



## Sanirajak Walrus and Bowhead Tour Trip Report 2023

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### Iqaluit

Due to a shift in flights we found ourselves with an extra day to explore Iqaluit. The group consisted of nine folks from the Floe Edge trip and one new guest meeting in Iqaluit (and another would meet in Sanirajak, aka Hall Beach). On the first of two mornings in Iqaluit, a few of us went out front of the hotel and found one of the specialty birds of Iqaluit: a visitor from Africa! The Northern Wheatear behaves similarly to the Common Ringed-Plover in that they both migrate across three continents: up from Africa, through Europe, over Greenland to breed on Baffin Island. Sure enough, we found a pair of wheatears and also a curious Ermine (Short-tailed Weasel)! After this, we arranged for a guided hike along the river, which was somewhat uneventful but it did allow us to look closely at some arctic wildflower species such as: Arctic Draba, Purple Saxifrage and Arctic Avens. We were also able to sample some bannock provided by our Inuit hosts.

### Iqaluit - Sanirajak

Our flight to Sanirajak was on time and permitted a brief touch-down in Igloolik before the short 15-minute hop south to our destination. That evening we tried to get out on the water but some half-expected logistics conspired against us in this regard. However, the weather was good for the following day and the boats were being readied.

### Sanirajak

This tour was focused on mammal-viewing, specifically Walrus. On the Saturday after our arrival we were ready to go out front of the hotel on a relatively ice-free shoreline (this would later change!).

The destination was Qingusaa Island, about one hour from town to the east, by boat. Our crews of Timothy, Joabe, Matthew and Enoki were keen to show us their local hunting grounds. Things came together nicely today and we saw all of our target species for the entire tour: Walrus, Polar bear, Bowhead Whale and Bearded Seal!



*Polar bear swimming by iceberg*



*Good looks of a walrus*



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*Watching a polar bear*

The many birds included: Dovekie, Red Phalarope, Arctic Tern and Herring Gull. It was interesting to appreciate that we were some of the few non-Inuit people to ever set foot on these small islets, and wild to do it while a Polar Bear was also lurking somewhere nearby. For the birders, a wild encounter was the Savannah Sparrow that decided to hang out with a group of Walrus and feed on their skin (or something- it was hard to tell if this was a normal occurrence or not; this bird was about 500km beyond its usual breeding range and out on an ice floe!).



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*Savannah Sparrow on Walrus*



*Bearded Seal*



*Arctic Tern*

The next day we woke to a storm that basically shut us down for a day and a half. Wind with snow from the east gusting to 70km/hr not only made boating hazardous, it was gnarly just walking outside. Ice that was floating around Foxe Basin blew into the shoreline, blocking access to the

beach.



*Ice in front of hotel*



*Sled dogs*

Still, on the Monday we managed to get out in the afternoon and evening by embarking from a launch to the south of town. The ice had plans to shut us down even further but we made a last-minute plan to head to another island: South Goat. Although the boats became separated for a short

amount of time, each set of passengers had a different experience. The first boat landed on the shore and promptly spotted a Polar Bear cresting over the top of the island, before watching it slink down to the bay and into the water. The second boat, with impeccable timing, arrived to watch the bear swimming away. All in all, this experience made the visit to this scarcely-visited island a rewarding one, but the icing on the cake was a visit from a curious Arctic Fox being marauded by Arctic Terns, or vice versa. The waves made for an arduous return journey but the captains made the voyage as comfortable as possible.



*Polar bear swimming*



## *Arctic Fox being chased by Arctic Tern*

Our third day on the water was a trip to the Oogli Islands. These are a collection of three small islands about 25km north of town where several key arctic bird species nest and some ancient sod houses are located. The journey, however, was again wrought with choppy waters and therefore took about double the usual time. Thankfully, we had a co-captain on one of our vessels: Solomon, the grandson of Enoki.



*Oogli Island*

It was pleasant to walk around the islands amid the fog and circling birds, and enjoy lunch and some conversations with our guides. We saw Arctic Tern, Red-throated Loon, Long-tailed Duck, Snow Goose, King and Common Eider (the latter stole the show with nesting females seemingly everywhere!), Red Phalarope and Brant (also nesting).



*Common Eider*



*Red Phalarope*

The sod houses were fascinating, especially with the assortment of bones and nesting birds scattered thereabouts. After the island tour we decided to head a bit north by boat since the wind and waves were calming down. Still, it was somewhat rough but we did manage to find several Bowhead Whales. There wasn't enough time on this day to enact the normal plan of going ashore and watching them swim past, so we instead played "Whack-a-mole" with the whales, trying to get

as close as possible with limited success. Back at base, one sharp-eyed guest turned up a rare bird near the hotel: a Hermit Thrush. Again, this bird was well out of its normal range.

## Departure

For better or worse, the poor weather finally ended on our last morning. This made it a difficult decision to stay ashore, but it was prudent to stay close to the hotel given we had a 2pm flight, and the previous day's flight was canceled due to fog, not to mention flight can randomly depart early. So, a few of us went out and did some birding while the rest of the group lounged at the hotel. When it was time to depart, we had a nice send-off by our local guides and our hotel host before lifting off on schedule to Iqaluit, and eventually, Ottawa. Although the weather tried its best to interfere with our wildlife-viewing plans, the trip was a success with great views of Walrus and some unexpected Polar Bear encounters, among other highlights.



*EET group 2023*