



# Bear WITH ME

A Manitoba excursion provides an opportunity to come face to face with the world's largest land carnivore. But please mind your distance.

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

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**'A** word to the wise," our guide cautioned as we climbed aboard the Frontiers North Tundra Buggy. "It's mid-October and the polar bears haven't eaten since the ice melted in July. These bears are going to see you as meals on wheels."

Although the warning was worth a giggle, the guide wasn't kidding. It wasn't long before a mother polar bear and her two cubs approached the Great White Bear Tours buggies just ahead of us. When they failed to find a quick snack there, they headed straight for ours.

I can't remember a time when I didn't want to see polar bears in the wild. Having already photographed penguins and elephant seals in Antarctica, I was definitely up for an adventure at the other end of the globe.

Frontiers North Adventures in Canada offered exactly what I wanted. With an itinerary called the Black & White Bear Adventure

ture, I could visit the tundra to see polar bears, and trek to Riding Mountain National Park in southwestern Manitoba for encounters with black bears. I couldn't pass up the chance to photograph both kinds of bears on the same journey.

Churchill, Manitoba, is called "The Polar Bear Capital of the World" for good reason. Not only will you find literally tons of bears in the area, but you also can move among them in their natural habitat. No other place in the world offers such easy access to these magnificent creatures in the wild.

The jumping-off place for the trip is Winnipeg, Manitoba. I flew in a day early to ensure I was well rested and to scout out the city. Winnipeg is located near the longitudinal center of North America. Home to more than 633,000 people, it serves as Manitoba's key economic and cultural center.

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PHOTOS BY BETH PARKS  
A worker (top) explains the design of cub traps used to catch bears that wander into the town of Churchill, Manitoba, looking for food. Captured bears are incarcerated in the polar bear jail until ice forms on Hudson Bay and the bears can be relocated to hunt for ringed seals. One of the impressive creatures (above), which can tip the scales at 1.5 tons, glances up at a tundra buggy.

## Bears

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When you go to the "Peg — or Winterpeg as some people call it, thanks to the severe winter winters — be sure to check out The Forks historic area at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. The Forks served as a meeting place for aboriginal people for at least 6,000 years. In addition to historic sites, it features a market place with unique shops, a river walk, and a variety of festivals and entertainment.

The Black & White Bear Adventure operates in two nine-day sessions that serve a total of about 20 people. The first 10 adventurers arrive in Winnipeg first and then drive out to a ranch near Riding Mountain National Park. They return to the city just as the second group of 10 comes in. The blended group then flies to Churchill to experience the polar bear portion of the trip. Then the entire group flies back to Winnipeg and the second group of 10 people goes on to Riding Mountain.

Part I of this story will describe the white bear portion of the adventure.

### An auspicious start

If ever there was a good omen for such a trip, it occurred the evening we drove from the airport toward the tiny town of Churchill on Hudson Bay. The sky suddenly exploded into a ballet of dazzling colors. I was the only American in the group and the only traveler who had ever seen the aurora borealis, or northern lights. After a trip to Alaska, I had written an article called "Night Lights" for the Bangor Daily News in October 2002. In all my travels, though, I had never seen anything remotely like the show we saw this night.

The Churchill area claims to have some of the brightest and most spectacular aurora borealis displays in the Northern Hemisphere. I believe it. We were so awed by the stunning dance of shimmering rays and curtains that we forgot to grab our cameras. Just as we realized we were missing out on the chance of a lifetime, the lights faded and went out.

Although the town is situated on the Churchill River, it is publicly accessible only by air or rail. It boasts a population of some 900-plus hardy souls. You will find friendly people, comfortable basic lodging, good food, some really cool gift shops, as well as such essentials as a supermarket and a hardware store. If you want a McDonald's, Wal-Mart or major hotel chain, however, look elsewhere.

One of the first things you learn when you arrive in Churchill is that nobody locks their cars or trucks. One reason is that polar bears often wander into town in search of food. The locals instruct visitors to give street corners and dark alleys a wide berth, and to jump into the nearest vehicle if they spot a bear.

### The polar bear jail

Polar bears may find themselves impounded in Churchill's polar bear jail, a Quonset hut near the airport. Bears that can't be frightened away from town are tranquilized with darts or caught in culvert traps. The jail initially featured good food and a swimming pool, but incarcerated bears liked the digs so much that they broke into the facility. Today's bears are held captive without amenities. They are released on Hudson Bay as soon as ice forms in the fall so they can hunt for their preferred food, ringed seals.

Each of our two days on the tundra began with a great breakfast in Churchill, followed by a bus ride out to the buggies parked at the Churchill Wildlife Management Area.

Although we usually think of polar bears as brilliant white, they actually tend to be more cream-colored. Some appear quite yellow and may even be tinged with brown. Their coloration helps to provide camouflage. Since little or no snow lay on the ground while we were there, we tended to confuse polar bears with large rocks of similar color.

The polar bear's thick winter coat features glossy guard hairs that shed water easily as the bear shakes itself when wet. Dense underfur provides an insulating layer beneath the guard hairs. The bear's skin is black, which helps absorb heat reflected downward by the translucent guard hairs. Beneath the hair and skin, a thick layer of fat further protects the bear from the bitter Arctic cold.

The whitish color isn't the



PHOTO BY BETH PARKS  
Mother polar bears build south-facing dens along the shore of Hudson Bay and normally give birth to twins in the dead of winter. This diorama at the Parks Canada Visitor Reception Centre in Churchill represents the inside of a typical den.

### POLAR BEARS AT A GLANCE

Polar bears are the world's largest land carnivores.

The bears are usually classified with marine mammals because they depend on the sea for food and can swim for miles. They use their front paws as oars and their rear paws as rudders.

The soles of the polar bears' feet have small bumps and depressions that act as suction cups and prevent the bears from slipping on the ice.

Fur and fat insulate the bears so well that they can scarcely be detected with infrared photography.

The bears have a sense of smell so keen that they can detect a seal nearly a half-mile away.

Polar bears can run at speeds up to 25 mph over short distances. They average about 6 mph on longer jaunts.

Unlike other bears that slow down their metabolism only when food becomes unavailable in the fall, polar bears experience a decrease in metabolism whenever food is lacking for a week to 10 days. Their metabolic rate returns to normal as soon as they begin to feed again.

Polar bears begin to live on their fat stores when the pack ice melts and they can no longer hunt seals. They conserve energy by remaining inactive about 80 percent of the time.

While ringed seals are the bear's favored food, additional food sources include other kinds of seals, walrus, beluga whales and narwhals. The bears sometimes eat berries, grasses and seaweed. They also scavenge the carcasses of other animals.

Polar bears don't become sexually mature until they are 4 or 5 years old. Males may not mate until they are 8 or more years old.

Mating occurs in April and May when the bears are still out on the pack ice. Females experience delayed implantation, with the fertilized egg not imbedding in the uterus until September or October.

Pregnant females construct their south-facing dens along the coast as soon as deep snow becomes available, sometimes as early as October. Pregnancy lasts about two months, with cubs usually born in December or January. The most common litter size is two.

Newborn cubs weigh about 2 pounds.

Their eyes are closed and their hair is so fine that the cubs may appear to be hairless.

Mothers and cubs usually emerge from their dens in February or March. Cubs usually stay with their mothers for 2½ years, and perhaps even an additional year. The earliest a mother will produce a new litter is three full years after giving birth.

The Churchill, Manitoba, area is one of the three largest polar bear maternity den sites in the world. The other two are in Russia and Norway.

The current world polar bear population is estimated to be 25,000 to 30,000. The Canadian polar bear population is probably around 15,000.

Humans are the primary predators of polar bears. Fees for nonresident sport hunters generally range from \$18,000 to \$20,000 for each hunt.

In addition to global warming, the greatest threats to polar bears are human encroachment on habitat, illegal hunting and chemical contamination of prey. While considered vulnerable, polar bears are not classified as endangered at this time.

— BETH PARKS

only characteristic that differentiates polar bears from the more familiar black and brown bears. The polar bear has a longer body and neck, small rounded ears and a classic "Roman" nose.

Polar bears are impressive. Adult males stand up to 10 feet tall and can weigh as much as a small car. Females are about half the size of males, but still make formidable predators. Getting between a mom and her cubs can be extremely dangerous.

### Life on the tundra buggy

The folks at Frontiers North designed their tundra buggies with passenger safety in mind. The tires are 3½ feet high and sit on 25-inch rims. The height helps the buggies navigate over the rough terrain. When you go out on one, be prepared to rock and roll for the entire day.

Because the tundra is extraordinarily fragile and may take centuries to regenerate, tour companies confine their vehicles to trails built by the military in the 1960s. Tire tracks made nearly 50 years ago and never used again look as if they were just created.

Each boxlike tundra buggy features a wide body that provides additional height, comfort and security, and each vehicle comes equipped with a restroom. A rear viewing deck permits adventurers to rush outside and photograph passing bears without endangering themselves.

A tundra buggy is kind of like a big open bus, and passengers can move around at will when the vehicle is stopped. Windows open in a hurry whenever a bear comes within camera range, so the inside can become chilly pretty quickly. A propane heater rewarms the interior once the windows and door are closed.

Each day in the tundra buggy includes coffee, tea, hot chocolate and doughnuts. Lunch consists of sandwiches, steaming hot soup, cookies and cake, as well as various drinks.

If you are a passenger on a tundra buggy chances are good that a polar bear's face will come within a few yards or even a few

feet of your own. When a polar bear approaches your window, thrill tends to smother reason. As I leaned out to get a close-up shot of a bear directly beneath me, the guide grabbed my shoulder. "Beth," he warned, "all he has to do is put his head in here and you're gone."

### The wildlife experience

Whether on the tundra buggy or a bus, we often stopped to photograph wildlife other than polar bears. They included arctic fox, arctic hare, muskox, lemmings and voles. A snow-white weasel teased us with its antics, and a mink popped out of a hole beside the trail. If lynx, wolves or wolverines were in the area, they failed to grace us with their presence.

The most common birds we saw on the tundra were ptarmigan. These white grouse, also called snow chickens, dotted the landscape or sought shelter among the scrubby willows. The ptarmigan's outstanding feature is their unique feathered feet. The feathers protect the birds' feet from the cold and also act as snowshoes.

Although the days on the tundra buggy were the highlight of our adventure, other experiences in and around Churchill also made the trip worthwhile.

An optional helicopter flight gave us a whole new perspective of the desolate tundra and the extreme northern section of the boreal forest. In addition to the large wildlife species we viewed at ground level, we also saw moose and a variety of birds. Caribou also moved within the



PHOTO BY BETH PARKS  
The arctic hare is North America's largest hare. It has short ears with black tips and a winter coat of thick white fur. When disturbed, arctic hares can run at more than 30 miles per hour.

losing oil pressure in one engine.

We also flew over the now-defunct Churchill Rocket Research Range, where occasional rocket remnants from past decades lie embedded in the permafrost. The site houses the Churchill Northern Studies Centre, an independent nonprofit organization that focuses on Arctic research and education.

### 'Mush' ado

On our return to the airport we cruised in low over the Port of Churchill, Canada's only Arctic seaport, which lies within walking distance of downtown. The port serves immense vessels that transport grain and other products from Canada's prairies to such places as Africa, the Mediterranean region and Europe. Connections with the Hudson Bay Railway through the Canadian National Railway System provide efficient access to trains throughout North America.

Back on the ground, Wapusk Adventures offered us a different frame of reference through a brief but interesting dog sledding experience. Owner and operator Dave Daley introduced us to his more than 40 dogs, regaled us with mushing stories, and took us in small groups on a milelong "Ididamile" ride through the boreal forest. Daley is known for having organized the Hudson Bay Quest, an annual 400-kilometer race that invites mushers from near and far to celebrate Arctic life and sled-dog culture.

For those who love history, Churchill offers some wonderful historic sites for visitors to research and explore. Danish explorer Jens Munck wintered here in 1619-1620. All but two of Munck's crew of 84 perished from exposure, trichinosis and scurvy. The trichinosis came from eating polar bear meat marinated in vinegar instead of being cooked in a way to kill the offending parasite.

Cape Merry at the mouth of the Churchill River is a must for birders. Be on the lookout for such species as harlequin ducks and king eiders. Your guide will bring along a shotgun loaded with blanks in case you encounter polar bears. You can climb around the cannon battery at the Cape Merry National Historic Site and also check out the Prince of Wales Fort across the river.

In town, be sure to visit the Eskimo Museum. Clean, modern and bright, the museum is known for having one of the oldest and most comprehensive Inuit artifact collections in Canada. It also educates visitors about the region's wildlife.

Also, be sure to check out the Parks Canada Visitor Reception Centre in the train station. The displays, videos and dioramas are extraordinary as are the staff members who enthusiastically share their knowledge.

As if all these activities and attractions are not enough, consider that you also will spend time with black bears and other wildlife if you book the Black & White Bear Adventure, which will be the focus of Part II of this series. For more information about polar bear viewing and other Arctic escapades, check out the Frontiers North Adventures' Web site at [www.frontiersnorth.com](http://www.frontiersnorth.com) or call 800-663-9832. Excursions vary in price and are not inexpensive, but my group and I were satisfied with our experience.

If you prefer to spend full days and nights with the polar bears, consider booking a berth at a Tundra Buggy Lodge. The lodge at Polar Bear Point consists of modules linked together and features a dining car, a lounge, a utility car, and two sleeper cars. A second lodge sits about 20 miles east at the legendary Cape Churchill.