Eagle-Eye Tours

Belugas, Bears & Birds Itinerary

Link: Belugas, Bears & Birds

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, 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.

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.

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. Ambroise 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 where will will look for owls, deer, Elk, Coyote, or Black Bear that may 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 and Muskrat. 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 or Great Horned Owls and driving the Park's roads after dark can be most productive for spotting mammals. Nights in Riding Mountain National Park.

Days 5 & 6: 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. During our full day here 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. The evening is 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. Nights in Melita.

Day 7: 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 8 - 10: 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 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 11: 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 12: Departure

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

What to Expect

Overview

The Belugas, Bears & Birds tour is a busy, moderately-paced birding, wildlife and sea life tour. You can expect early morning birding (before breakfast) almost every day. Depending on our itinerary and the morning's destination, we typically return to town for lunch. In the afternoon, we'll head out for a few more hours of exploration but aim to be back in time for a short break before dinner. On days with extensive travel or frequent stops, this downtime may be closer to 30 minutes. Evenings are often ideal for wildlife viewing, so some days we will head out again for a few hours after dinner (generally back by 9:30 pm), but anyone that would rather take the evening off is always welcome to do so.

Food

We usually go out for pre-breakfast walks, and either return to the hotel for breakfast, or pick something up on the road. We either have a picnic lunch in the field, or something on the road, in between birding locations. Dinner is usually at the hotel or a nearby restaurant. Each evening after dinner we compile the day's checklist, review the day's activities and other observations, and set out the plan for the next day.

Accommodation

We generally stay in 3 to 4-star hotels or lodges that provide a comfortable stay near the locations where we want to go birding.

Walking

The walking on this tour is rated as easy and is usually short. Most walks are under 1 km (0.6 miles) and on well worn trails or roads. Very seldom the group will go off trail (less than 50 m away) to look at a specific bird.

In the prairies, a lot of the birding will be from the vehicle. There will be times when we don't have

the opportunity to get out of the vehicle, but we will attempt to get out and walk when it is safe to do so.

Driving

We spend a lot of time in the van driving between birding sites. There will be two longer drives, but we make several rest stops along the way (the longest drive is about 3 hours). It is not always possible to get out of the van (e.g. when stopped on the side of a road), but we will do so when safe.

Please note that while in remote communities, we are limited in our choices for transportation services. We will always strive to book the best available option, however the vehicles are likely to be older models.

Climate

July is the warmest month in southern Manitoba, with average highs of 26°C (78° F) and lows of 16°C (60° F). Although it is the warmest month, it is also among the wettest, so one should expect a lot of precipitation. Average July highs and lows for Churchill are a fair bit cooler, from 18°C (65° F) to 7°C (44° F), but in reality, temperatures can vary all the way from sweltering highs of 30°C (86° F) to lows just above freezing. It's best to check the weather report in the weeks leading up to the trip to get a clearer idea of weather.

Be prepared for some mosquitoes and black flies, especially in the north. Come prepared with repellent, layers and heavier clothing, as well as mosquito netting for your face. Although we will probably do very little, if any, off-trail walking, particularly in inclement conditions, waterproof footwear and rain gear may be necessary for damp days.

Boat Trips

Our itinerary includes two boat/zodiac tours in Churchill, so participants must be physically able to get in and out of a zodiac boat with assistance.

The Beluga & Fort tour lasts 2.5 hours and is a combination tour with one hour of whale watching and one hour of interpretation at the historic 1731 Fort Prince of Wales. Polar Bears are frequently observed and watched at close range from the boat at Eskimo Point during this tour.

The Churchill Estuary Tour is 2 hours of beluga whale watching and does not include a visit to Fort Prince of Wales. Polar Bears are frequently observed and watched from the zodiac at Eskimo Point during this tour.

There are no bathrooms on board, however there are outhouses on the docks of each port. Participants can bring something to drink and/or snack on all of the tours. For either of these boat trips, plans could change slightly if there is any unfavorable weather.

Internal Flights

Our itinerary includes two internal flights between Winnipeg and Churchill that are included in the price of the tour. These flights will be booked by Eagle-Eye Tours for you.

Insurance

Emergency medical insurance is mandatory for this tour due to its remote location and the potentially high cost of emergency evacuation. Trip interruption insurance is also mandatory

because weather-related flight delays and cancellations are possible. We strongly recommend trip cancellation insurance to protect your investment if you need to cancel before departure.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes
• All accommodation
• Flights between Winnipeg-Churchill
• All meals and soft drinks
• 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
• Flights to/from start location
• Mandatory emergency medical and trip interruption insurance
• Travel Insurance
• Items of a personal nature
• Taxes (5% GST)
• Alcoholic beverages