Eagle-Eye Tours



# Belugas, Bears & Birds 2023 Trip Report

Link: Belugas, Bears & Birds 2023 Trip Report

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*Take a look at our Belugas, Bears & Birds tour for more information!* **July 8-18, 2023 Leaders: Ken De Smet; James Lees** Highlights on this trip abounded. On our final evening together, we shared some of our favorite bird, mammal & other moments from the trip; it brought back some great memories. We were definitely given some major challenges – a significant road closure and the Boreal Trail reconstruction in Riding Mountain that robbed us of some prime wildlife viewing opportunities, and most significantly two missed days in the north due to unusually bad weather & cancelled flights into Churchill. Despite all that, we not only reached our bird and mammal targets for the trip, we totally exceeded them. In the end, our bird and mammal totals for the trip were an amazing 226 and 30 species! No doubt if we would of had our full 3 days in the north, those totals would have been considerably higher, but as it was both totals were greater than those for any previous Belugas, Bears & Birds Manitoba tour!

## Day 1 – July 8

We met in the lobby of the hotel that first evening and walked to a restaurant where we dined, got acquainted and discussed trip logistics. Almost everyone had arrived a day earlier, and many had visited Assiniboine Park earlier in the day – we added some of their sightings for Day 1 to the list, including the only Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Peregrine Falcon observations for the tour. But, we'd have an early start tomorrow with a fair bit of driving, so we packed it in early that evening.

## Day 2 – July 9

Stocked with coffee from the lobby, and bag breakfasts from the hotel, we left the hotel at 5:45 am bound for St Ambroise on Lake Manitoba. On the way, we stopped for a White-tailed Jack Rabbit on the edge of Wpg, a Short-eared Owl perched on a fencepost, got out at a known spot along PR227 for Red-headed Woodpeckers (first of 4 for the day), and further on spotted a couple Eastern Bluebirds, 2 Wild Turkeys and a Swainson's Hawk.



*White-tailed Jackrabbit © JS Lees*

At St Ambroise beach we had breakfast, and had a few birds along the lakeshore including Bonaparte, Franklin's, Ring-billed, Herring & California Gulls, Black, Common & Forster's Terns, 2 Stilt Sandpipers, 4 Least Sandpipers, 1 Sanderling, 2 Red-necked Phalarope, some Greater & Lesser Yellowlegs, 2 Bald Eagles, and large numbers of American White Pelican and Double-crested Cormorant. Driving the beach ridge we had a couple Franklin's Ground Squirrel, as well as Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. In the marsh and surrounding grasslands, we had our first looks at American Bittern, Northern Harrier, Brewer's & Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Marbled Godwit, Willet, Marsh & Sedge Wrens, Bobolink, Brown Thrasher, and Swamp Sparrow. Our next stop, Cal's place along the Portage Creek, was particularly productive with decent looks at Virginia Rail, Sora, Solitary Sandpiper, Wood Duck, Ruffed Grouse, Black-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Wood Pewee, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, and Yellow-throated Vireo.



*Rose-breasted Grosbeak © Paul Arneson*

Pushing on to Neepawa, we spotted a Eurasian Collared-Dove there before stopping at Subway for lunch. Taking gravel roads north we spotted more Upland Sandpipers, and our first of 14 Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels along roads in the south. South of Riding Mountain National Park, we had a quick look for Great Gray Owl in a traditional spot (one flew across the road directly in front of one van, but we could not relocate it). A shy LeConte's Sparrow was eventually coaxed into showing itself there as well.



*LeConte's Sparrow © JS Lees*

Making our way west to the south gate of the Park, we checked into the Elkhorn Resort with an hour to spare before a 6 pm dinner at the Elkhorn. A few folks stayed behind that evening; the rest of us went to have a look at the semi-wild Bison herd at Lake Audy. On Clear Lake some Common Loons and a brood of Common Mergansers were added. At Lake Audy, 65+ bison were found including lots of frisky tan-colored calves. A few other birds were added that evening on or near Lake Audy the most noteworthy being 3 Trumpeter Swans, and a few Western, Red-necked & Horned Grebes; a Beaver and Meadow Vole were added to the mammal list that evening.

## Day 3 – July 10

Out by 6am, we drove down Hwy 10 quickly picking up our first of 4 Black Bears for the day and a Red Fox. Stops to investigate small mixed flocks of passerines yielded our first Boreal Chickadees, Black-and-white, Tennessee, Blackburnian & Chestnut-sided Warblers. We stopped at Grayling Lake for a picnic breakfast before carrying on to the Boreal Trail. The trail was under reconstruction so we could walk just a portion of it but it was extremely productive yielding 3 Black-backed Woodpeckers, 2 Winter Wrens, a stunning Bay-breasted Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Evening Grosbeaks, Blue-headed Vireo, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Canada Jays, and calling Lincoln's Sparrow, American Redstart and Golden-crowned Kinglet.



*Bay-breasted Warbler © JS Lees*

North on Hwy 10, a stop for a variety of ducks on a roadside pond yielded great looks at a Moose for one van, but it was spoked by a passing car before the second van could get a look at it. At the Beach Ridges trail on the north end of the Park, a couple Philadelphia Vireos, an aggressive female Ruffed Grouse with at least one chick, and a singing Veery were added. Back-tracking to the North Shore Road (Brown Creeper, Nashville Warbler) and to Lake Katherine for a picnic lunch (Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers), we were surprised to see that the gate that had prevented traffic from proceeding east on Hwy 19 had recently been opened (a welcome sight). Dinner today would be early, and it was getting hot, so we headed back to Wasagaming, did a short boardwalk trail on a marsh near town (Swamp Sparrow, Alder Flycatcher) and got back to the resort at 2:30 for an afternoon rest. After an early 4:30 dinner at the popular TR McCoys restaurant in Wasagaming, we headed out to the Great

Gray spot some 30 km out of the park on PR262. On the way we cruised slowly listening for Connecticut Warbler and some other target birds, and took some side roads. We added a couple Sharp-tailed Grouse, a Broad-winged Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker, 4 Sandhill Cranes, more Wild Turkeys, several Wilson's Phalaropes, and for mammals a second Black Bear, a couple Meadow Jumping Mice sprang across the road in 3-4 jumps, a pasture with numerous Richardson's Ground Squirrels had a Coyote den with a least 2 half-grown young, and a Striped Skunk was spotted along the roadside. At the Gray Owl spot we split up each watching one side of the valley and a yard site where the Great Gray had been seen yesterday, but none put in an appearance that evening. We did add a few birds however, including 2-3 Nelson's Sparrows that began calling just before dusk, a couple Great Blue Herons, 15 Purple Finches, an Eastern Phoebe, calling Wilson's Snipe and American Bittern, and a couple more Black Bears including a cinnamon-colored adult. We had planned to take the back way into the park (Rolling River Road) and listen for Woodcock or maybe luck into a Lynx on Hwy19, but it was closed so we beat it back to the resort getting back after dark.



*Black bear © JS Lees*

## Day 4 – July 11

Out at 6am, we headed down Hwy 19 hoping that it would be open all the way to the east escarpment, but found the gate had re-erected just a few kilometers east by Whirlpool Lake. Driving into Whirlpool, we added some roadside Snowshoe Hares. We had planned to have breakfast at Whirlpool, but the lake was enveloped in a heavy fog so we backtracked to the main road and had breakfast at Clear Spring Bog. That worked out well, as we quickly added a couple of fly-over crossbill flocks (12 Red & 5 White-winged), a nearby Yellow-bellied Flycatcher cooperated for good looks, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Swainson's Thrush were heard. After breakfast we went back to Whirlpool where we added a family of Least Chipmunks, Cape-May & Magnolia Warblers (our only ones for the trip), plus singing American Redstarts and Boreal Chickadees.



*Whirlpool Creek, Riding Mountain NP © Toni Weber*

Heading back on Hwy 19 we stopped at the 'S-curves' where Spruce Grouse can sometimes be found, but a walk through a section of the open black-spruce forest there yielded only some singing Golden-crowned Kinglets. Back on Hwy 10, we walked some stretches of the North Shore Road, this time calling in a Canada Warbler, and getting better looks at Blackburnian Warbler and Ovenbird. We stopped at the Aspens picnic area on Clear Lake for an early picnic lunch, but not before calling up a Northern Waterthrush (also our only one for the trip). Scanning Clear Lake, we spotted more than 60 Common Loons (obviously many failed breeders). After lunch, we looped around the west and southwest ends of Clear Lake finding a few birds for our day list but little of significance. Back at the resort by 2, we took the afternoon off, had a 4:30 dinner at TR McCoys, and those who were keen for a bit of a drive headed for the Aggasiz Ski Hill Road on the east escarpment of the Park. With Hwy 19 being closed, the only way around to Aggasiz is a 1 hour plus highway drive (Hwy 10 south to Erickson, 357 east to Hwy 5, 5 north to McCreary, and east to the ski hill road). We wasted little time getting there, spotting a Red Fox and a few ducks, kestrels, Red-tailed Hawks and open country birds on the way. On the edge of the park we added a few Mourning Warblers. Stopping and walking a stretch of oaks half way up to the ski hill (listening for Golden-winged Warblers), we eventually added a towhee (expecting an Eastern by the area and call, but we were surprised when it turned out to be a Spotted Towhee). We heard a second towhee but couldn't get it to come in, then added in quick succession a richly-colored Indigo Bunting and a fly-over Sharp-shinned Hawk. A quick stop for restrooms at the base of the ski hill produced calling Hermit Thrush and 3 Chimney Swifts (a traditional spot for the species so far removed from any chimneys that these birds are believed to among the only known/suspected ones still using big old trees for nesting!).

## Day 5 – July 12

Today we had a fair bit of driving to do, so we got up a bit earlier (5:45). First stop was in Minnedosa's Rotary Park where we had breakfast (Merlin, Cliff Swallows, Beaver). Next, we drove through the Minnedosa pothole country, a series of small glacial depression lakes, good for a variety of waterfowl (first Northern Shoveler, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy & Hooded Mergansers), grebes (Red-necked, Horned, Eared & Pied-billed), American Coot, plus good numbers of broods for most of the

above. We gassed up in Brandon and carried on south down Hwy 10 detouring on some gravel roads for a few miles when we crossed the Souris River. At Boissevain we stopped for an early Subway lunch and had a quick look around town (Eurasian Collared-Doves, Fox Squirrel) before proceeding west to Whitewater Lake. Stopping at most of the accessible spots on the lake around the north and west ends that afternoon we had many more ducks, geese (125 Snows with at least one Ross'), 3 White-faced Ibis, 2 Black-crowned Night Heron, 20 American Avocets, more Upland Sandpipers (80 for the day!), Marbled Godwits (40 today), 3 Pectoral Sandpipers, 8 Wilson's Phalarope, 15 Long-billed Dowitchers, lots of Willets and yellowlegs, and Black Terns (200). One van briefly got onto a calling Dickcissel, but it flew off before all could get looks. After a rest stop in Deloraine, we hit backroads to Melita and checked into the Western Star for an hour rest.



*Upland Sandpiper © JS Lees*

After an early Chicken Chef dinner, we headed out for a look at the prairies. Driving through the 'Poverty Plains' northeast of Pierson we stopped at 3 active Ferruginous Hawks nests (two which were artificial nests that Ken had installed in the 1990s during his career as an endangered species biologist). We observed several adults perched and in flight, and fairly large young (most still in the nest but flapping their wings in anticipation of fledging). At a couple of stops a Sprague's Pipit could be heard doing their aerial display calls but they were too far to be seen. A family group and a couple adult Loggerhead Shrikes were found. Down the road, a Swainson's Hawk was observed bringing food back to a nest containing 3 downy young. South of Pierson we spotted a Mule Deer, and shortly after turned on to a 2-track grass trail. Stopping along the trail, we spotted a couple nearby White-tailed Jack Rabbits, and heard all three target birds we were after (Baird's Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow & Chestnut-collared Longspur) but they were quite far off. We carried on a short distance and crossed a fence into a nice piece of crown prairie where Chestnut-collared Longspur & Grasshopper Sparrow were quickly found and observed at close range. Baird's were more of a challenge, but we eventually found 3 singing birds in a low area and got great looks. For full effect, a yipping coyote was heard in the distance. It had been a spectacular evening in the prairies, but the sun was getting low and it was time to make our way back to Melita.

## Day 6 – July 13

Another big travel day, we had breakfast in the hotel at 6 and were off by 6:30. Along the road west of town we spotted a family of Ring-necked Pheasant (mom, dad & 6 young). Next we headed south of town along the Souris River picking up in short order a large flock of roosting cormorants, 4 Say's Phoebes, and our first Lark Sparrows. At a crossing of the Souris we found two family groups of Northern Rough-winged Swallows, and a Solitary Sandpiper (8 seen today). Nearby, we had good looks at a Yellow-throated Vireo, more Cliff Swallows (400 for the day!) and a Raccoon, before proceeding to Coulter Park for restrooms and a walk about. Heading back to the extreme southwest corner of the province (at one point 1 mile from North Dakota & 2 miles from Saskatchewan), we stopped along the Gainsborough Creek where we eventually found a Willow Flycatcher. North of Pierson, we drove through more of the Poverty Plains, picking up a fence-sitting Black-billed Cuckoo carrying food, more Swainson's Hawks (20 today), 3 Loggerhead Shrikes and more Vesper & Lark Sparrows (25 of each today).



*Swainson's Hawk © JS Lees*

Near Broomhill we stopped at a large piece of native prairie pastureland where a couple of wild Burrowing Owl pairs had nested near three recently released pairs. They were quite far out in the pasture, but eventually 3 adults and at least 3 young were spotted. From Broomhill, we hit the highway to Pipestone where we gassed up and had lunch. We checked out a section of the Oak/Plum Lakes marsh (50 White-faced Ibis) and some wetlands by Deleau (Snow Goose, Wilson's Phalarope, etc.), before doing a long haul to Brandon and east to Shilo where we had a quick look for bluebirds. From there we beat it to Winnipeg and had time to unpack and freshen up before dinner at Chicago Joe's. It had been two very full days, but the southwest had been really good to us, and tomorrow we could sleep in just a little before our flight to Churchill.

## Day 7 –July 14

We had a 7 am breakfast at the hotel and took the shuttle to the airport. Our Calm Air flight left just a little late (10:30) but all seemed to be going according to plan until we started descending at

Churchill with the landing gear down. We kept descending but all one could see was clouds until a brief break in the clouds revealed that we were too close to the ground to allow for a safe landing. Circling back to Thompson to refuel, we found out there would be no Churchill in our plans for today! Back in Winnipeg weary after being on the plane for nearly 7 hours, Eagle-Eye scrambled to find us a hotel and something to get us around tomorrow morning as our Churchill flight had been rescheduled until 2 pm tomorrow. It was a big disappointment but everyone took it in stride. We had a really nice dinner that evening , and we looked forward to a better day tomorrow.

## Day 8 – July 15

After a continental breakfast at the hotel, we climbed aboard a large 47-seat van with Carl the driver and headed off to bird some parks in northeastern Winnipeg. First we hit Kildonan Park where Red-bellied Woodpeckers had been reported. It took us a while but we eventually found one, but in the meantime had Gray & Red Squirrels everywhere, a nice Indigo Bunting, and many adult and young Wood Ducks.



*Indigo Bunting © Paul Arneson*

On to Bunn's Creek, where we were finally able to find several Great Crested Flycatchers and House Finches, a curious-looking Short-tailed Shrew (unfortunately dead), and a couple Eastern Chipmunks that had made a home in someone's garage. On to Bergen Cutoff Park (a raised abandoned railway line that crossed the Red River) and finally the rather open Centennial Park where we spotted several nests in the mostly dead oaks but no Cooper's Hawk. The flight to Churchill showed up as delayed until 3, so after lunch, we headed to the airport to check in. Barely in line, we heard the word that the rain & fog cover in Churchill had not subsided and today's flight had been cancelled! While Ken & James made sure we were on the early flight tomorrow, Eagle-Eye secured us rooms at yet another hotel near the airport. We spent the rest of the afternoon making sure that we could reschedule the Zodiac Tour on the Churchill River for tomorrow while clients relaxed in their rooms and at the bar. We dined downstairs that evening and prepared for yet another attempt to fly to Churchill tomorrow. The forecast there was for better weather after two days of rain & fog, so we were hopeful we might finally get there.

## Day 9 – July 16

Our flight today was scheduled for 10:15 so after breakfast at the hotel we made our way to the airport. This time the flight was pretty much on time and we made it to Churchill by about 1. Grabbing vans at the airport, we quickly checked in to our hotel while Ken grabbed some groceries (today being a Sunday there were no restaurants open and we had little time to waste if we were going to see a bit of what Churchill had to offer). At our first stop (the Lower Docks by the grain terminal along the Churchill River) we had a bite to eat while observing what was on or near the river (Common Eiders, Red-breasted Mergansers, Arctic Terns, White-crowned Sparrows, a fly-over Semipalmated Plover, and for mammals many Belugas could be seen cresting the water's surface, a Harbour Seal climbed up on a rock close to shore sunning itself, and finally a Polar Bear! among the rocks on the opposite shore. Driving around to Cape Merry for a better look at the Polar Bear, an unexpected Northern Mockingbird was spotted, and a raft of birds along the shore on the Bay had quite a few Red-throated Loons (40 for the day), Common & Red-breasted Mergansers, and many Common Goldeneye among them. At Cape Merry we got better looks at the sleeping Polar Bear across in the rocks, and had fly-by Whimbrels (25 for the day), and a Parasitic Jaegar.



*Polar bear on shore © JS Lees*

We stopped at 'the beach' on the way out of town – more of the same waterbirds, plus more Arctic Terns (100 for the day). We then headed out of town picking up a pair of Bald Eagles, a pair of Sandhill Cranes, tons of Canada Geese & goslings, a Hudsonian Godwit pair with young, and a Pacific Loon on a lake near Akudlik. We checked out Goose Creek Road (Osprey, American Kestrel), the cabins (Fox Sparrow, Dark-eyed Juncos, Boreal Chickadee), the Weir Road (Greater Scaup, American Wigeon, Tundra Swans) and a bit of Hydro Road (Ring-necked Ducks, a Merlin, Dunlin (20), Stilt (10), Least (1), Pectoral (6) & Semipalmated Sandpipers (3), and Common Redpoll (15 for the day)).It was time to make haste back to town to change and get ready for our 6:30 pm Zodiac Tour. Donning life jackets and lots of cloths, we headed out on two Zodiacs. We quickly headed out to where the Polar Bear had been seen earlier – it was still sleeping among the rocks but we got closer looks.



*Parasitic Jaeger © JS Lees*

Then we ventured out into the middle of the Churchill River where it seemed like hundreds of Belugas were actively feeding (an estimated 3500-4000 call this river mouth home in the summer). All around us Belugas were surfacing; white adults often accompanied by gray juveniles. Some of the young were very small and hung very close to their moms on every dive. Everywhere Arctic Terns hunted among the feeding Belugas, 2-3 Parasitic Jaegars made regular appearances harassing any tern that had food, and 2 White-winged Scoters were spotted near one of the Zodiacs.



*Beluga boat trip © JS Lees*



*Belugas © JS Lees*

After a couple hours of Beluga watching, we received a report of another Polar Bear near the Fort Prince of Wales fort. In fact, we suspected it was the same one that had moved a bit, but we got to see it a little closer even if the water was a bit too choppy for good photos. Some of us were quite cold, so we went back to the hotel and had a bite to eat and made some tea/coffee to warm up. Conditions were still good, and we wanted to make the most of the evening hours because they were talking about foggy conditions possible for the morning, so a few of us went out for a couple hours beyond the airport on Launch Road. We added a few more Pacific Loons (one pair with young), 2 Northern Harriers, and as we were about to turn around when we came upon a pond with 142 roosting Hudsonian Godwits, 9 Long-tailed Ducks, a Red-necked Phalarope, and as we were looking at these Sonjia noticed some very close Willow Ptarmigan (great looks at a male, female and 6 young)! As we drove back, an Arctic Hare was spotted at the side of the road to top of a great first half day at Churchill.

## Day 10 – July 17

To make the most of our last half day at Churchill, some of us ventured out at 5 am; while others held back to meet us for breakfast at 7. We were happy the predicted fog did not materialize. An Arctic Hare was spotted by a couple folks near the hotel, and another was seen later that morning. Heading straight out to Cape Merry, we added 3 American Pipits and quite a few Whimbrels (40 today) among the rocks. Near the mouth of the river and in the Bay several flocks of Black Scoter flew by (80 for the day), along with a few White-winged Scoter (10) and some Surf Scoters (7). A couple of real dark Parasitic Jaegars were seen. A Polar Bear roaming among the rocks at Eskimo Point was a nice addition – although far, viewing conditions this morning were ideal. After some quality time there, we headed out of town, and at the Goose Creek cabins we had a windfall of birds (our first and only Pine Grosbeak, Orange-crowned & Blackpoll Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Canada Jay, as well as heard-only Ruby-crowned Kinglet, White-throated Sparrow and Boreal Chickadee). After breakfast we checked out the Coast Road (Miss Piggy & Graffiti Rocks). On

Launch Road, we stopped where a Polar Bear had been reported yesterday and soon spotted it loafing among the rocks. Good looks at it, plus scope looks at all three scoters offshore in the Bay, some Long-tailed Ducks, and our first good looks at a Semipalmated Plover. After talking to someone who had seen a Polar Bear with cubs near Bird Cove, we raced down there and checked out Halfway Road to see if we could find them. A mom with a fairly large cub was eventually found; we drove as close as we could (not bad looks but a bit far). While there we spotted a pair of Sandhills with two half-grown orangish young, 3 Black Ducks in the Bay, and a Horned Lark near the vans (a bit of a rarity for the north). Driving out, we found another male Willow Ptarmigan. At the lake where we had seen all the Hudsonian Godwits yesterday evening, there were only a handful remaining, but among them was a Short-billed Dowitcher, plus we got better looks at a Red-necked Phalarope, and some Long-tailed Ducks there. On the way back to the hotel we stopped along Launch Road to observe the bear we had seen earlier. This time it appeared to have been spooked by some observers near the road; it ran across the rocks and when it hit the water's edge, jumped in and proceeded to swim out into the Bay!



*Willow Ptarmigan © Brian Wesley*

It was time to head back to the hotel, change into our cloths for the flight, have a bite to eat, and get ready to head to the airport. We got to the airport at 12:30 and were boarded and off by 2. It had been a whirlwind tour of Churchill for sure, but we were quite pleased with what we did get to see for Belugas, Polar Bears & arctic birds. After we'd checked into out rooms at the hotel in Winnipeg, we walked down to the restaurant for our final meal together. Sitting around a big circular table in our own private dining area, we reminisced about our best bird, mammal, and highlight experiences from the trip. Each part of the trip had so many memorable moments – from the scenic boreal and mixed woodlands of Riding Mountain National Park that we traversed early in the trip, to the aspen parklands, lakes and prairies of southwestern Manitoba that we criss-crossed the rest of the first week, and finally to Churchill which never fails to yield a plethora of memorable vistas and northern wildlife encounters (albeit a little rushed this time!). There were many unexpected finds, close-up views and photographic opportunities. Thanks to all for a wonderful trip, a great group, and for helping capture some of those memorable moments in the attached photos. Thank you all; may our paths cross again sometime in the future. Ken De Smet & James Lees


Welcome to
The Town of Churchill
Polar Bear Capital of the World
Bird Watchers Paradise
Late May Through September
Beluga Whale capital of the World
Late June to Late August
CHURCHILL

*Group photo*