



Churchill & Southern Manitoba 2023 Trip Report

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Written by: Ken De Smet Flying into Churchill in early June, you never know what to expect. If it's been an early spring, most of the snow will be gone? Or in a late spring, you can expect high snowbanks, some of the roads may still be blocked, and the Hudson's Bay and Churchill River will be mostly covered with ice. Last year had been exceptionally late; 6 foot snowbanks where roads had been recently cleared, very little if any open water along the Bay shoreline and the Churchill River essentially covered with ice. As we flew into Churchill and banked over the Bay, I couldn't believe the sight - no ice anywhere except way off in the distance! It obviously was an exceptionally early spring; one like I've never seen in the 25 or so springs I've come up here in early June. How would that affect the bird complement up here? Would the migrants that nest further north (Sabine's Gull, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting & others) be largely gone through. On the other hand, maybe we'd get to see Beluga's this time (it had been a few years since we'd had them in early June). Maybe there might even be some Polar Bears that had jumped off the ice and were on land (that had only happened once in all the years I've come up here in early June). Churchill always has lots of mystery and surprises, what would it hold for us this year. But wait, more than half this trip is in southern Manitoba which always surprises visitors with its diversity of habitats and wildlife. Big days in southwest Manitoba at this time of year have regularly topped 200 bird species, and we have some of the highest May and June Big Day totals anywhere in North America. On this trip, we hit most of the best birding areas in southwestern Manitoba, crisscrossing farmlands, aspen parklands, large lakes, potholes and marshes. From the prairies of southwestern Manitoba we travel to the boreal and mixed woodlands of Riding Mountain National Park during the latter half of the first week. On this trip you certainly got to see and experience the best of what southern Manitoba & Churchill has to offer for visiting birders and wildlife enthusiasts. Yes, there was a lot of ground to cover and a few bumps along the road, but we did it. Thanks so much for your keen participation on this endeavour and thanks for sharing some of those incredible photos you took to make this report complete.

Day 1 - May 28

We met in the lobby of the hotel the first evening and walked over to the a nearby restaurant, where we got acquainted and discussed trip logistics. Some of the participants had arrived early and had done some birding at Assiniboine Park and other good birding locales in Winnipeg; we started off the list with some of the birds that they had seen for Day 1. But, we'd have an early start tomorrow and the first 3-4 days would involve a fair bit of driving and minimal time for afternoon rests, so we packed it in early that evening.

Day 2 - May 29

Stocked with coffee from the lobby, and a bag breakfast from the hotel, we were packed and on the road by 5:30 bound for St Ambroise on Lake Manitoba. On the way, we stopped at a good spot along PR 227 for Red-headed Woodpeckers and got a head start on a number of nesting birds including the 2 Red-headed Woodpeckers, Northern Harrier, Warbling Vireo, House Wren, Orchard Oriole, and a variety of sparrows (Clay-colored, Lark, Savannah & Song). Further down the road a Short-eared Owl was observed hunting over a pasture, 3 Wood Ducks and a Sharp-tailed Grouse were spotted, we counted at least 8 utility pole-top perched Wilson's Snipes, and 4 Upland Sandpipers perched on fence posts.



Upland Sandpiper © David McCorquodale

Driving through St Ambroise and to the beach we added Brown Thrasher, Gray Catbird, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, close up looks at Brewer's Blackbird, and a few Bobolinks (30 tallied for the day). At St Ambroise Beach we had breakfast looking over Lake Manitoba adding some fly-by Forster's Terns, 2 more Red-headed Woodpeckers, several small flocks of Cedar Waxwings, an Osprey, and 2 Bald Eagles. Hundreds of American Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants were spotted, as well as 15 far-off Western Grebes, and 20 Sanderlings along the water's edge. We drove along the beach road adding more of the regulars (Least Flycatcher, Warbling & Red-eyed Vireos, Baltimore Oriole & Yellow Warbler), plus a Franklin's Ground Squirrel. A stop to scan the sand spits and cormorant nesting island yielded 5 Caspian Terns, and a single Common Tern. The nearby marsh was also alive

with birds and song - Yellow-headed & Red-winged Blackbirds, Swamp & Song Sparrows, Marsh & Sedge Wrens, Northern Harrier, American Bittern, Common Yellowthroat, numerous calling Soras, and a Virginia Rail that moved through the ditch vegetation only a few meters away without us even catching a glimpse before it finally yielded one brief flying away look. Our next destination was the PR 227 garbage dump where we identified 3 California Gulls among several hundred Ringed-billed, Herring and Franklin's Gulls. On to Cal's place along the Portage Creek, where we added a calling Black-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Phoebe, Yellow-throated Vireo, Great Crested Flycatcher, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Hooded Merganser, Downy & Hairy Woodpeckers, and along a well-groomed woodland trail we were greeted by "Grumpy" the very territorial Ruffed Grouse, and finally, the nesting Northern Saw-whet Owl that peered out of its nestbox. A great spot, but it was past lunch time so we made tracks into Portage la Prairie to Subway for lunch.



Northern Saw-whet Owl © David McCorquodale

On route to Brandon we drove through several heavy downpours and the van was acting up in drive gear forcing us to drive a bit slower in second. After a brief rest stop at Camp Hughes, we opted to head straight to Brandon rather than chance another approaching storm. We took a couple hours off, had dinner at Montana's, and went out birding for a couple hours that evening. Heading east to Shilo, we spotted a couple Loggerhead Shrikes, had good looks at Richardson's & Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels, Vesper Sparrow, and finally spotted our objective for the evening (both Eastern & Mountain Bluebirds). On our drive back to Brandon we added Belted Kingfisher and a Swainson's Hawk.

Day 3 - May 30

Overnight, Ken had switched out the bigger van for a slightly smaller but much more functional 8-seater so after an early breakfast in the hotel we were on the road. In Brandon we checked out the Ag Research Station where we spotted several White-tailed Jack Rabbits and White-tailed Deer but no new birds. We checked out the downtown Peregrine nesting site (no luck), had a short walk on Dave Barnes woodland trails (White-breasted Nuthatch, Downy Woodpecker), and drove around some residential areas adding House Finch, 3 Chimney Swifts, and a cooperative Merlin. In the

Brandon Hills we added Red-necked Grebe, Wild Turkey, White-throated Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, American Redstart, Black-and-white Warbler, heard Scarlet Tanager and Ovenbirds, and finally a Red Fox. South on Hwy 10, we took a detour to a lake near Ninga which produced among other birds our first shorebirds (25 Sanderling, 4 Pectoral, 10 White-rumped & 1 Baird's & 30 Semipalmated Sandpipers, a couple Wilson's Phalarope and 3 Willets), a fly-over Cooper's Hawk, 2 Bald Eagles, 2 Swainson's Hawks, our first Ruddy Ducks, and many of the day's 50 Eared Grebes. On to Boissevain where we hit another Subway before checking out a bit of the town adding a couple Eurasian Collared-Doves and Fox Squirrels. Our destination for the afternoon was Whitewater Lake stretching between Boissevain & Deloraine. The lake had receded considerably from recent highs, but we were able to find good numbers of migrant and resident shorebirds at several access points and small ponds along the north and west ends of the lake (400 Black-bellied Plovers, 200 Semipalmated Sandpipers, 15 American Avocets, 5 Marbled Godwits, 5 Stilt, 2 Baird's & 25 White-rumped Sandpipers, 3 Dunlin, 1 Semipalmated Plover, 1 Ruddy Turnstone, and 5 Red-necked Phalaropes among about 50 Wilson's Phalaropes). Waterfowl were abundant including our first Snow Geese (330), Lesser Scaup (25), Bufflehead (25), and Ruddy Ducks (40), plus large numbers of all the expected prairie dabbling and diving ducks save for American Wigeon and Common Goldeneye. Near the west end, we added a single Black-crowned Night Heron, and a fly-over White-faced Ibis. Driving through Deloraine we would add 2 more Eurasian Collared-Doves, and on backroads from Deloraine to Melita we picked up a surprise Ross' Goose at a small roadside pond, a roadside pair of Gray Partridge, and good looks at a Sora. After checking into the hotel in Melita and freshening up, we went over for a 7 o'clock dinner only to find it was closing, so we headed down the street where we enjoyed some fine Chinese cuisine. At least 4 Chimney Swifts circling over downtown greeted us as we left the restaurant but it had been a long day so we took the evening off.

Day 4 - May 31

Today would be our big day for the southwest prairie specialties so we were happy to wake up to mild and calm weather. As we were leaving the hotel after a 6 AM breakfast, a surprise Say's Phoebe was spotted calling from the rooftop of the hotel. Taking backroads to Lyleton, we added a couple male Ring-necked Pheasants, 3 more Gray Partridge, and a few more shorebirds including our only Lesser Yellowlegs for the south. After a rustic rest stop in the old ballpark in Lyleton, we proceeded to the best prairie spots stopping to observe a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek where the birds were much more active than they usually would be at this time of year.



Sharp-tailed Grouse at lek © David McCorquodale

Along a grassy prairie trail we added our first Grasshopper Sparrows and a Chestnut-collared Longspur on the fence wires. Further down the trail we stopped to do a walk-about in a nice piece of prairie and were immediately greeted by an overhead calling Sprague's Pipit. Baird's Sparrow is always the toughest of the prairie birds to find so we focused on them, walking and playing the call occasionally. Ken was concerned that none were calling, but eventually we drew the interest of one and it obliged us with super looks. At about the same time a Sprague's Pipit resumed calling overhead so Ken played the call until it descended to the ground to check us out. And did it ever check us out! Great looks and photos as it eventually sat up on some tufts of grass and even started calling from the ground! Before leaving that gorgeous piece of prairie we'd get better looks at more Chestnut-collared Longspurs (5) and even locate a longspur nest with eggs, we'd hear 4 Grasshopper Sparrows, a second Baird's Sparrow, and a total of 3 Sprague's Pipits.



Baird's Sparrow © David McCorquodale



Sprague's Pipit © David McCorquodale

Next order of business were stops along the Gainsborough Creek for Willow Flycatcher (a somewhat cooperative bird eventually gave us decent looks), and for Northern Rough-winged Swallow (at least 2 spotted among 10 Bank Swallows going into holes along the bank). Here and at every bridge we stopped at today, large numbers of Cliff Swallows would emerge from underneath (conservative estimate of 1000 for the day). A spot along the Antler Creek where Lazuli Bunting are occasionally

found was checked but no luck. A couple more Loggerhead Shrikes were added through the morning (a rare and steeply declining bird in Manitoba). Another highlight of the morning was a cow and calf Moose observed in some willows near Coulter. We watched them for a while at close range from the van. Mom walked off but the youngster got tangled up in some shrubs and began bleating. Mom ran back, fire in her eyes, as she probably thought it was us hurting her baby. We were glad we were in the van and could speed off as a mad momma Moose would be a quite a force to deal with! At noon, we stopped at Sourisford Park - a nice birding spot near the confluence of Antler Creek and the Souris River for a picnic lunch. After lunch we carried on to another riparian spot along the Souris where we called up an Eastern Wood Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher and 4 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. For new mammals, we'd add a Raccoon hunting for grub along the Souris River and later in the afternoon spotted a Mule Deer. Proceeding north of Pierson through the Poverty Plains we added more Upland Sandpipers (25 for the day), and checked out a few Ferruginous Hawk nests (another very rare bird in Manitoba). We stopped and observed incubating birds at two occupied nests, at both the mate did a fly-by. Ken explained that during his career as a wildlife biologist in Manitoba, he erected many artificial nests for Ferruginous Hawks in strategic locales in SW Manitoba. Both of the nests we looked at had started out as a wire basket with a few sticks added, and both had been used for over a decade and been built up (some get to be 10 feet deep!). Near Broomhill we checked out a Burrowing Owl release site where a couple wild pairs had settled in near 3 release pairs that were being temporarily held in large pens. The pens were at least a quarter mile off the road, but we were able to see the adults in one pen and spotted one of the wild birds briefly as it perched on a post. On the road, David found a toad which we assumed to be the regular Canadian Toad, but closer examination and pictures revealed it to be the much rarer Plains Spadefoot Toad. Nearby as we searched in an area where Great Horned Owls occasionally nest, we found a closer Ferruginous Hawk nest and got better looks at the female as she stood up on the nest. Back in Melita, we had an hour or so rest before heading to Chicken Chef for dinner. We had plans to check out a shorebird pond near town after dinner and get some photos of the downtown swifts, but an approaching storm and high winds derailed our plans, so we called it a day.

Day 5 - June 1

Packed and ready to roll by 6:30, we took a few group pics at the 30 foot banana statue (Melita is often Manitoba's hot-spot - hence it became known as Manitoba's banana-belt!). Most of the shorebirds had departed from the shorebird pond overnight so after a quick look there we carried on. At a stop where a Nelson's Sparrow had been heard near Pipestone, we noticed that one of the tires on the van was nearly flat. While Ken & Andrew changed the tire (with the help of a local farmer who helped extract the spare with wire cutters!), the rest of the group got decent looks at the Nelson's, a Bobolink, and 20 Wilson's Phalarope (75 for the day!).



Wilson's Phalarope © David McCorquodale

South of Findlay we drove through the Hunter's Lake marsh (American Bitten & Virginia Rail heard), and then north where we accessed the south end of the Oak/Plum Marshes (good for a variety of waterfowl, 30 White-faced Ibis, large numbers of Black Terns (500 today) and Franklin's Gulls (1200 for the day)). East of Deleau we checked out more small lakes (male Hooded Merganser, American Wigeon pair, Great Blue Heron, and close up Eared Grebes). Before getting to Oak Lake 2 more Red-headed Woodpeckers were spotted (so far a surprising 8 had been seen on the trip, and 3 more would be added on our last day in the south). At Oak Lake we spotted 3 more Black-crowned Night-Herons and carried on to the resort where we found a nice secluded picnic lunch spot. After lunch we drove a section of dyke that separates Oak Lake from the Oak/Plum marshes (close up Western Grebes, Franklin's Ground Squirrel), and stopped at some roadside ponds north of Oak Lake where we would find more Wilson's Phalaropes, 2 Ruddy Turnstones and a lone Stilt Sandpiper. Hitting the highway to Brandon and north to Riding Mountain, we detoured on some gravel roads in the pothole country south of Minnedosa looking for Horned Grebe and eventually found 2. Arriving at Riding Mountain National Park mid-afternoon and checking into the Mooswa Resort in Wasagaming, we had a couple hours rest before dinner at TR McCoys. This evening we would go to look for Great Gray Owls, so after dinner we headed south and east of the park on PR 262 listening at a few spots where Connecticut Warbler might be found. At a small pond south of the park, an American Woodcock was heard in the ditch, but we were unable to spot it. Three Sandhill Cranes and a Coyote were added to our trip list. Eventually getting to the area where Great Grays have occurred in the past, we were periodically sidetracked by a LeConte's Sparrow that reluctantly gave us some looks. Speaking to the locales, it was obvious that the owls were around so we watched from a vantage point until one was spotted on a post quite far off. Driving around for a closer look & photos, we were somewhat hampered by the failing light and quite a few mosquitoes, but the owl cooperated flying to a post very close to the road. A great way to end a long travel day.



Great Grey Owl © David McCorquodale

Day 6 - June 2 This year once again we would be hampered by road closures in the park. PR 19 (a highly favored birding road that extends from Hwy 10 to the east side of the park) was out! Nevertheless, up and off by 6, we made a stop at a roadside pond along Hwy 10 by the Lake Audy turnoff where we've had good stuff before, but today only heard Merlin, Swamp & Lincoln's Sparrow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-headed Vireo and a far-off Pileated Woodpecker. Next, we did some drive/listen and stop birding along the North Shore Road getting out occasionally for good looks at Canada and Mourning Warbler and stopping in spots where flaked bark on the trees indicated the presence of Black-backed or Three-toed woodpeckers. Winter Wren and Swainson's Thrush were heard but not seen. Carrying on down Hwy 10 to our breakfast spot at Grayling Lake, we spotted the first of 16 Black Bears we would see in the park today, and 30 for the next 3 days! Most of the bears paid little attention to us, as they eagerly munched on dandelions in the ditches. A couple smaller ones briefly scampered off into the woods or climbed a tree for a few feet before coming back to munch on more dandelions. Several of the bears we would see in the park the next couple days were cinnamon color-phase bears, including a black sow bear with two cinnamon cubs! At Grayling, Ken dug out the breakfast goodies, while participants checked out a variety of birds at this picnic site (Common Loon, Alder Flycatcher, Evening Grosbeak, Northern Waterthrush, Ovenbird, etc.). After breakfast we spotted a pair of Trumpeter Swans on a small lake along Hwy 10, and had some nice roadside Evening Grosbeaks and Purple Finch. We'd hoped to walk the Boreal Trail next, but found it closed. We walked in to use the restrooms and walked a bit of it anyways -- good for the only Cape May & Bay-breasted Warblers we would see on this trip, better looks at a Mourning Warbler, brief looks at a Magnolia Warbler, and 5 Canada Jays. Next we went back to the North Shore Road walking much of it this time getting first or better looks at several warblers (Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Tennessee & Yellow-rumped), a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker nest, but no hint of the three-toed boreal woodpeckers we'd hoped for. We also had looks at the two most common warblers -- Ovenbird (65 for the day) and Nashville Warbler (40). At the Spruces rest stop on Clear Lake we had 5 more swans (deferred to Trumpeter but in retrospect they may have been late migrant Tundra Swans), 4 Common Mergansers, 2 Bald Eagles, and some far-off White Pelicans & Western Grebes.



Western Grebe © David McCorquodale

It was getting on to lunch time, so we walked a portion of the Lake Katherine entrance road, had lunch along the lake, and then drove south of the park hoping to maybe hear a Connecticut in good habitat there. It was getting quite hot & few birds were singing so we took the rest of the afternoon off before going back for dinner. I'm sure we made quite a scene leaving the restaurant when some Boreal Chickadees called in some spruce in front of the restaurant. This evening we'd planned on heading down to Lake Audy to see if we could find the wild-stock American Bison that are in a several square mile fenced compound. On the way we stopped for a Black-throated Green Warbler, had a few more bears, and after much driving around were able to find the bison - first a lone bull, and then a group of cows, many of which were accompanied by cute frisky calves. Nice way to end a productive day.

Day 7 -June 3

Some primary target birds for this morning would be the three-toed woodpeckers, so we drove the Wishing Well Road and walked the entire entrance road into Lake Katherine before breakfast getting first looks at Blue-headed Vireo, and more Boreal Chickadees, Canada Jay, and Blackburnian Warblers. After breakfast at Katherine we walked along a trail on the lake shoreline for some nice looks at Common Yellowthroat, another Mourning Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Eastern Phoebe, Common Merganser, and others. Still looking for the woodpeckers, we walked some stretches of the North Shore Road we hadn't done yesterday. Finally, an American Three-toed Woodpecker was heard drumming nearby (its distinctive speeding up tapping trailing off at the end), but try as we might we couldn't see it nor get it to come in to playback. Since dinner would be early today, we had an early picnic lunch at the Aspen rest stop on Clear Lake and got great looks at a Northern Waterthrush near there. After lunch we drove a section of the Lake Audy Road, looped around the west and southwest ends of Clear Lake, and on some gravel roads outside the park tallied our first Broad-winged Hawk. Back at the resort by 1:30, we took the afternoon off, had an early 4:30 dinner at McCoys, and headed out to the east side of the park (more than an hour's drive with PR19 being closed). On the way we had 8 Wild Turkeys by the town of Riding Mountain. Hoping to find a Golden-winged Warbler we checked out a good spot north of the east gate without success, settling

for a second Ruby-throated Hummingbird and some photos at the east gate. Carrying on around to the Aggasiz Ski-hill Road west of McCreary, we had more Wild Turkeys, a really dark Raccoon, heard at least 3 Indigo Buntings and 5 Hermit Thrushes, and 4 Eastern Towhees, but no Golden-wings. Stopping at restrooms at the base of the old ski hill we added calling Veerys, a Broad-winged Hawk, and 3 Chimney Swifts - these no doubt belong to an rare group that still use their natural habitat (trees) for nesting.



Looking for Golden-winged Warblers © David McCorquodale

We'd decided to give Whip-poor-will a try in some good habitat east of McCreary where they had been seen in the past. Over the next hour we made numerous stops to listen, but none could be found. We did add several more American Kestrels, calling American Bitterns, LeConte's Sparrow and Alder Flycatcher, and spotted 2 Striped Skunks (one a bit close for comfort!). With the extra time spent out there & the long drive back, it was quite late by the time we got back.

Day 8 - June 4

Today we decided to head out the north side of the park. We had breakfast at Moon Lake (lots of good birds but nothing new), got some great looks at 15 Evening Grosbeaks and a Purple Finch at a roadside salt lick, had another Moose along Hwy 10, and made a brief stop at the Beach Ridges Trail parking lot (good for our first looks at Veery & a couple Philadelphia Vireos). We hit Dauphin for gas, and then zig-zagged our way on gravel roads around the northeast end of the park. At a flooded field we had a large group of at least 75 Short-billed Dowitchers and a couple Marbled Godwits. At Aggasiz, we hoped the timing would be better for Golden-winged Warblers but there still was none to be found. Settling for a Barred Owl calling during the daytime, 3 Indigo and a hybrid Indigo/Lazuli Bunting, we headed south to Neepawa where we again had lunch at Subway.



Short-billed Dowitcher © David McCorquodale

From Neepawa we drove east to Delta Beach on Lake Manitoba where we encountered a large mixed flock of shorebirds on the East Beach (Semipalmated Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Pectoral, Semipalmated, Baird's & White-rumped Sandpipers). On to Winnipeg, but not before we'd driven through another very heavy rain storm on Hwy#1. In Winnipeg we checked out Bruce Park (nice Cooper's Hawk, Downy & Hairy Woodpecker, House Finch), downtown Winnipeg where a most cooperative Peregrine Falcon nesting pair was observed near its nest box on the Radisson, Fraser's Grove (an Eastern Cottontail, but no Cardinal or Eastern Screech Owl today), and Bunn's Creek (Eastern Gray Squirrels, House Finch, Great Crested Flycatcher). Back at the hotel, we took 45 minutes to unpack and freshen up before walking to nearby restaurant for dinner. Ken took the rental back across town that evening while everyone packed for the next leg of the journey - Churchill

Day 9 - June 5

Our scheduled flight to Churchill was at 8:45, so right after our 6:30 breakfast we headed to the airport leaving plenty of time if complications arose. After getting through security we were told the flight was delayed a bit. That delay ended up being nearly 3 hours; they gave us a \$20 lunch voucher for our troubles! With a stopover in Gillam to refuel, we didn't land in Churchill until after 3. In the intro, I mentioned the surprise of flying over the Bay on landing and seeing it virtually ice-free! But Churchill is always great at this time of year, so we found our van waiting at the airport, hastened back to the room to grab our gear and maybe an extra layer of cloths. Off we went to see if there was anything unusual in the Granary Ponds (mostly all the southern regulars this time with a bunch of Herring Gulls nesting on rocks and a few Arctic Terns flying around) or at the Lower Docks below the elevator (some Common Eider and Parasitic Jaegers visible but they not close). We headed out of town to Akudlik, Goose Creek Road, the Weir, and all the way south to CR30 at the end of Hydro Road. The roadside mudflats yielded a few shorebirds (most common being Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstones, but there were also 10 Hudsonian Godwits, 3 Black-bellied Plovers, and 4 Semipalmated Sandpipers). The most common ducks were Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Pintail, American Wigeon and Greater

Scaup, with a few Bufflehead, Gadwall, a pair of Lesser Scaup, and single Blue-winged Teal & American Black Duck. Canada Geese were everywhere. By the Weir, an Osprey and 2 distant swans were spotted (tentatively identified as Tundra given Trumpeters are rare this far north). There were also 100 Arctic Terns, 200 Ring-billed Gulls, and 150 Tree Swallows. White-crowned Sparrows were scattered everywhere (including in town), Savannah and Swamp Sparrows were heard in a few places, and a couple American Tree & Fox Sparrows were heard. Nine Rusty Blackbirds were also recorded for the day along this stretch, mostly seen at a distance. For warblers, we heard quite a few Yellow and Northern Waterthrush. Mammal sightings were limited to 3 Snowshoe Hares seen mostly near the Goose Creek cabins. After dinner we found a few new scoters off the main beach along the bay on the edge of town (7 Surf & 3 White-winged) along with 35 more Arctic Terns, 4 Parasitic Jaegers, 7 Red-breasted Mergansers, 14 Common Eider, and a Long-tailed Duck pair. On Goose Creek & Hydro Road we got better looks at a pair of Surf Scoters, 25 Bonaparte's Gulls, 2 Sandhill Cranes, and the usual complement of shorebirds and waterfowl. It had been a shortened but good intro day to Churchill.

Day 10 - June 6

In Churchill, we would settle into an early morning routine of heading out at 6 for a quick look around town, the Lower Docks & Cape Merry, before coming back between 7 & 8 to a well-stocked continental breakfast at the hotel. Today, pre-breakfast we made a quick check of the Granary Ponds (Song, Swamp & Lincoln's Sparrow, Spotted Sandpiper, Greater Scaup, 2 Red-necked Phalarope) and the Lower Docks (lots of Common Eider, Common Goldeneye & Red-breasted Merganser), but our main goal was Cape Merry. At the Cape, we had a first look at the Churchill River from the old artillery/fort and then went out onto the rocks near the point for a closer look.

Ken was sure he'd spotted a Pomarine Jaeger at the fort, but it was really too far to call for sure and to get others onto it. But soon after we were on the rocks, a second Pomarine Jaeger flew low overhead, its twisted tail feathers clearly visible. A really great bird to get up here!



Pomarine Jaeger © David McCorquodale

Our first 4 American Pipits were spotted among the rocks and calling overhead, we'd add 2 Red-

throated Loons (the all-dark back distinctive in flight and on the water), and for scoters, we'd tally 35 Black, 3 White-winged and 1 Surf. Another significant first for the Cape before breakfast that morning were Beluga's. Richard who really had wanted to see them on this trip spotted them first and eventually we all got on to some surfacing about halfway across the river. Viewing conditions at the Cape were so good today and the temperatures so mild, we went for breakfast and came back to the Cape for another hour. This time we went right down to the water's edge along the river where we had great looks at some real close Arctic Terns and a couple Common Terns perched on the river rocks accompanied by many Bonaparte's, Ring-billed & Herring Gulls.



Bonaparte's Gulls © David McCorquodale



Arctic Tern © David McCorquodale

Anyone who hadn't been able to get great close-up photos of Common Eider and Harbour Seals certainly got them now. In addition to the Scoters, most of today's 175 Common Eider, 100 Common Goldeneye, 250 Red-breasted Merganser, 15 Common Merganser, 9 Long-tailed Duck, 7 Snow Geese, 12 Parasitic Jaegers, and 15 Harbour Seals were spotted here either swimming or flying by. And who could forget, and estimated 20 Beluga's for the day.



Common Eiders © David McCorquodale

Cape Merry had been phenomenal but we wanted to get inland and all the way out to the Twin Lakes

today. We took the Coast Road past the graffiti rocks and past Miss Piggy (the cargo plane that went down in the rocks). From there we took Launch Road picking up a couple distant Tundra Swans, a couple inland Parasitic Jaegers, and a far-off Whimbrel that landed before most got onto it. We stopped along the coast to take pics of a Pacific Loon pair and briefly spotted a Semipalmated Plover. Mile-4 Road where a meadowlark had been seen a few days ago was uneventful. Next we took Halfway Point Road all the way to the Bay which yielded our first American Golden-Plovers, a long-range Barren Ground Caribou and most of the 60 Ruddy Turnstones for today along the tidal zone. Making our way to the Northern Studies Centre, a Long-tailed Duck pair in a roadside pond presented photo ops. Stopping at the Centre for restrooms we met fellow Winnipegger Rudolf Koes and his group and shared info on desirable birds. Veering inland on Twin Lakes Road we spotted the first of 4 Willow Ptarmigan for the day (this one flew over giving its weird display call but landed out of sight). At the shorebird fen we pulled over and had a throw together picnic lunch. A Whimbrel flew in calling but a pair of Hudsonian Godwits forced it to land some distance away. A couple more American Golden-Plover were spotted, some Short-billed Dowitchers, and a couple more Parasitic Jaegers. A Least Sandpiper could be heard doing its aerial displays. As we were getting ready to leave, a male Willow Ptarmigan flew over and ran ahead of the vehicle for quite some distance before looped back when it got close to another ptarmigan pair on the road ahead. Stopping to listen for Gray-cheeked Thrush beyond the fen we called in an Orange-crowned Warbler (surprisingly the first for the trip); we would hear several more as we walked trails later in the day. Just before reaching Twin Lakes we turned off on Cook Street where we often see Spruce Grouse, but today there were only frequent piles of droppings on the road and no grouse. Reaching the old burn area beyond Twin lakes, we drove through the burn and walked a stretch of trail along a high sand ridge. Northern Hawk Owl have been seen here before but none responded to the call today. We did discover that the Canada Jays were certainly interested in the owl call (9 seen today). On the way back to the van a Pine Grosbeak landed nearby but in poor light. Driving out through the burn a juvenile male Spruce Grouse was encountered along the trail. We made one more try for waxwings, crossbills, grouse or owls (Boreal, Northern Hawk) walking a stretch of road beyond the burn, finding a Merlin (one of 4 for the day) but little else. Time to head back. In some shrubbery along a lake we stopped for some Common Redpolls (10 for the day) and while we were waiting for them to respond Lori said she could hear Blackpoll Warblers. The calls were so high pitched that most of us could not pick them out and they were unresponsive to taped Blackpoll calls, but sure enough the Merlin app picked them up so we knew they were around! After dinner, we tried Goose Creek and Hydro Road for a couple hours, but before that following up on a tip we found an obliging Arctic Hare at the southern edge of town. The rest of the evening, we would get to actually see a Blackpoll Warbler at the Goose Creek cabins (this one we had no trouble hearing; in fact readily picking it out as we were driving!). Otherwise much the same birds as on previous runs; somewhat noteworthy were 2 Bald Eagles, an Osprey, 3 American Black Ducks, a Sandhill Crane, more Hudsonian Godwits (12 for the day), 5 Stilt Sandpipers, most of the 100 Short-billed Dowitchers for the day, a couple Red-necked Phalaropes, and more Bonaparte's Gulls (but still no Little Gulls!). As we neared town on the way back a hunting Short-eared Owl was the last bird we'd add for the day.

Day 11 - June 7

First order of business today was to have another look at the Granary Ponds where Rudolf's group had reported a Harris's Sparrow yesterday. The usual White-crowned, Savannah, Lincoln's and Swamp could be heard but no Harris's. We played a call and got an immediate response; there it was perched atop one of several trailers there! Looking around at the Lower Docks for a Western Kingbird that had been reported, we had a Barn Swallow fly by (another unusual bird for Churchill). It was another real nice morning, so after a quick look at the Lower Docks, we headed straight to Cape Merry and spent most of our pre-breakfast time close to the water's edge. Not too much different today vs yesterday, but a lot more Common Mergansers (150) and less Red-breasted (40).

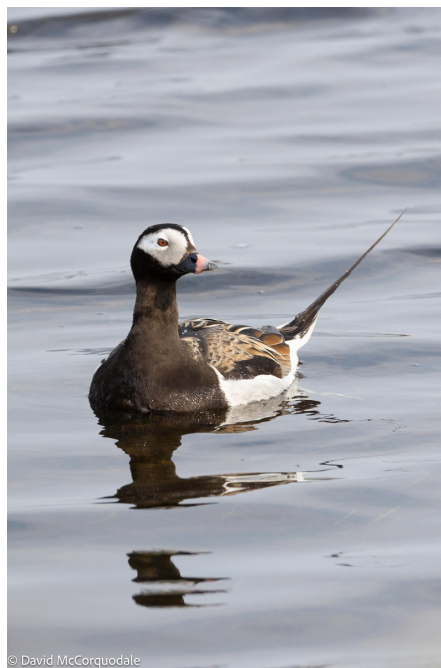
A huge flock of Ring-billed Gulls (500+) with a few Herring & Bonaparte's hunting out over the river, but try as we might there were no apparent oddities among that gull flock. Harbour Seals were more abundant today too (25+ on the river) and we made a conservative estimate of 20 Belugas but there may have been many more than that. We also had a Willow Ptarmigan close to the road among the rocks today - quite unusual for the Cape.



Willow Ptarmigan © David McCorquodale

The group felt they wanted to give the waxwings, crossbills, grouse & owls one more shot at Twin Lakes today. But before heading out there, we wanted to try for Little Gull one more time. The morning light along Hydro Road was much better for checking the black-headed gulls making sure there weren't any Little or even Sabine's hanging out with the Bonaparte's. Finally, a little past the Marina we spotted one and then two Little Gulls hunting along the river's edge -- their black underwings real obvious in flight but it is easy to pass them off as Bonaparte's when they land. After good long looks, we headed back spotting yet another Little Gull closer to the Marina. On the way back, heard a second Harris's Sparrow by the Goose Creek cabins, we did a quick drive through Nodwell trail, and took an alternate route to Launch Road via the Scrap Metal/Dump Road where 6 Starlings were added (an uncommon bird for Churchill). On Launch Road and Twin Lakes Road we would spot a few more Willow Ptarmigan (5 today) and a displaying pair of Sandhill Cranes at the shorebird fen, and a couple high treetop singing Blackpolls (6 heard & seen today). Driving into Cook Street to the cabin, we would stop there for a picnic lunch and then walk a couple kilometers of trail beyond the cabin trying in several spots for Northern Hawk Owl and Boreal Owl and like yesterday getting a bunch of Canada Jays responding to those calls. We'd finally get a Fox Sparrow to cooperate for decent looks, a male Pine Grosbeak briefly lit on a treetop, and as we were walking back to the van a male Spruce Grouse stood on the trail waiting for us. After initial looks & pictures, we played a call & it responded by fluttering up into a tree. Somehow we could not relocate it, but as we proceeded toward the van, we would see two more males in quick succession, one of which displayed nicely for us on the ground and in a spruce giving everyone very memorable looks & photos. We did another long walk on the edge of the burn. This area has occasionally produced both crossbills and waxwings but none could be found today. On the way back to town, Ken saw a bird fly across the road that he couldn't identify so we turned around hoping to relocate it. As we pulled

ahead and turned to head back there was a loud clunk and the front end of the van dropped. The passenger front wheel had completely come off! Thankfully we got a hold of the rental company and they got us to town in short order and provided us with a couple of smaller vehicles to finish the trip. After dinner, we went back out for a couple hours to see if anything new had turned up on Goose Creek and Hydro Roads. The light was great this evening for very nice Red-necked Phalarope, Hudsonian Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, and Short-billed Dowitcher photos. Near the cabins, a White-throated Sparrow and Alder Flycatcher were heard; both rather rare this far north. A total of 8 Rusty Blackbirds for the day, all along Goose Creek & Hydro Roads, was also noteworthy. **Days 12 - June 8** This being our last day up north, we took advantage of good light, mild temperatures and an incoming tide for one last pre-breakfast look at Cape Merry. Beluga's (40+) and Harbour Seals (25+) were both a little more prominent today, and the usual complement of Scoters flew by - mostly Black (47), with a handful of Surf & White-winged. Today there were about equal numbers of Common & Red-breasted Mergansers, and as was the case yesterday the majority of the gulls hunting over the river and on the rocks were Ring-billed. A few Parasitic Jaegers took turns harassing the gulls and 30 or so Arctic Terns hunting for Capelin in the river. After breakfast we moved all our bags into one room and went off to see what the last day might bring. On Simpson Street an out of range Brown Thrasher had been reported so we gave it a try. We had a look at some Common Redpolls, but then an extremely light-colored Hoary Redpoll was found perched on a stunted spruce. Next, we checked some of the lakes near Akudlik where a Red-throated Loon had been reported a couple days earlier - no Red-throated but 5 Pacific Loons & a real close-up pair of Long-tailed Ducks which fell asleep before all had good pictures. Ken played a call; no response from the female but the male went into high gear swimming almost too close for pics (what a cool looking bird and an amazing northern call).



Long-tailed Duck © David McCorquodale

Along Goose Creek Road Ken had a Boreal Owl nest box that he'd been saving that had been used twice over the last decade so we gave it a look. No luck this time, although we did get a flyover calling White-winged Crossbill as we walked in. One other thing we quickly noticed was that the mosquitoes had suddenly gotten bad in some spots (amazingly we'd had almost none until today in the north). At the cabins, we looked for Gray-cheeked Thrush unsuccessfully, but as we approached

the bridge at Goose Creek one was heard calling. It took a while, but eventually it flew closer giving everyone great looks. Past the Marina, two Little Gulls were spotted but neither was closer than yesterday's birds so we carried on. At CR 30 we could barely make out a large flock of at least 60 Tundra Swans on the opposite side of the Churchill River (11 more Tundras would be seen in lakes along the coast that afternoon). One other trail we hadn't yet walked was the Kennedy Park Road. It had produced Palm Warblers before so we played the call occasionally as we walked. At one spot we had a bird calling that we were quite sure was a Palm; it responded by coming in close chipping back but it was never seen. Reluctantly, best we could do was a "heard" on that one. Another new warbler for us in the north which we heard in a couple spots along Kennedy Park Road and elsewhere today was the Tennessee Warbler. At dinner, highlights of the trip were discussed, everyone was forced to come up with at least one different highlight but no sweat - there were many! Speaking to the waitress she mentioned something about a Polar Bear being seen but no other details. Ken checked with a source at the motel who said one had been seen among the rocks by the old dump earlier today. Bit of a needle in a haystack, but what the heck, let's try. Near the old dump we started taking any side trails and scanning the rocks. A few miles past the dump, we took the Mile-4 Trail which we'd done on our first day because we knew it headed all the way down to the bay. As we neared the shore we spotted an orange truck and as we approached they pointed down as if to suggest something might be in a pond that we couldn't see all that well between us. Best way to find out for sure was to drive back and around to where they were. We met them driving out as we approached - yes they had seen a Polar Bear it was swimming but it had disappeared behind the rocks and they pointed inland. So we drove to where they had been and started scanning, mostly inland. After a couple minutes Richard said he thought he could see it. Not inland, but rather way out in the open water along the coast partially hidden by rocks. Indeed, there it was. Quite far away but unmistakable - a large white Polar Bear swimming along the shore. At any distance, that has to be a highlight for anyone who has never seen one before. While we were watching the bear we spotted a couple Bald Eagles among the rocks (4 for the day). A Least Sandpiper was also spotted in ponds just before the bear was seen but forgotten in the excitement. Lastly, a Short-eared Owl flew by as we drove out. But birds paled in comparison to the excitement of getting to see a Polar Bear in Churchill at this time of year. The early spring in the north had stolen a few migrant birds from us, but today's Polar Bear & simply getting to see Belugas at this time of year compensated for some of the birds we missed. We drove back to the motel, grabbed our luggage, and hit the airport with almost two hours to spare before our 6:15 flight back to Winnipeg. This time there was no delays, and we landed in Winnipeg at 8:30, 15 minutes ahead of schedule. We said our goodbyes while waiting for our luggage and everyone went their separate ways. It had been an exciting trip indeed, an altogether great group that really wanted to be out as much as possible finding and photographing birds and other wildlife. Our final trip totals were down a bit from usual due to the scarcity of migrants in both the south and the north. The final tally - 236 bird species and 26 mammals; not record-breaking but certainly respectable. And chock full of highlights, surprises, and amazing looks/photo ops. The weather had been most cooperative, the bugs rarely a problem, and we were fortunate that the vehicle problems really hadn't hampered us at all. I hope that as you leave Manitoba, this report and the many great photos you all took stirs up pleasant memories of our beautiful province and its diverse wildlife. Thank you all -- may our paths cross again sometime in the future. Ken De Smet