



Sanirajak Walrus and Bowhead Trip Report (June 22-28, 2022)

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Walrus and Bowhead Whale viewing amid a stark, mysterious landscape.

Iqaluit - Sanirajak All eight of us met in the Iqaluit airport with plenty of time to spare before the flight to Sanirajak (aka Hall Beach). This was a fortunate scenario since six of us had just arrived from Pond Inlet where we had it engrained that northern flights were problematic. Not this one! We even stopped in at Kinngait, aka Cape Dorset for a half-hour layover. **Sanirajak** When we arrived to the quaint hamlet of Sanirajak on the shores of Foxe Basin, little did we know that we were the very first ecotourists to arrive here—possibly ever. That was the report, according to locals we subsequently met. This revelation, true or not, made for an exciting and somewhat trepidatious first couple of days, especially when we discovered the limitations on town-based activities, like dining. However, the trip was focused on mammal-viewing, specifically Walrus. On our first evening's meeting we were assured by our local guides that these beasts would welcome their first audience



with open flippers.

On the first morning we were ready, but the boats, unfortunately, were not. Some delays due to fork-lifting them onto the ice and some fiddling with the batteries had us departing for Qingusaa Island around mid-day. Our crew of Timothy, Joabe and Ron were keen to show us their local hunting grounds where gigantic male Walrus hauled out. When we neared the island, however, we saw that it was blocked by pack ice that had crept in from the south. Despite numerous attempts, we were unable to find our way through to the island though we approached as close as 1.5km from land. We did enjoy lunch on an ice floe and saw a couple of Bearded Seals.



Eagle-Eye Tours group 2022

Our second day was a highlight. We departed at 09:00 from directly in front of our hotel and headed slightly south of Qingusaa for about an hour. We encountered the same large (several hundred

kilometers-long!) ice pack, but this specific area evidently was where the foraging Walrus waited at this time of year. Weaving through chunks of pack ice, we kept our eyes peeled for anything that looked like a Walrus. This resulted in a close-up encounter with a Bearded Seal right after lunch. Just before some of us started thinking *this is why no tourists have been here before!*, the sharp-eyed Ron shouted out “Walrus!” and behold, several were on a nearby ice floe. From here in, as we traversed the edge of the pack ice we kept running into more groups, which we stopped and approached fairly close. This was very exciting but it would get better when, on a random encounter during the commute home, we came across the motherlode of around 150-200 of the bellowing beasts! This was likely the most memorable part of the tour!



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Watching walrus from boat



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walrus on ice



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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. After two days on the water it was pleasant to walk around, and while doing so we saw some loose colonies of Arctic Tern, and many Walrus skulls. Other bird species included: Snow Bunting, Red-throated Loon, Long-tailed Duck, Snow Goose, King and Common Eider, Red Phalarope and Brant. At the sod houses were some (we don't really know how old for sure, but they were old) human



remains!
Ogle

sod house © Steve



Snow Bunting



Red-throated Loon



Arctic Tern

Our fourth day was back on the water in a quest for Bowhead Whales, since we hadn't seen any to this point (except the folks that were on the Floe Edge trip). We headed out toward a seemingly random area that Timothy had earlier said was THE place for the whales. Bobbing around in the open ocean with no whales had us a bit skeptical, especially when Timothy shrugged his shoulders admitting he actually had no idea where the whales were. We decided to head to the nearest shores for lunch and a bathroom break, when Ron again spotted our quarry—a Bowhead! Despite the sighting, we had difficulty tracking it down, but found this individual or another soon afterward, and everyone saw a fluke. We had checked the Bowhead box for the tour, and wouldn't you know it, they indeed were found in the special Bowhead area. It was on the shoreline locally known as Kangi Beach that the floodgates opened and in the next couple of hours we watched nearly thirty Bowhead Whales pass by within 400 metres of shore! After lunch we went out in the boats and had one swim between our two vessels. Our cups overflowing, it was time for the one-hour commute back to Sanirajak.



Bowhead whales

On our fifth and final day in this wonderful area we took a walk out past the airport and the North Warning System Site to do some birding. It was cool and windy and the tundra fairly damp as the snow had just melted, but we did manage to get looks at a few exciting species—especially the shorebirds. We found a Baird’s Sandpiper nest along with sightings of Semipalmated and White-rumped Sandpiper, Semipalmated Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, two Brant nests, a Snow Bunting nest, Long-tailed Duck and a few King Eider in the scope. Probably the most emblematic bird of the area must be Red Phalarope, and indeed we saw a few of them on territory surrounding the town.



Red Phalarope



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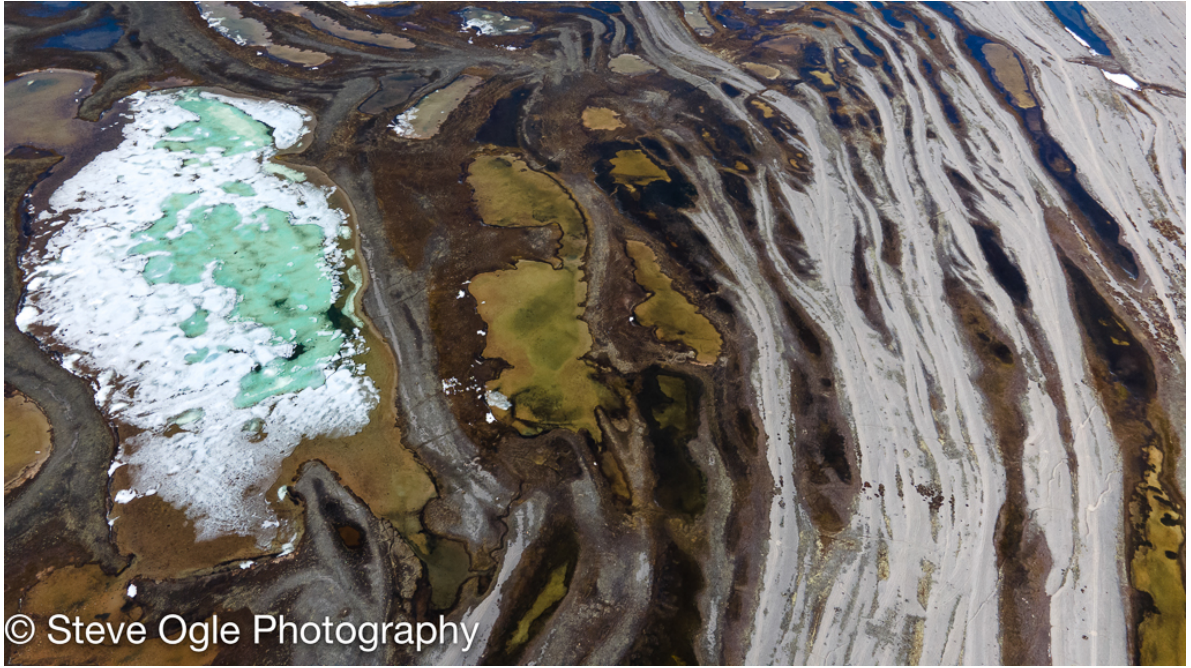
Flock of King Eiders

That evening we had a celebratory dinner with our local outfitters and the hotel proprietor. On the menu was Arctic Char and Lake Trout and some veggie stew. They brought with them some local art that some of us brought home as souvenirs. **Departure** We had a seamless flight the next morning to Iqaluit (via Igloolik) with a several-hour layover before finally getting back to Ottawa—one step closer to our former lives.



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boat and reflection in arctic



beach ridges taken from drone



cloud arch over ice