

## Churchill, Manitoba, Canada

by Dave Gibson

After months of subsisting on body fat, berries, bird eggs, roots, rodents, geese, crabs, kelp, and an occasional carcass, hungry polar bears amass at the edge of the Hudson Bay in anticipation of freeze-up and the bounty it promises. Cooled by northwesterly winds, the fresh water flowing into Hudson Bay from the Churchill River in remote Churchill, Manitoba, Canada, will be the first to transform into seasonal ice where access to the bears' staple food, ringed seals, becomes available. To the detriment of the polar bears, the bay freezes 30 days later than it did 30 years ago giving the polar bears less time to feed on their preferred prey. Conflicts with humans are increasing as the bears loiter about longer than in the past.

Of the estimated 25 thousand polar bears in existence, about one thousand will pass through the Churchill area during October and November. Inundated with bears and eco-tourists, Manitoba Conservation officers patrol town around the clock and a grassroots "Polar Bear Alert Program" keeps

# Polar Bear capital of the world

a lookout for the stealthy and at times dangerous polar bears. Persistent intruders that can't be deterred with air horns, firecrack-

ers, scare pistols, paintball guns, or rubber bullets are sentenced to a stretch in the twenty-five pen holding facility or "Polar Bear Jail." As

to not encourage return visitors, the bears are given only snow to eat and released when the sea ice freezes.

Churchill residents encounter the polar bears about 175 times a year with most instances of the benign variety ending with only a scare. In just the second bear conflict death since 1717, as strange as it might sound, a man with salvaged meat in his pockets from the then recently burned Churchill Hotel met his demise in 1983 from a bear attack. More recently, 30 year old Erin Greene was mauled while walking home from a Halloween party. Being tossed about with the polar bear's powerful jaws clamped around her head, a man heard her screams and rushed to her aid hitting the bear with a shovel. The heroic man suffered severe lacerations to his head and torso when the bear turned on him while three of Erin's arteries were severed, with a chunk of ear hanging from her torn scalp. Both of them were fortunate to escape with their lives.

Following a thoroughly sumptuous dinner at the Tundra Inn Restaurant of elk meatloaf smothered in brown gravy, without doggie or bear bag in hand, I was wary of my surroundings during the short walk back to the motel in the cold dark drizzly evening.



Having signed on with Tundra Buggy Adventures for a day of bear viewing, we boarded the shuttle that would take us 14 miles to Churchill Wildlife Management Area and the buggy launch. The surest way to see the local polar bears is from the comfort and safety of specially designed tundra buggies. Like wide school busses on giant balloon-shaped tires that traverse the water-soaked predominately bumpy trail, the 4WD tundra buggies are outfitted with slide windows, padded bench seating, lavatory, propane heat stove, and observation deck off the back of the vehicle. Through the windshield our first bear was spotted! A snowy white sub-adult female slowly ambled as it sniffed at the ground. Paying no heed to the tundra buggy, she chewed on an empty aluminum can before circling an observation tower and headed toward the buggy. Being the first wild polar bear that most of us had ever seen, half of the 36 people onboard rushed to the rear deck for a picture. While we checked her out, she checked us out with a near pass before going on her way.

A flock of ptarmigan in full winter plumage was easy to spot contrasted against the still snowless tun-

dra. Stunted black spruces 100 years old and merely 15 feet high grew their needles only to the southeast, away from the unrelenting harsh winter winds. Although we didn't see any, arctic fox and snowy owls are sometimes present along the rough trails built by Canadian and American Armed Forces in the fifties and sixties. The vast majority of polar bears are found at the terminus by the ocean, Polar Bear Point. Aside from adult males being larger than females, a reliable method of determining sexes is the location of urine stains on their fur. Males exhibit yellow under their bellies and females on the haunches.

A massive male alternated between lying down and sitting up long enough to scope out the surroundings and squeeze in a yawn or two. After a while he lumbered to the shore for a wade. Another sizeable bear put on a show; sitting up for spectators and rolling with apparent delight in the vegetation. Affording us a glimpse into their lives before they disperse onto the ice until late spring, a mother with cubs huddled close to her side was the highlight of the day and what I took to be a hopeful sign for the future of polar bears.



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