



Narwhals and Polar Bears Trip Report (Jun 6 - 13, 2025)

[Link: Narwhals and Polar Bears Trip Report \(Jun 6 - 13, 2025\)](#)



Pond Inlet © Joel Maes

Our first Narwhals and Polar Bears trip of 2025 out of Pond Inlet was a big success! Central to any good trip is the people - always, the people. Our guests were a vastly collaborative and good humored bunch, dealing well with the vagaries of Arctic travel, always recognizing that when one

door closes, another opens. When we were delayed at the airport, we visited the fabulous visitor center in Iqaluit to learn about the legendary resourcefulness of the Inuit and their ancestors, who have lived here for many thousands of years. When wet snow precluded a visit to the floe edge, we embraced a delightful hike on Bylot Island, featuring up close views of Lapland Longspur, Baird's Sandpiper, and Snow Buntings - and superlative views of the sea ice covering Lancaster Sound, stretched out in front of us. When the Pond Inlet grocery store inexplicably closed for the morning, delaying our departure to the floe edge, we hiked out towards Salmon Creek and saw Sandhill Cranes and numerous waterfowl species, including some great "money shots" of Long-tailed Ducks.



Lancaster Sound © Gareth Thomson



Lapland Longspur © Alison Smeaton



Baird's Sandpiper © Ellen Fraser



Long-tailed Duck © Joel Maes



Our camp © Gareth Thomson

We also conquered the unfamiliar challenges that come with the High Arctic: for example, we all stayed toasty warm in our sleeping bags in our tents, on plywood sheets laid on top of four feet of ice. We always spend several days at the floe edge, where the sea ice meets the ocean, and bird and mammal life abound. Inuit hunters are famously patient, sometimes spending an entire day motionless waiting for a seal to arrive at its breathing hole - and our own patience, as we tried to

channel these hunters, was rewarded with the fabulous and diverse birdlife that comes in search of food along the floe edge. A flock of Common Eider, impossibly handsome in their spring plumage, would fly by in one direction, only to be eclipsed by the beauty of a flock of King Eiders flying the other direction - whose color scheme, to quote the purple prose that appears in our Merlin app '... is particularly shocking, as if you left a child unsupervised with a set of paints.'



Common Eider © Alison Smeaton



King Eider © Joel Maes

Every now and again the pace would increase, creating the sort of Peak Experience that birders talk about in hushed tones, when it becomes impossible to keep track of everything that is happening: a flock of Dovekie flying by, their wings a blur in this cool arctic air! A huge mixed flock of Pomarine, Parasitic, and Long-tailed Jaegers in brilliant bleeding plumage! Black Guillemots clambering onto the ice in front of us to mate. Northern Fulmars coming close to clipping us with their wings as they soared over both sea ice and ocean waves...



Black Guillemots © Joel Maes

We developed a wonderful connection with our Inuit guides as we all worked together to conquer the challenges imposed by the arctic environment. It was a fabulous and unexpected bonus of the trip to get to know these fine, humble, personable Inuit guides through hundreds of conversations, asking about their lives and answering their questions as we all compared our very different experiences, realities, world views, and perspectives.



Chatting with Andrew, one of our Inuit Guides © Gareth Thomson

Travel on the sea ice comes with challenges - including crossing open leads in the ice, and navigating our snowmobiles and 'komatik,' the large Inuit sleds, across the pools of surface water that form beneath the hot sun - but these wise and resourceful men inspired our confidence as they got about the important business of getting us from one place to another, leveraging hundreds of generations of experience of doing exactly that with their families and their community.



Travelling by komatik © Ellen Fraser

At one point, our Eagle-Eye guide introduced the concept of a Nemesis Bird: that wily, evasive, and

altogether maddening creature that resists any and all attempts by birder or photographer to successfully see or photograph it. The group eagerly embraced the concept, and much good-natured banter ensued as the group confronted then vanquished one Nemesis Bird after another: the Rock Ptarmigan, which successfully evaded our group until the second last day - check! A suitable photograph of the King Eider, which had one photographer tearing out his hair until - check! Mission accomplished!



Photographing Rock Ptarmigan © Gareth Thomson

The famous and mystical Narwhal seemed well on its way to becoming our Nemesis as well - so one morning, our group called for an earlier start to the floe edge. There was not a breath of wind, and the 24 hour sunshine beamed down on an ocean as still as a millpond, the clouds mirrored in the sea's gossamer surface like an arctic dream. We stood with cameras, telescope, and binoculars at the ready, and the best Inuit spotter stood atop a komatic, his neck on a swivel. Then we heard it: that unmistakable whooshed cetacean exhalation - Narwhal! Several pods appeared before us, and for an hour we watched well over a dozen of these mystical animals, a purposeful and beautiful ballet of our fellow mammals plying their way effortlessly through these cold, fertile Arctic waters...



Scanning the ocean © Gareth Thomson



Narwhal and Thick-billed Murres © Joel Maes



Narwhal © Joel Maes

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