



A Tropical Birding CUSTOM tour

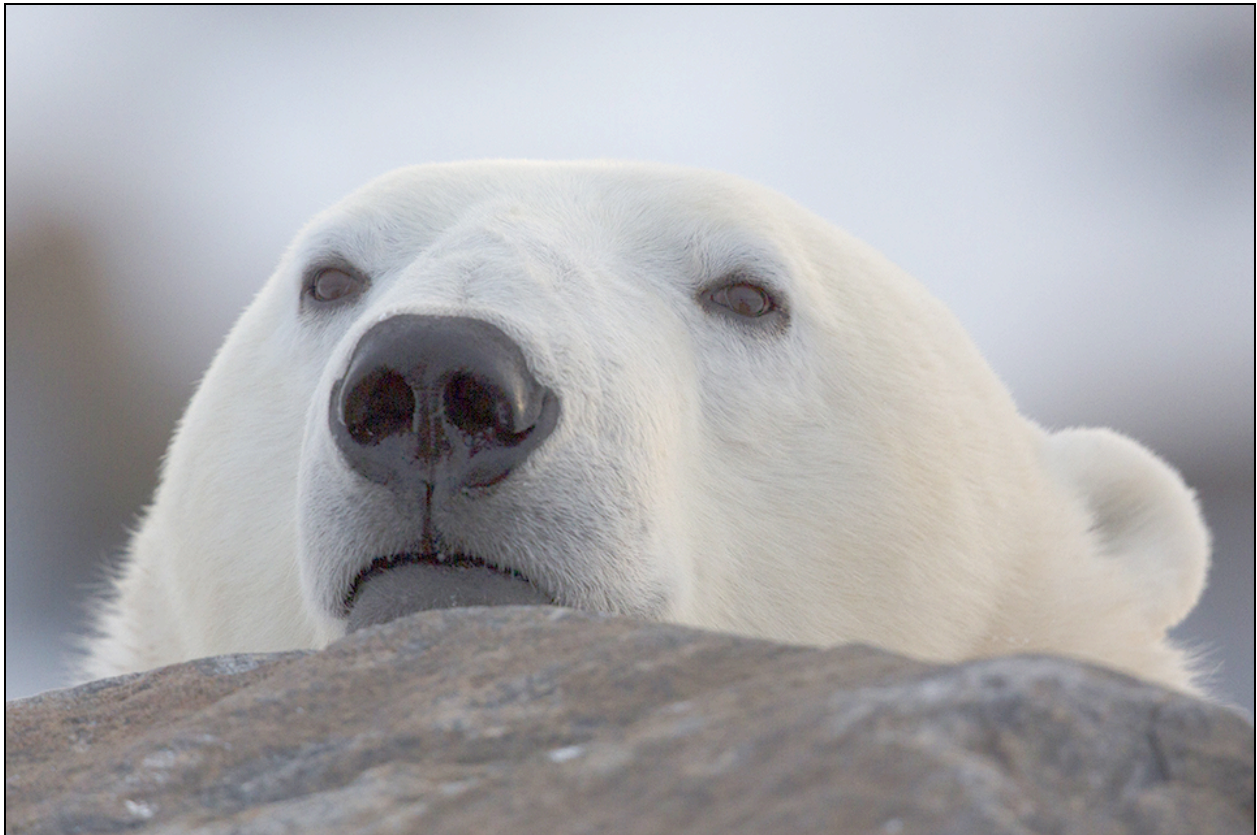
Polar Bear Walking Photo Journey

Northern Manitoba, Canada

October 25-31, 2013

Guided by Iain Campbell

All photos & report by Iain Campbell



I am used to being somewhat underwhelmed when people sprout hyperbole, you go there and it is not quite as amazing as they made it seem. Well I can say that this trip point blank was the best photographic and wildlife adventure that I have ever experienced. After five days with bears, I wanted to stay for another week and was excited when our flight out was delayed by four hours. Time for one more walk.

The trip started in Winnipeg when you arrive the night before to ensure the early morning flight to Churchill, Manitoba on the southwestern bank of Hudson Bay. The next morning after arriving in Churchill, people needing warm weather gear got fitted out and we took a small 8-seater plane for a low flight north to Seal River Lodge. As we left Churchill we flew over the last of the Taiga forest and onto the tundra. The landscape is not classically beautiful, but glorious in its starkness.

On arrival onto the small runway, the snow was blowing strong, our temperatures dropped, and one person decided that the two minute drive to the lodge was better than the ten minute walk, so she headed off with the luggage. The remaining six of us braved it out, and were rewarded by our first Polar Bear off the edge of the runway, chilling out in some willows.



After settling in, grabbing a great lunch and getting an introduction to dealing with massive carnivores that you feel inclined to cuddle, we set off with Tara and Andy, the two local guides who made us feel completely at ease. We were about to walk around the tundra with Polar Bears, so having A-grade guide who know their stuff was very important. On the first afternoon we had a bear rolling around, stretching and generally just checking us out. We also had an Arctic Fox in its new winter plumage.



It was only that night that we really spent time to check out the lodge. If you want plush with all the bells and whistles, satellite television and a spa, this is not it. It is however, much better than that with very comfortable with en-suite bathrooms, and extremely cozy lounge to hang out and chat, and best of all, amazingly helpful staff who do everything to make sure that you have a brilliant experience. Where in the world do you have staff that hop up hourly through the night to call you when the northern lights are shining? Well, they do here. The food was outstanding, and although I would have been happy in an igloo eating beans, it was fun to have great food every lunch and dinner to warm you up between walks.

The next three days were very similar where we left the compound, walked in the tundra and on Hudson Bay looking for Polar Bears. We found at least one on each walk, but they were always in different situations, different lighting and doing different things. At no point did I, or any others in the group, feel as though we were doing the same old, same old.





So although it was almost all white, it was by no means only Polar Bears. We spent a lot of time stalking down the flocks of hundreds of Willow Ptarmigan that have turned into their winter plumage. They would let us approach quite closely and you could have taken decent shots with a 300mm. We also chased Arctic Hare all over the place but only managed really good looks inside the lodge compound.



Sometimes you did not need to head out of the lodge compound to have a close encounter. Bears are walking up and down the coastline of Hudson Bay so every few hours or so, one may walk past the lodge. Now, sitting for a month waiting for ice to form would test even the most Zen bear, so having a person to interact with is a pretty interesting way to fill in the time. If one was in the area and I went out to the compound and sat beside the fence, the bear would come up to the fence. I spent about 20 minutes with the one in the photo above before I was late for lunch and being rude to the kitchen staff. I went in, had lunch and watched him play in the snow.



When we went on the walks, the guides talked about all aspects of Arctic biology, history and culture. We found ourselves talking about Inuit and first nation lifestyle while being watched by another local. The general protocol was to not let new bears get too close (about 100 yards) before the guides made noise to keep them away. When it was a bear that the guides know the bear, know its behavior they will let it get to a safe distance. There was one bear that followed us a lot, and would walk to within 30 yards and usually lie down and watch us before dozing off. Now that is not to say that there were not times when my adrenaline went sky high with a bear not wanting to back off. At no time did the local guides lose their composure, and they were always in control of the situation. The photo at the top of this trip report was one of those situations. The bear did not want to back down, and after having noise made and snow thrown at it, he went and hid behind a large rock where he kept poking his head above the rock to watch us. Now playing peekaboo with a massive carnivore seems surreal, but every time he popped his head over the rock, we would all make a noise saying,

“We still see you Bob”. Again, the local guides were in complete control of the situation, which did not feel threatening, as the bear was showing signs of anything but curiosity.



On the last day of the trip the plane that was due to pick us up had mechanical difficulties, and it looked as though we may not be able to get out, and the new group may not get in. In a show of a first rate operation, Mike and Jeannie from Seal River Lodge, sent a message of the radio that “Guys you are getting a helicopter safari”. My last image of this spectacular place was taking off from their front door in a helicopter, rising right over their roof, before shooting off towards Churchill flying low over the tundra. An exhilarating experience, landing in Churchill just on dusk, heading for a wonderful meal with our group in the local restaurant before flying back to Winnipeg that night. Would I go back? In a heartbeat.

