

## Belugas, Bears & Birds Itinerary

[Link: Belugas, Bears & Birds](#)

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### Tour Overview

Manitoba has become one of the premier locations on the continent for seeing and photographing iconic northern birds and mammals. This tour will take you to many of Manitoba's premier wildlife-viewing sites and to an incredible diversity of habitats including the rich prairies, wetlands, aspen parklands and boreal forests of southern Manitoba and finally to the taiga/tundra and arctic environment of Churchill.

Our first destination is the boreal and mixed forests in and around Riding Mountain National Park. This boreal island is superb for a variety of warblers and numerous other boreal and parkland birds including some highly sought after species like Spruce Grouse, Great Gray Owl, Connecticut and Golden-winged Warbler, plus Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpecker. The park is also particularly productive for mammals including Black Bear, Elk, Moose and Beaver. Lynx have been seen with some frequency, and maybe even a Wolf, Cougar, Pine Martin or Fisher.

Swinging to the extreme southwest corner of the province we traverse the mixed-grass prairies, home to Ferruginous Hawk, Loggerhead Shrike, Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur and a host of other southwest grassland specialties. Mule Deer, White-tailed Jack Rabbit, Red Fox and Coyote may be found here as well.

Next we fly north to Churchill, a world-renowned hotspot for birding and mammal viewing and photography opportunities. We will be taking two organized boat trips to observe the hundreds of beluga whales that gather in the waters of the Churchill River and Hudson Bay. Although polar bears are just coming off the last of the ice in Hudson Bay, in most years there should be a few around in spots that are visible from the boats or as we drive around exploring the arctic tundra. Other arctic wildlife that we might encounter include Red and Arctic Fox, Arctic Hare, Ringed and Harbour Seals, and Barren Ground Caribou.

This is also prime time for arctic breeding birds. Pacific and Red-throated Loons, Common Eider, scoters, as well as numerous shorebirds are in superb breeding plumages. We will also search for Willow Ptarmigan, and various arctic passerines including highly sought after northern specialties like Gray-cheeked Thrush, Harris's Sparrow and Smith's Longspur.

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### Itinerary

## Day 1: Arrival



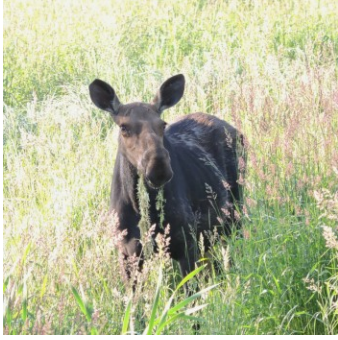
Our Belugas, Bears and Birds tour begins with arrival in Winnipeg and check-in at our hotel. We meet for dinner to discuss the adventure ahead. Night in Winnipeg.

## Day 2: Lake Manitoba and transfer to Riding Mountain National Park



We'll get an early start today, looking for birds and mammals on route to St. Ambrose Provincial Park on the south shore of Lake Manitoba. This upland, marsh, riparian corridor and lake shore edge can be teeming with birds including Western & possibly Clark's Grebes, a large offshore pelican and cormorant colony, American Bittern, Sora & Virginia rails, Marbled Godwit, Upland Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, Willet, Common, Forster's, Common & Caspian Tern, Franklin's Gull, Marsh & Sedge Wrens, Yellow-headed & Brewers Blackbird, Bobolink, Baltimore & Orchard Oriole, as well as Swamp, LeConte's & Nelson's Sparrows. We'll make a few more stops at the dump, Portage Creek and Delta Marsh for species like Hooded Merganser, Wood Duck, California Gull, Black-billed Cuckoo, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Vireo, Great Crested Flycatcher, and maybe even a Northern Saw-whet Owl, before carrying on to Neepawa for lunch. This afternoon, we head north to the Aggasiz Ski Hill road looking for east escarpment specialties (Broad-winged Hawk, Indigo Bunting, Philadelphia & Yellow-throated Vireo, Veery, Scarlet Tanager, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested & Olive-sided Flycatchers, and Eastern Towhee). We'll access Riding Mountain National Park via the historic East Gate and head to our accommodations for the next few days, the Elkhorn Resort. After dinner, we may head to the spacious Lake Audy bison enclosure. This area has occasionally been productive for Great Gray Owls, with the possibility of Barred and Long-eared, and we'll hope to see Plain's Bison and maybe some Elk roaming in their native semi-open habitat. Another evening option is driving gravel roads along the southern edge of the park, an area that can be productive for Connecticut Warblers, Great Gray & other owls, and where deer, Elk, Coyote, or Black Bear often come out near dusk. Night in Riding Mountain National Park.

### Days 3 & 4: Riding Mountain National Park



This superb National Park rises from the surrounding farmlands and parklands to an elevation of 450 meters (1500 feet), and the mixed deciduous and boreal coniferous forests here are rich and varied. The Park has been recognized as one of the top birding hotspots in all of Canada, with over 260 species of birds recorded. Warblers abound in season, as more than 20 species nest in the park, including a rich array of eastern (Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Green, Canada, Magnolia, Golden-winged & others) and northern representatives (Orange-crowned, Tennessee, Connecticut, Mourning, Cape May, Bay-breasted, Northern Waterthrush). The mixed woods are also superb for a variety of boreal specialties including Spruce Grouse, Canada Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Evening Grosbeak, crossbills, and both Black-backed & American Three-toed Woodpeckers. Other boreal and parkland birds we'll hope to find include Ruffed Grouse, Osprey, Northern Goshawk, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Winter Wren, Brown Creeper, Ruby & Golden-crowned Kinglets, Hermit & Swainson's Thrush, Purple Finch, White-winged Crossbill, and Pine Siskin. The Park is also particularly productive for mammal viewing and photography. Driving roads at dawn and dusk can be particularly productive for Black Bear, White-tailed Deer, Elk, Moose and Snowshoe Hare. Wetlands can be good for Beaver, Muskrat, Mink and River Otter. Lynx have been seen with some frequency, and maybe even a Wolf, Cougar, Pine Martin or Fisher. Among evening options, we may look for displaying American Woodcock. Although waiting at dusk for the woodcock to display can test one's patience, we have occasionally been rewarded by calling Barred, Great Horned or even Boreal Owls, and driving the Park's roads after dark can be most productive for spotting the rarest mammals. Nights in Riding Mountain National Park.

## Day 5: Transfer to Mixed-grass Prairies



Today we'll make our way to the southwest mixed-grass prairie leaving Riding Mountain National Park after breakfast, and travelling through a section of the Minnedosa pothole country (an area with numerous glacial remnant wetlands that is also known as North America's "duck factory"). Nest predators like Red Fox, Coyote, Striped Skunk and Raccoon may be spotted in this area as well. We will make our way to Oak Lake resort, where we will have lunch and look over the lake and nearby marshes. Depending on time and conditions, we may check out portions of the mixed-grass prairie this afternoon where one can find the endangered Ferruginous Hawk, Loggerhead Shrike, and with luck maybe even a Burrowing Owl. Other southwestern prairie specialties we'll look for that afternoon, evening or tomorrow morning include Gray Partridge, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Ring-necked Pheasant, Swainson's Hawk, Upland Sandpiper, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Willow Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, and Brown Thrasher. Or we may check into our accommodations in Melita, the Western Star Inn, and catch a couple hours rest. After dinner, we'll head to some of the best mixed-grass prairies spots and search for among other specialties, Sprague's Pipit, Baird's & Grasshopper Sparrow, and Chestnut-collared Longspur. This is also an ideal area and time of day to find Mule Deer, Coyote, Richardson's & Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels, Fox Squirrel, and maybe even a Badger. Night in Melita.

## Day 6: Whitewater Lake and transfer to Winnipeg



After an early breakfast, depending on how we made out in the prairies yesterday, we may go back to try for some species we needed better looks at, check woodlots along the Souris River looking for riparian species we may have missed earlier, or head east to Whitewater Lake. Whitewater is a large, shallow lake that is usually teeming with waterfowl, gulls, terns, and various other waterbirds. It is one of the only spots in the province where White-faced Ibis and various egrets (Cattle, Great and Snowy Egrets) may be found. Six species of grebes including Red-necked, Western and Clark's nest here (although the latter are quite rare). Some of the early migrant mixed flocks of shorebirds will likely be passing through, and nesting shorebirds include numerous American Avocet, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Wilson's Phalarope, and rarely Black-necked Stilt or Piping Plover. After lunch in Boissevain, we'll start our lengthy commute to Winnipeg, stopping briefly near Shilo to look for Mountain & Eastern Bluebird. In Winnipeg, we may check out a couple parks where Eastern Screech Owl and Northern Cardinal may be found. Or given all the driving and excitement of the last few days, we may check in and take the rest of the afternoon and evening off to rest up and get ready for the next phase of our Manitoba adventure. Night in Winnipeg.

## Days 7 - 9: Churchill



Today, we catch a morning flight into Churchill, and check out our accommodations before eagerly heading for our first look at arctic birds and mammals. In Churchill, our days will be organized around weather conditions, reports of target species, rechecking some of the best sites several times, and venturing further afield as far as the trails and road systems will safely take us. A highlight will be partaking in a couple boat or zodiac trips on the Churchill River to witness the spectacle of hundreds of curious Belugas and see some of the other sights that the estuary and nearby Hudson Bay have to offer. We may also take a tour of the Prince of Wales Fort across the river, established by the Hudson's Bay Company as one of its original fur-trading posts. We will make frequent excursions to the granery ponds, the docks by the river, and to Cape Merry near the mouth of the Churchill River as these sites are readily accessible and superb for viewing unique arctic birds and mammals. The docks and the elevated rock outcrops at Cape Merry are fabulous viewpoints for observing various gulls, eiders, scoters, mergansers, loons, and other waterbirds in the estuary. One could probably spend hours watching the frenetic gull, jaeger and other waterbird foraging activities, or observing the rhythmic surfacing of Beluga Whales as they cruise up and down the Churchill River feeding on schools of Capelin and other larger fish. Seals are often seen from these vantage points as well, those on the river usually being Harbour Seals, while Ringed Seals (a favored food of the Polar Bears), usually frequent the bay shorelines. The rocky uplands at the Cape and along the coast are also a favored American Pipit nesting area, and this is one of a handful of areas frequented by the Arctic Hare or the dark "cross fox" color phase of the Red Fox. During our stay at Churchill, we will venture onto the Churchill River on a couple occasions with a locally owned whale watching company, getting up close and personal with the friendly Belugas, often called the "canaries of the sea". We will use hydrophones to listen to their strange high-pitched whistles, clicking, chirping and other underwater vocalizations. Depending on the year and timing of ice-off on the bay, there is a good possibility of finding a Polar Bear walking along the shore and swimming in the water while on our the boat tours. Although Polar Bears are never guaranteed in mid-July, this time of year is becoming increasingly popular for bear viewing as they venture ashore ever earlier. The road systems around Churchill are not terribly extensive, but get us out to all of the best areas for finding the area's unique wildlife. At this time of year, it is not uncommon to find a mother Polar Bear with cubs in the flats near town. Elevated sites near the railway tracks just outside of town provide an ideal opportunity to scan over hundreds of geese looking for the odd Ross's or Cackling. This is also an ideal area for observing Bald Eagles and various other raptors hunting, and to look for caribou, Red & Arctic Fox, and of course the iconic Polar Bear. We'll make frequent excursions down Goose Creek road checking out some productive feeders for various sparrows including Fox, American Tree, White-crowned & Harris', Canada Jay, Pine Grosbeak, Common & Hoary Redpolls, Rusty Blackbirds, and who knows what else - Merlin and Boreal Owls have even been seen in this area on occasion. Goose Creek Road is also great for numerous roadside wet and partially dry mudflats, and river overlooks where shorebirds, scoters, various other waterfowl and raptors, plus Little Gull are possibilities. The various roads east of town and along the coast will also be explored, including the Twin Lakes road beyond the Northern Studies Centre. Churchill is ablaze with arctic wildflowers and butterflies abound in the summer, so if you're into that sort of experience, this trip offers you the opportunity to see and photograph all that this gateway to the arctic has to offer. This area is particularly productive during the summer for nesting shorebirds. Still adorned in their breeding plumage, but with many having young by mid-July, Stilt Sandpipers, Whimbrels, Short-billed Dowitchers, Lesser Yellowlegs and Hudsonian Godwit may be found calling from treetops, performing acrobatic aerial displays, or aggressively protecting broods. The fens near Twin Lakes are often among the most productive for these as well as American Golden-Plover, Dunlin, Golden Eagle, Short-eared Owl, and maybe even Smith's Longspur. Willow Ptarmigan are also more plentiful as one gets out further from town alongside the gravel roads, although they may be harder to spot in their mid-summer attire. In a variety of wooded and shrubby habitats along Goose Creek Road and near Twin Lakes, we'll search for Three-toed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse, Canada Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, Fox, American Tree & Harris's Sparrows, White-winged Crossbill, and warblers such as Blackpoll, Orange-crowned, Wilson's & Palm. In years when vole and small mammal food supplies are abundant, nesting Rough-legged Hawk, Parasitic Jaeger, and maybe even a Northern Hawk, Boreal, or Snowy Owl may be found. Nights in Churchill.

## Day 10: Churchill & Return to Winnipeg



We spend our last day in the north mopping up on species and areas that we may have missed. If you haven't already done so, we'll make sure you have ample time to walk the main street, where several shops offer locally made handicrafts, and a must is a visit to the Itsanitaq Museum which has artifacts collected from centuries of local habitation. We catch a mid-afternoon flight south to Winnipeg. Our last dinner together that evening gives us a chance to reminisce about the all the highlights and adventures we have experienced on this trip. Night in Winnipeg.

## Day 11: Departure

Our Belugas, Bears and Birds tour ends today, you can transfer to the airport for flights home anytime today.

## What to Expect

On our Belugas, Bears and Birds tour, early mornings and some late evenings should be expected in southern Manitoba to take advantage of the best times of the day for birds and mammals respectively. Except on travel days, we'll check in or return to the hotel early enough in the afternoon for participants to catch at least a couple hours of rest or relaxation before dinner.

Evenings are ideal for wildlife viewing so we usually head out for 2-3 hours after dinner and may not return until after 10pm, but anyone that would rather take the evening off is always free to do so.

Driving will be limited to short and moderate stretches, although there will be a couple of longer commutes in the south.

Lunch times and venue will be variable depending on the weather and accessibility to suitable lunch spots.

July is the warmest month in southern Manitoba with average highs and lows of 26 and 16 degrees Celsius. Although it is the sunniest month, it is also among the wettest, so one should expect anything except snow in the south. Average July highs and lows for Churchill are a fair bit cooler, 18 and 7 degrees Celsius, but temperatures can vary from sweltering highs of 30 degrees to lows just above freezing.

Especially in the north, participants should layer their clothing as conditions can change quickly while we are in the field. Be prepared for some mosquitoes and black flies, especially in the north. Come prepared with repellent, heavier clothing and probably mosquito netting for your face. Although we will probably do very little if any off-trail walks, particularly in inclement conditions, waterproof footwear and rain gear may be necessary for damp days.

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# What's Included

## **Tour Price Includes**

- All accommodation
- Flights between Winnipeg-Churchill
- Breakfasts and lunches
- Ground transportation
- Guides (4 - 8 participants with one guide, 9 - 12 with two guides in two vehicles)
- All park, conservation and entrance fees

## **Tour Price Does Not Include**

- Evening meals
  - Travel Insurance
  - Items of a personal nature
  - Taxes (5% GST)
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