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Brian K. Jeffery



During the first couple of weeks in November of 2010, I made a visit to Churchill, Manitoba. The purpose of my visit was to see polar bears. My first observation upon arriving was that there was no heavy blanket of snow and the bay was completely free of ice as the wind whipped the waves against the rocky shore. Temperatures were about -13 degrees at night and plus two degrees centigrade during the day. I learned that the spring breakup came earlier and the winter freeze up came later. Clearly, these were not the typical weather patterns I have known in the past. I couldn't help but wonder how these changing weather patterns were affecting the polar bears. I was to learn that the bears were spending as much as 160 days on land waiting for the freeze up.

I thought this extended time before the freeze up must be rather stressful for the polar bears as they are dependent on ringed seal for survival. They are not omnivorous like other bears and now must endure an extended fast. The only way they can get to the ringed seal is for the freeze up to take place so they can get onto the ice to hunt. For the females, it is extremely important, as they not only have to provide for themselves but their cubs as well.

The best way to see polar bears is to travel in a "tundra buggy". These specially designed, slow moving buggies will transport you to the viewing areas where you will see polar bears. The buggies are heated for your comfort and they are high enough off the ground to ensure your safety. As I jostled across the rough terrain, I definitely saw polar bears! Let me tell you about some of the behaviours I observed.

I saw polar bears ambling along in what is referred to as a "walking hibernation". During this state, their metabolic rate is lowered thus helping them to conserve energy during their fast. I also saw bears in "day beds" on the leeward side of some willow bushes. Here, they rest quietly with their head propped up on one paw. I also watched a bear on its back, with paws in the air, rolling around in the snow attempting to stay cool and I suspect, to relieve some boredom. It was quite humorous but a great photo op! Another way a polar bear will attempt to stay cool is by lying flat out on the ice in a frozen tidal pond.

A special treat to watch for is a female with cubs. I managed to see a female with one cub that curled up beside her to stay warm. Another thing to watch for are sparring males. Staying alert pays! Off in the distance were two sparring adult males, which were best viewed with binoculars. This form of "play fighting" helps to maintain rank in the hierarchy, as well as prepare males for the more serious spar during mating season, where the victor claims mating rights. Sometimes they will use their jaws like large calipers to "size up" the competition. Literally! This spar didn't last long as the two males pushed and shoved and briefly stood up on their hind legs. Did you know that researchers can identify adult male polar bears by the pattern of scars on their muzzle?

If you want to learn about the polar bears of Churchill, the best way to go is with a group and the best group to go with is the University of Saskatchewan through The Centre for Continuing and Distant Education. This department specializes in ecological education and tours. Their extremely knowledgeable program leaders will guide you through an exciting northern adventure while ensuring your comfort and safety at all times.

We had nine people in our group including our interpreter / program leader. We traveled by van during the day, taking in the various points of interest in and around the Churchill area. As well, we explored areas looking for wildlife and those special photo ops. In addition to polar bears, there are other things you should watch for including, arctic fox, arctic hare, ptarmigan, snow buntings, snowy owls and red fox.

I stayed with my group at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre whose main focus is research and education. I enjoyed all the meals as there was always a wide offering to satisfy personal preferences. Rooms are always clean, quiet and comfortable. In the evening, I was fascinated and learned much at three different presentations about polar bears. This was a great learning opportunity! Individually and collectively, there is a tremendous amount of knowledge about polar bears by the people who stay at the study centre. You owe it to yourself to get to know some of these people during your stay so as to enhance your learning experience.

The highlight of my journey was to see polar bears. I spent a whole day on the tundra buggy where I was able to see polar bears in their usual habitat. Some bears were best seen with binoculars or photographed through a telephoto lens. Our skillful driver was able to get close to a few bears providing a fabulous viewing and photographic opportunity! Did I mention that I saw as many as 40 bears on this trip? Yes, the polar bears of Churchill were quite a sight to see!

If you want to see and learn about polar bears, the Polar Bear Ecology Program, as offered through the University of Saskatchewan, is the one I highly recommend. Their extremely knowledgeable program leaders generously cater to your learning needs as well as ensuring your comfort and safety while on tour.

Be advised that The Polar Bear Ecology Program is extremely popular and tends to sell out quickly. While the full details for the 2011 edition are pending, the tentative program dates are November 4th to 10th. Space will be limited!

Why not create a polar bear learning adventure for yourself? Call the U of S information line at (306) 966-5539. You'll be glad you did!

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See full text of Nature View, Fall 2011  
[http://www.naturesask.ca/rsu\\_docs/fall-nv2011--1-.pdf](http://www.naturesask.ca/rsu_docs/fall-nv2011--1-.pdf)