Eagle-Eye Tours



Narwhals & Polar Bears: Pond Inlet Trip Report (May 25 - Jun 1, 2022)

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Days 0 and 1 - No luck flying north

Our group of keen Arctic travellers gathered in Ottawa for a quick orientation dinner. We discussed the plans for the next day and the forecast winds for Iqaluit. We were up early and at the airport at about 5 am with our luggage and bins of food that we took north. We departed Ottawa planning to change planes in Iqaluit, Nunavut's capital, and carry on to Pond Inlet. Alas, we flew north for 2 hours before the plane suddenly banked and turned south and the captain came on to let us know that the wind in Iqaluit was gusting to 100 km/hr (60 mi/hr) with blowing snow and near zero visibility and they had made the decision to turn around. We landed in Ottawa and our office had found us rooms for another night. We met for another dinner and kept our fingers crossed that Canadian North would find us seats for the next day.

Day 2 - North to the Arctic

We were back at the Ottawa airport early for our flights north to Nunavut and the weather in Iqaluit was much better and we had no trouble getting there and changing to our very full plane that was bound for Arctic Bay then Pond Inlet. We arrived in the beautiful community of Pond Inlet and met several of our local guides at the airport. The view across to Bylot Island and Sirmilik National Park is absolutely stunning. We made our way to the hotel for their famous prime rib steak dinner before changing into our warmer clothes for the ride to our camp. We got a ride to the beach where we boarded our sleds, known as qamutiks, which are towed behind snowmobiles. We settled in with 2 or 3 people per qamutik and we were off by 8 pm. Typically we spend the first night at the Sauniq Hotel

in Pond Inlet, but we went directly to the sleds with full bellies and warm clothes. I knew it would be a late night, but I was keen to get to the camp after we were delayed by a day flying north. We travelled along the northern side of Baffin Island before crossing toward Bylot Island. The snow arrived and we were out in the middle surrounded by white with no land in sight. There were a few stops to discuss the direction of travel and it was fascinating to watch our Inuit guides navigate with confidence in challenging conditions. At one point they were digging through the fresh snow to look at the direction of the winter snow drifts to aid their route-finding, but in the end they pulled out the GPS and got us safely and efficiently to the north side of the inlet along Bylot Island. We travelled east to our camp, arriving at midnight. The larger dining and kitchen tents were set up and our crew sprung into action setting up our dome tents for sleeping. Off to bed by 2:30 am! It had been a long day, but everyone rolled with the punches exceptionally well and were looking forward to tomorrow.



Two of our trusty Inuit guides © Cam Gillies

Day 3 - First day at the floe edge

We had a late breakfast given our late bedtime, but we woke to bright sunshine and the view across to the snowy peaks and glaciers of Baffin Island. We loaded up and we were off to the floe edge! It was about 30 minutes from our camp to the floe edge, where the ‘fast’ ice that is solid and doesn’t move meets the open water and pack ice of Baffin Bay. This is where the action is as birds and mammals migrate along this edge. We travelled north along the floe edge to a spot with some open water and became acquainted with the birdlife. Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes were moving north in small flocks, heading toward their nesting cliff on the southeast corner of Bylot Island. We also soon found both Common and King Eider, both of which were looking exceptionally sharp in their breeding plumage. We also saw our first ringed seals in the water just off the edge of the ice. We chose an iceberg as our backdrop for a late lunch before returning to camp in falling snow and limited visibility.



An iceberg surrounded by sea ice near Baffin Island © Cam Gillies

Day 4 - Full day at the floe edge

We awoke to sunny and calm conditions at our camp and headed east after breakfast to an area of open water. Initially there was pack ice close to the ice edge, but this was slowly pulled away by the currents and a large area of open water opened for us to scan for our target. One of our guides had seen a narwhal when we arrived, but none of us had seen it. It was calm and beautiful in the morning and we had a chance to enjoy great views of murres, kittiwakes, and eiders, plus Long-tailed Ducks and Brant. We could see many ringed seals lying in the sun on top of the ice and had several curious seals come close to the edge of the ice where we were sitting. Scanning the ice behind us we spotted a beautiful white arctic fox cruising across the snowy landscape. The wind began to pick up and the ocean even started to freeze at the edges as we headed back to camp for dinner. Rumours of a coming blizzard arrived via the chatter on the VHF radio.



Brant geese swim by at the floe edge © Cam Gillies



A flock of King Eider fly by at the floe edge © Cam Gillies

Day 5 - Arctic blizzard!

Mother nature was back in control and the high winds and blowing snow kept us in camp for the day. Our guides had been up in the night moving qamutiks and snowmobiles to protect the tents from the wind. The big surprise for some was that the bathroom tent was missing when we woke up, leaving a lonely cold seat in the blowing snow. I had a look around assuming it had gone for a tumble

across the ice, but it had just been taken down in the night. It was back up and we had a leisurely day of relaxing in the dining tent or napping in our own tents. It was quite the experience to be camping in the arctic with winds that I estimated were gusting to 50 mph / 80 kph. Snow drifts were forming around our tents and it was clear that this was not a day to be out travelling. Our lone wildlife encounters were a few Sandhill Cranes and a Canada Goose heard flying overhead.



Digging our camp out during a blizzard © Cam Gillies



Enjoying our dining tent © Cam Gillies

Day 6 - Narwhals at last

It was another windy night and we were greeted by wind, albeit diminished, when we got out of our tents in the morning. We expected the wind to calm so we headed out mid-morning to the floe edge and travelled north to an area where the winds were calm. It wasn't long before we spotted four narwhal to the north in front of a large iceberg. We watched from this spot for a while before moving north. We saw a group of three narwhal several times, but they never came close for great photos. We did, however, see both a walrus and bearded seal several times. The bearded seal kept quietly surfacing near us and then would make a splashing exit as it dove. There were plenty of birds to enjoy with many murres and kittiwakes along with eiders, Brant and others moving at the edge of the ice. We could also just see the murres and kittiwakes coming and going from their nesting cliff when we used a spotting scope. We also had views of our lone Pomarine Jaeger of the trip. After our dinner back at the camp, Elisha told us stories about learning to hunt as a boy and how he had learned so much from his father. He also told us the story of how the narwhal got its tusk :).



Scoping for Narwhal on Baffin Island © Cam Gillies



Mammal watching near Bylot Island © Cam Gillies



Enjoying our time on the ice near Bylot Island © Cam Gillies



Birding at the Floe Edge © Cam Gillies

Day 7 - Morning at the floe edge before returning to Pond Inlet

We left after breakfast and returned to the same area as the day prior after about 30 minutes of travel. Winds were calm, but the ocean was very wavy from winds to the south. It was very difficult to spot mammals although we did see a ringed seal a number of times. King Eiders and other species were bobbing away in the waves. There wasn't too much happening with the wildlife so Sheatie started cutting blocks from a snow drift to build a small igloo (iglooviuk in Inuktitut, meaning 'snow house'). It was fascinating to watch a master at work. We got our photos and returned to camp. We had lunch and packed our bags got into the qamutiks for the ride back to the community. We enjoyed dinner and shower back at the hotel and headed off to bed.



Igloo building © Cam Gillies

Day 8 - Around the community and flying south

We had a final morning to walk around town and do a little shopping in the Co-op store. Some of us walked past the airport and found Snow Geese, Snow Buntings, Canada Geese, and plenty of Common Ravens. We received mixed messages from the airline about when our flight would arrive, so there was a small moment of panic when a few were not at the airport for boarding. I sent a stranger to pick up the last few people as they walked to the airport. She kindly told them to get in the car and she zipped them to the waiting plane, no security required. Thank you! All happily onboard and underway we enjoyed the views of the dramatic glaciated landscape below as we reflected on our northern adventure. We had time in Iqaluit for some exploration of the city before flying out in the evening back to Ottawa. It has been a remarkable Arctic adventure in search of narwhals and much more. We couldn’t have stepped off the beach without the incredible guidance and wisdom of our Inuit hosts and my heartfelt thanks go out to them. We had more than our fair share of challenging weather, but our hardy group of travellers rolled with these punches with aplomb. It had been a great privilege to travel through this beautiful land and share the experience with her people.



May 2022 narwhals & polar bears group photo © Cam Gillies