nearly as many Bonapart's Gulls getting their fill of Capelin as well. In addition, we saw a large flock of Surf and White-winged Scoters along with a few Common Eiders and their chicks. After enjoying the sights and sounds of the sea canaries (another colloquial name for Belugas) we headed back to shore and then back to the lodge for dinner and a good night's sleep.

Thurs., July 13 Coastal Tour on Hudson Bay

The tides dictated our activities on the water and that resulted in a rather early morning return to the Lazy Bear dock on Thursday morning. We boarded the new boat, a catamaran called the Matonabee, and found our seats



on the main deck. We headed out into Hudson Bay and shortly after making the corner past Eskimo Point, we found our first Polar Bears of the day, what appeared to be a female bear and her cub from the previous year. We observed the bears from the water and at one point the female bear came right down to the water's edge to study us too. It was a rather humbling experience to have a large apex predator staring right back at us. We proceeded a bit further down the coast to the west of the mouth of the river. Along the way we observed quite a few Belugas, large rafts of scoters, including many Black Scoters, a few Red-throated Loons, and more of the ever-present Bonapart's Gulls and Arctic Terns. We found a couple more bears along the shore and then turned around and came back to visit the first pair of bears we had originally observed. This time we got to watch the younger bear wandering through the Arctic Tern colony. It was bombarded by adult terns the entire time, but the bear did manage to catch and eat one of the young terns while we were watching. The older bear was at the edge of the colony and was also getting attacked by the terns but was much less tolerant of the attacks and was growling at the terns. We continued to make our way around the point and managed to find one drake Harlequin Duck foraging along the shore on our way back in. We spend a bit more time watching the mass of Belugas in the river before we headed back to shore. Upon the completion of our tour, we all headed back to the lodge for some much-needed rest after an intense and long couple of days. Some of us took advantage of the unscheduled afternoon to explore the museums in town. We closed the evening with another enjoyable dinner at the Lazy Bear Lodge.

Fri., July 14 Churchill Town

Friday was a cold, wet and rainy day. In the morning a few of us ventured down Kelsey Boulevard to a local birding patch known as the Granary Ponds. Along the way we admired a few more of the murals painted around town. At the 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 hurried past the Arctic Tern nest in the middle of the railroad bed and found 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 Wilson's Snipe. We cut our trip short and returned to the lodge for lunch. In the afternoon a few of us made our way in the wind and rain to the Itsanitaq Museum where we were able see a beautiful collection of Inuit carvings and artifacts that are among the finest and oldest in the world dating from Pre-Dorset (1700 B.C.) through Dorset, Thule and modern Inuit times.



Sat., July 15 **Tundra Crawler Tour of Bird Cove | Flight 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. This morning our tour vehicle was a Tundra Crawler, a specially designed vehicle built for Polar Bear viewing. We were able to drive a network of roads around the cove and observe a few birds from the vehicle despite the smokey and overcast skies. From our lumbering perch in the Tundra Crawler we were able to observe a number of new bird species for the trip along with most of the other species we had already observed. We saw Tundra Swans fly across in front of us and a pair of Sandhill Cranes worked their way across the open slope near the crawler. It was our best shorbird day and despite the haze we were able to find a rather rare observation of a few Red Knots along with a number of Hudsonian Godwits, Whimbrels, and Baird's and Semipalmated Sandpipers along the coast. Later on an inland pond we were able to find a few Semipalmated Plovers. One Merlin made a quick appearance too. And we even found a few more polar bears along the way. Most were distant observations but we did manage to get a closer view of another female bear and an older cub where they blended into the shoreline rocks. Perhaps the most exciting find of the day was a brood of Willow Ptarmigan attended by both parents just off the side of the trail we were on. Everyone got good looks at these birds both on the way in and again on the way out. After we completed our Tundra Buggy adventure we transferred back to our buses and headed off to the airport where we boarded our plane back to Winnipeg. Upon arrival we gathered our belongings at the airport and crossed the street to our hotel. We enjoyed one last delicious meal together before heading our separate ways home.

Photos by John Carlson: Group Photo, Bonapart's Gull, Bee on Flowers, Group on Zodiac, Beluga Whale Tail, Polar Bear, Pacific Loon, Willow Ptarmigan, Polar Bear Mural, Mother and young Polar Bear, Female Common Eider, Surf Scooters, Polar Bear Pair, Polar Bear Mural, Whale Watching, Harlequin Duck, Surf Scooters, Polar Bear & Arctic Tern