

**The
Travelling
Naturalist
&
Limosa
Holidays**



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Churchill for Polar Bears

19 – 26 October 2007

Trip Report

Churchill

Friday 19 – Friday 26 October 2007

Trip Report

Leader

Neil Arnold

Introduction

Some of us were disappointed that there was no snow. This didn't affect the bear sightings however and provided us with the opportunity to enjoy far more bird species. I am most grateful to you all for your alertness in the field and your very good company. My thanks go to Wally, Jodi, Paul and to the Great Canadian Travel Company for their professionalism. Thanks also go to the Lazy Bear Lodge and to Gypsy Bakery restaurant for taking care of us so diligently. Let's hope we'll meet again soon.

Neil Arnold

p.s. You will notice that I have a new toy, a mobile weather station!

Diary

Friday 19 October

Everyone reached Heathrow at the appointed time and we enjoyed a good flight, well looked after by Air Canada staff. Our change at Toronto only just left enough time to buy some snacks then it was on to Winnipeg where a very swift check in at the Hotel Fort Garry saw us heading to bed at what looked like an early hour – our bodies were telling us otherwise!

Saturday 20 October

Winnipeg

Having enjoyed a restful night and a filling breakfast, most of the group were “prompt on parade” at 9am to walk to The Forks and on to the Riverside Walk where our birding attracted comments from a number of friendly locals including Boyd Knox who later escorted us back to the Forks on a guided tour – having first taken a group photograph.

After lunch at The Forks, we returned to the Fort Garry for our transfer to the Airport and another smooth flight to Churchill where we were met by Wally and Jodi. We had a brief orientation tour in our red ‘school bus’ before a warm welcome at the Lazy Bear Lodge and a filling evening meal.

Sunday 21 October

Churchill

Weather Overcast, 1008 millibars, 5 degrees C, wind North 8 mph

After an early breakfast we were on board the bus and on our way to the Tundra Buggy Station by 7.45am. Joining our allocated Buggy, number 13, we set off onto the tundra at a very sedate pace, following long standing tracks so as not to further damage the fragile habitat. Close views of an Arctic Hare and some good bird sightings suggested that number 13 was 'lucky for some'. Then came our first bear – sitting in the willow scrub and only a few yards from the vehicle. More excellent sightings followed, interspersed among hot chocolate, lunch of soup and sandwiches and enormous afternoon pastries which were dispensed by our enthusiastic driver, Brian with the help of Wally and Jodi. There were bears of various ages and sizes in a range of postures and all at close range. As a final joy we found a mother and her well grown cub nestled down in the willows. It was time to head back to base in order to get back to town before dark and in fact some members had time for a little retail therapy while others whose rooms faced the river managed more bird and mammal watching. Our evening meal was taken in Gypsy's Bakery but unfortunately the sky was still overcast as we made our way back to the Lazy Bear, so the aurora was obscured.

Monday 22 October

Churchill

Weather Overcast, 1005 mb, 1 degree C, north 10mph

A relatively lazy start saw us join Paul Ratson at 9am. We headed south on the Goose Creek Road with stops at various bird feeders. Snow buntings were everywhere but one stop produced Common Grackle and good views of Grey Jay. A stop at the weir on the Churchill River added more ducks. As we retraced our route, a keen-eyed member spotted an interesting 'blob' which turned out to be a Hawk Owl giving good telescope views. It then flew towards us for even better views – a star bird! A quick lunch was taken at Gypsy's and we were soon back looking around the port area before heading out of town on the coast road. We visited an area where waste from the grain silos is dumped. Clouds of Snow Buntings feeding on grain were disturbed by a fast flying Gyrfalcon which settled for a while before making another pass and taking one of the Buntings. Time was spent scouring the flock for Lapland Longspur and Horned Lark. We then turned down a side track towards the hulk of MV Ithaca – the remains of a vessel stranded in the early 1960's. Paul noticed an Arctic Hare among the rocks so we took a walk to the shore. By approaching the Hare openly we were able to get really close before it decided that its white colouring was not protecting it – but it only moved a few yards away. It was time to return briefly to town as three of our number were due to take a dog sled ride. The rest of us headed out again to the edge of the Boreal Forest where another walk got us close to two Willow Ptarmigan. There was a light snowfall as we made our way back to the vehicle and returned to town, thanking Paul for a fantastic day out.

Roy and Margaret had opted to take a morning helicopter flight along the coast where they saw some 30 bears and gained a real appreciation of the extent of the Tundra and the adjoining forest areas. On their way back they were thrilled to see five moose including one really big bull.

Again our evening meal was enjoyed at Gypsy's and again it was overcast as we returned.

Tuesday 23 October

Churchill

Weather Overcast, 1013 mb, 1degree C, NW 13 mph

An early breakfast again saw us on board the school bus at 7.30am and back on board Buggy 13 with Brian by 8.15am. We made steady progress onto the Tundra and our first sighting was of a mother bear with her cub – more active than on the previous occasion. We then took a different track out towards the coast where a 'white blob' was identified through the telescope as a Snowy Owl. As we moved back inland a Caribou was spotted. It was windier than on the first day so the bears tended to be settled down in the scrub but we found one reaching up against another buggy. Unfortunately it then retreated to doze, conserving energy, but it later woke with a comical scratching routine. As before all of this had been punctuated by welcome refreshments, by good views of Ptarmigan and

several Arctic Hares. As we turned for home Brian allowed Margaret T to audition for the post of Buggy driver – she drove us ‘round the bend’ with great success. The only ‘large’ animal missing from our sightings was Arctic Fox and we spent some time by a den site but without success. Again a return to town by 4pm allowed a visit to the Post office for passport stamping before our final meal at Churchill in the Lazy Bear. The skies remained overcast so unfortunately we had had no opportunity to see the Aurora as we had hoped.

Wednesday 24 October

Churchill

Weather Churchill 1016 mb, 0 degrees C, NW 8mp
 Winnipeg 986 mb, 2/8 cumulus and cirrus, sunny, 14 degrees C, W 5mph

A quick call at Gypsy’s provided us with some snacks for the day and then time to explore and to admire the Husky puppies at a neighbouring establishment. Some of our number were lucky to find another Snowy Owl, this time rather closer, and to sight another Glaucous Gull. Our flight back to Winnipeg went smoothly and we were back at the Fort Garry in time for some more birding along the Riverside for those who wished. A Ring-billed Gull was a new sighting but good views of White-breasted Nuthatch and Hairy Woodpecker were the highlights.

Our final meal together was enjoyed at the Keg Steakhouse.

Thursday 25 October

Winnipeg

Weather Sunny, no cloud. 978 mb, 17 degrees C, W 13 mph

Some members opted for an easy start but having marvelled at the skill of Fort Garry’s omelette chef over breakfast, ten of us boarded taxis to Assiniboine Park. It was a crisp clear morning as we headed for the Duck Pond and the English Garden before following the riverside walk. The highlights were Blue Jay, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers and a mixed flock of Bohemian and Cedar Waxwings.

Back at the Fort Garry there was time to finish packing and have a snack before a visit to the Manitoba Museum with its impressive displays on the varied natural habitats and history of the State. We bid farewell to Ged and Margaret who were staying on in Canada and headed for our smooth flights back to Heathrow.

THE SPECIES CHECKLIST

CHURCHILL 2007 CHECKLIST

KEY

() peak count
 [] total count

BIRDS

GROUSE

Tetraonidae

Willow Ptarmigan

Lagopus lagopus

Common on the tundra (41) and two seen at close range in the woodland, Churchill

WILDFOWL

Anatidae

Snow Goose

Anser caerulescens

Only noted on the tundra (24) Churchill

Canada Goose

Branta Canadensis

Common Churchill (300) and Winnipeg (1000). Three birds in Winnipeg were of the small race B.c.richardsonii

American Wigeon	Anas Americana	Two Churchill
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	Common (300) Churchill
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta	A few Churchill [16]
Green-winged Teal	Anas carolinensis	Noted Churchill (39)
(Greater) Scaup	Aythya marila	Widespread Churchill [25]
Common Eider	Somateria mollissima	Up to one hundred Churchill
White-winged Scoter	Melanitta deglandi	Three Churchill River
Black Scoter	Melanitta nigra	Six Churchill River and eleven Hudson Bay
Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis	Common Churchill [38]
Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula	Flocks Churchill [25]
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator	Four Hudson Bay

FALCONS

Falconidae

American Kestrel	Falco sparverius	One over the city, Winnipeg
Gyr Falcon	Falco rusticolus	A stunning dark adult Churchill

KITES, HAWKS AND EAGLES Accipitridae

Bald Eagle	Haliaeetus leucocephalus	An adult Churchill
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PLOVERS & LAPWINGS Charadriidae

Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola	Nine records on the tundra, Churchill
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SANDPIPERS

Scolopacidae

Greater Yellowlegs	Tringa melanoleuca	Two on the tundra, Churchill
Purple Sandpiper	Calidris maritime	Twelve on the tundra, Churchill
Dunlin	Calidris alpina	One on the tundra, Churchill

GULLS, TERNS AND SKIMMERS Laridae

Ring-billed Gull	Larus delawarensis	A single bird on the river Assiniboine and a flock of thirty one at Assiniboine Park, Winnipeg
Glaucous Gull	Larus hyperboreus	Three sightings of first winter birds, Churchill
American Herring Gull	Larus smithsonianus	Common Winnipeg and Churchill

PIGEONS AND DOVES Columbidae

Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	Columba livia	Common Winnipeg
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TYPICAL Owls

Strigidae

Snowy Owl	Nyctea scandiaca	A male on the tundra and a female in town, Churchill
Northern Hawk Owl	Surnia ulula	A lone bird in Churchill was a very pleasant surprise

WOODPECKERS	Picidae	
Downy Woodpecker	Picoides pubescens	One on the river walk and three Assiniboine Park
Hairy Woodpecker	Picoides villosus	Three on the river walk and three Assiniboine Park
JAYS & CROWS	Corvidae	
Gray Jay	Perisoreus Canadensis	Five Churchill
Blue Jay	Cyanocitta cristata	One Assiniboine Park
American Crow	Corvus brachyrhynchos	Very widespread, Winnipeg
Northern (Common) Raven	Corvus corax	One Winnipeg and thirty five sightings, Churchill
WAXWINGS AND ALLIES	Bombycillidae	
Bohemian Waxwing	Bombycilla garrulus	Four in a mixed flock, Assiniboine Park
Cedar Waxwing	Bombycilla cedrovum	Ten in a mixed flock, Assiniboine Park
TITS & CHICKADEES	Paridae	
Black-capped Chickadee	Parus atricapillus	Common Winnipeg
LARKS	Alaudidae	
Horned (Shore) Lark	Eremophila alpestris	One would have been seen by the group if a Gyrfalcon had not exploded the finch flock!
NUTHATCHES	Sittidae	
White-breasted Nuthatch	Sitta carolinensis	Three sightings on the river walk and three Assiniboine Park
STARLINGS	Sturnidae	
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	Several Winnipeg and two Churchill
THRUSHES	Turdidae	
American Robin	Turdus migratorius	Twelve Assiniboine Park
OLD WORLD SPARROWS	Passeridae	
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	Small flocks Winnipeg and Churchill
FINCHES & Allies	Fringillidae	
Common Redpoll	Carduelis flammea	Six in flight Churchill
NEW WORLD WARBLERS	Parulidae	
Cape May Warbler	Dendroica tigrina	One on the river walk

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS Icteridae

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula* One at Churchill was unexpected

BUNTINGS, New World Sparrows Emberizidae

Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus* One Churchill
Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis* A thousand or more Churchill and one on the River Assiniboine walk, Winnipeg
White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis* Three on the river walk
Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis* Common Winnipeg
American Tree Sparrow *Spizella arborea* Three on the river walk

MAMMALS

CARNIVORES - Bears Carnivora - Ursidae

Polar Bear *Ursus maritimus* Seventeen sightings from the tundra buggy, including two cubs. Thirty were also seen from the helicopter.

CARNIVORES - Seals Carnivora – Phocidae

Harbour Seal *Phoca vitulina* Three Churchill River

RODENTS - Squirrels Rodentia - Sciuridae

American Red Squirrel *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* Common Winnipeg and one Churchill
Eastern Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis* Common Winnipeg

RODENTS - Rats, Mice & Voles Rodentia - Muridae

Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus* Three sightings Churchill

LAGOMORPHS - Rabbits & Hares Lagomorpha - Leporidae

Arctic Hare *Lepus arcticus* Seven sightings, some very close, Churchill

ARTIODACTYLA – Even-toed Hoofed Mammals

Moose *Alces alces* Five, one a very fine male, from the helicopter, Churchill
Barren Ground Caribou *Rangifer articus* One from the tundra buggy, Churchill

Neil Arnold

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