Eagle-Eye Tours

Pond Inlet Floe Edge Trip Report June 2022

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Our eclectic group of twelve met at the Ottawa airport with much excitement to check in for our journey north to Baffin Island. The weather conditions were favorable to gain good views of Baffin Island as we flew across the glaciated tundra through Iqaluit and to the Hamlet of Pond Inlet situated at 72.7 degrees north. We enjoyed the warm hospitality of the Sanuiq Hotel for the night, met our local Inuit guides, and learned the details for our departure for the floe edge the next morning. Some folks went out for a late evening walk to stretch their legs and reported seeing Snow Bunting and White-rumped Sandpiper. Spring was late to arrive this season so we hoped to see more shorebirds on the tundra around the airport upon our return from the floe edge. The next morning we loaded up our gear and dressed warmly for our 3 hour komatik ride to our camp just off the shore of Bylot Island. This island is an important bird refuge and part of the new Sirmilik National Park. It is in this region where scientists have predicted that multi-year sea ice will persist the longest, providing vital habitat and food sources for the many bird and mammal species found in the area.

Travelling by komatik © Meghan K Kelly

Upon arriving to our camp we got settled in to our tents and warmed up in the dining room tent over some hot drinks and sandwiches. While we had lunch, Elisha, our head local guide and chef, went to scout out conditions at the floe edge. He came back with news that the floe edge was full of pack ice that had been pushed up against the edge from the windy conditions during the previous night. So, with no open water to search for wildlife at, we decided to take the opportunity to explore the tundra on Bylot Island just above our camp.

Tundra, Bylot Island

There were large flocks of Snow Geese flying overhead and dotted throughout the tundra as well as smaller numbers of Canada Geese. A single Lapland Longspur entertained the group and a pair of Sandhill Canes flew overhead. We were lucky to find some early to bloom purple saxifrage and signs of fox and hare. We spent some time to take in the view from the top of the island where we could just barely see the edge of the ice and become even more excited for the days to come searching the floe edge for marine mammals and birds. The next morning we had a hot breakfast and geared up for our first full day at the floe edge. The pack ice was still pushed up against most of the floe edge but we found an open patch of water where we joined a group of three ringed seals who patiently watched us learn the most common birds we would encounter over the next few days: Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Thayer's Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Northern Fulmar, and King and Common Eider.

Northern Fulmar in flight © Meghan K Kelly

We also had Purple Sandpiper and Pomarine and Long-tailed Jaeger flying overhead. We would eventually enjoy good views of these species as well as Parasitic Jaeger sitting on the ice. In the afternoon we had our first polar bear sighting, showing some playful behavior in the far distance but easily spotted through the scope and binoculars.

watching a polar bear © Meghan K Kelly

Polar bear on ice, near Bylot Island © Meghan Kelly

Overnight we had strong Westerly winds that moved the pack ice away from the floe edge and gave us the opportunity to begin our search for Narwhal in earnest. In the morning we waited for the wind to subside and ice conditions to improve and used the time to check out the seabird colony on Bylot Island. Here we saw thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Thick-billed Murres fly to and from the colony to feed in the open water around the floe edge and pack ice. We took time observing

the birds navigating a busy airspace to land on the sheer cliff edges and listened to the ebb and flow of the birds preparing for a busy breeding season.

Thick-billed Murre coming in for a landing © Meghan K KellyOur local guides explained how they know when to collect eggs from the nests by looking for signs of spring melt from the island draining into the sea. Surveys of the colony have found that over 40,000 Murres and 6,500 Kittiwakes nest along the cliffs. During our time at the colony we also saw Glaucous Gulls and a Red Fox patrolling the colony looking for an easy meal. We enjoyed an easy meal ourselves just beside the cliff where we could take a peek out of the warm dining tent to watch the colony go about its day. We spotted some Polar Bear tracks on our way to the colony and heard reports of two males prowling the ice to the North, so we made our way that afternoon to search for the bears. The tracks led to an area where we couldn't take the komatiks so we decided to head to the floe edge to check out conditions there. When we arrived to the floe edge we found that the winds had died down, which made conditions safe for us to set up for some wildlife viewing for the rest of the day. Before we even disembarked the komatiks we spotted two Bowhead Whales feeding at the edge and a swarm of Kittiwakes following their lead, picking up scraps from the Bowhead Whales' massive baleen plates. We spent the next few hours watching a group of about 10 Bowheads feeding along the edge at a bit of a distance, along with another distant Polar Bear, a brief sighting of Walrus, and great views of a Red Phalarope.

Bowhead showing baleen © Meghan K Kelly

We decided to take advantage of the steadily improving conditions and head back to camp for an early dinner so that we could return for a late evening at the floe edge. As we returned to the floe edge we could see the diagnostic V-shaped blow of numerous Bowheads and found a spot where the whales were feeding. We enjoyed idyllic conditions with flat calm water, no wind, and dramatic lighting as we experienced the Bowheads feeding and diving just at the edge of the ice we were standing on. A scan of the horizon showed us that there were Bowheads in all directions, feeding on the abundant copepods in the water. We spent a few hours taking it all in, listening to the whales take deep breaths as they prepared for another dive under the ice, and even spotting a curious Arctic Fox watching us from the ice behind us. We got back to camp after 11pm and even after a long day out on the ice, it took some of us time to settle down for some rest after such a memorable experience.

Arctic fox © Meghan K Kelly

The next morning brought yet another change in the weather. This time we had rain and snow affecting visibility. We scoped out a couple of clear spots of open water at the floe edge where we could spend some searching for wildlife. At the first site there were quite a few birds and a couple of Bowheads in the distance. We were able to walk right up to a large crack in the ice where we could see the source of food for most of the wildlife we were encountering. Brown algae clung to the ice and numerous copepods could be seen flitting about in the water. A few small Arctic Cod could be seen swimming around as well, and we were all amazed at how such small creatures could sustain the wide variety of bird and mammal species found at the ice's edge. After a few hours, we moved further along the floe edge toward the traditional Narwhal hunting grounds to try our luck spotting this elusive species of the North. There wasn't much bird or mammal activity in the water, but trusted the instincts of our local guides as we scanned the horizon and around the ice's edge. After an hour or so of searching, a large older male surfaced just in front of the group. We quickly got everyone's binoculars on to the animal as it approached the floe edge in front of us. It swam along the edge and showed it's fluke just before diving to feed at up to 1,500 meters deep below us. This was to be our best sighting of Narwhal and it seemed to happen in an instant, but we were all in awe of our chance to see this iconic Arctic species just a few meters in front of us. Over the next several hours we spotted small groups of Narwhal passing by at a distance, including a mother and grey calf. As the afternoon went on the wind picked up and we decided to call it a day, albeit a successful one, and head back to camp to warm up and have dinner.

Narwhal at floe edge © Meghan K Kelly

The next morning we decided to try to improve our views of Polar Bear. We left camp with the intention of returning to where they were spotted earlier in the trip, but blowing snow caused poor visibility in that direction. So, we headed back towards Baffin Island and carefully navigated around the thinner ice along the floe edge and found a whale carcass from a successful hunt. A group of Glaucous Gulls hovered around, waiting to return to their meal as we scanned the ice for bears. After a short time we spotted a large male Polar Bear also waiting to return to the carcass, and watched as the bear came closer to check us out and jump into the sea to take cover on a floe in the pack ice. It was an incredible encounter and a privilege to see this species in its own domain, on the sea ice and in its element. After a few moments of taking it all in, Nina walked us out to check out the carcass and showed us how the Inuit harvested the animal.

Polar bear © Meghan K Kelly

This afternoon we set up along the floe edge closer to Bylot Island under idyllic conditions. We spent several hours watching flocks of eider, kittiwakes, murres, and three species of Jaeger fly by. Just as we were packing up we were treated to views of a lone Bearded Seal poking its head out around some brash ice in the open water. We got good views of this large seal and it's iconic long whiskers that give it it's name. On our way home to camp we checked out a few groups of Ringed Seals that were hauled out on the ice next to their breathing holes.

King Eiders in flight © Meghan K Kelly

For our final night dinner Elisha cooked up a fresh meal of Arctic Char that was caught at an inland lake and brought to our camp by local fishermen. It was a delicious taste of local food and a memorable meal talking about the experiences we had over the past few days. Our last morning was spent at the floe edge, where we experienced snow, sun, and shifting clouds. Every ten minutes or so the lighting changed and showed us even better views of the snowy mountains on Baffin and Bylot Islands, the icebergs trapped in the sea ice, and the flat calm open water in front of us. Somehow we managed to have yet another incredible Bowhead encounter with several animals feeding just under our feet, beneath the ice. There were well over 50 animals coming up for air and and showing their flukes just a few meters in front of us and all the way out to the horizon. A whale was even spotted coming up for air in the lead in the sea ice that we crossed to get to the floe edge, showing us just how well adapted these animals are at living in and around the frozen Arctic waters!

Bowhead whale fluke © Meghan K Kelly

Thousands of seabirds were swimming and flying around us as well, creating a cacophony of sounds that was just as beautiful as the scenery before us. As our time at the floe edge was coming to a close, we were treated to better views of a large Walrus swimming along looking for food. These pinnipeds are the largest in the world, reaching 1,200-1,900kg in weight, and this individual seemed to be at the upper end of this range. Just as we were about to head back to the komatiks the wind picked up, making it a bit easier to say goodbye to this very special place. The wind also brought an unexpected new species for the list, a Yellow-billed Loon, which flew by in a flash just overhead. After a last lunch at camp we packed up and headed into the wind for our journey back to Pond Inlet. We encountered a few ice bridges and leads in the ice that weren't there on our trip out, showing us just how quickly ice conditions can change during this time of the year. Once we arrived to town there was a flurry of activity to get everyone checked in to the hotel to enjoy a much anticipated hot shower and hearty meal. A few of us bared the cold one last time for an evening walk on the tundra by the airport where we picked up a few new species like Horned Lark, Red Knot, and Ringed Plover, showing us that indeed summer was on its way.

Group photo at camp © Meghan K Kelly

The next morning we all started our long journey home via Iqaluit and to Ottawa where we said our goodbyes and continued onwards toward our final destinations.