

Life in the Fur Lane

In Churchill, the line between humans and bears comes down to a pane of Plexiglass in a tundra buggy

story and photography by *Claudine Gervais* 

It's nightfall, and I'm glancing side-long into spaces between buildings, imagining what might be lurking there. I'm walking in an unfamiliar town, and my heart is racing. It's neither the 923 citizens of Churchill nor my fellow travellers that concern me. It's the area's more famous inhabitants – polar bears.

I've arrived at this town along the shore of Hudson Bay to see the great whites . . . but from a safe distance. The tour orientation warnings were enough to heighten my anxiety, but the sight of a rifle at the side of guide Dr. Paul Watts now has me thinking that one of the planet's largest land carnivores is eyeing me up as a tasty treat. Fighting the urge to flee back to the bus, I look forward to my sheltered tundra buggy trip tomorrow. In the meantime though, this feet-on-the-ground primer is a necessary step toward understanding Churchill's longstanding relationship with its seasonal residents.

After a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Winnipeg this morning, our group of nine tourists began following Watts around on a Churchill area tour. The landscape is more diverse than I expected, having only seen images of a barren desert of snow so often associated with the north. In fact, the region encompasses the biomes of an arctic ocean bay, tundra and boreal forest. There are trees, but their growth is slow, resulting in many Charlie Brown Christmas tree look-alikes.

A BEAR in the Churchill Wildlife Management Area forages in a berry patch; (inset top) a tree shows signs of life on the tundra, a growth pattern known as the krummholz effect; (inset bottom) evidence on the forest floor of Churchill's place on the migratory path of more than 250 bird species.

Known as the krummholz effect, the flag or banner-like structure is from continued exposure to blasting north winds. The effect becomes a navigational feature, like moss growing on the north side of trees in warmer climates. The forest floor is alive, spongy and almost trampoline-springy to the step, its green growth dotted with bright red currant berries. Spotting a broken eggshell, I'd learned from Watts that more than 250 species of birds nest or pass through here on their annual migrations. The rocky shoreline harbours subtle tints of grey, green and rust; these lichens are slow growers too (two millimetres a year), used to date the iconic Inukshuk markers left by early peoples.

Inside the Eskimo Museum, I find out that the Churchill area was a seasonal hunting ground (caribou in the summer, seals in winter) by the Pre-Dorset, Dorset and Inuit peoples thousands of years ago. The Cree, Dene and Inuit also had trading networks in the region. In more recent times, the Hudson's Bay Company, headquartered at York Factory 250 kilometres southeast, marked Churchill's fur trade era. The company's Prince of Wales Fort, near town across the Churchill River, is a massive stone fortress that took more than 40 years to build. Accessible only by boat or helicopter, this National Historic Site of Canada is open for tours in July and August.

The Port of Churchill, Canada's only arctic seaport, was built in 1929. The town's unique location facilitates the export of grain delivered here by rail from Western Canada and beyond. The shipping season runs from mid-July to the beginning of November. However, longer ice-free periods (more about that later) are expected to increase trading opportunities because vessels from Russia, Europe and northeast Asia will be able to use the port, cutting





I'm almost eye-to-eye with a 405-kg polar bear. I feel a bit like Little Red Riding Hood. "My, what big paws you have"

home. Attracted by the smell, a bear attacked and killed the man. Which leads me to reason, the next day before our tundra tour, that as long as I don't throw rocks or stuff my pockets with raw meat, I should be OK.

The launch area's pier-like structure makes it easy to get into the buggies – like school buses on steroids, the monster vehicles offer a panoramic perspective. It's cold today, but to a Manitoban, barely worth a mention. The Texans in the party disagree, and mention it quite a bit. We bump along roads constructed for military training drills in the 1950s. While the buggies can achieve a top speed of 40 km per hour, the average is four km/h. Our first glimpse of an *Ursus maritimus* is of one curious about another buggy. Though only a few buggies are allowed in the wildlife management area at a time, there's a code among drivers from the competing tour companies. Marc Hebert, our driver, asks for our trust in him to find our own bears to observe. It's not hard to listen to Marc, who looks like he's just arrived from central casting, with a French-Canadian charm that could melt the ice on Hudson Bay in January (not that we want that to happen). We'll never chase a bear, or disturb them. And feeding or baiting is illegal. I think about this a bit later, as soup is poured from Thermoses and sandwiches are unwrapped. Bears have an acute sense of smell, able to sniff out seals under metres of ice. Driving a food-laden buggy out into the polar-bear-dense tundra seems a little like leaving a picnic basket out for Yogi and Boo-Boo at Jellystone Park.

Our guide Derek Kyostia certainly seems as hungry as a polar bear in October. For knowledge, that is. He's not only an expert on polar bears but also a guide for grizzly-spotting in coastal British Columbia and penguin-gawking in Antarctica. He says approximately 25,000 to 40,000 polar bears currently exist across five countries. In 1987, the Western Hudson Bay bear population was estimated to be around 1,200; today, the estimate is 935.

For the most-studied bear population in the world, many questions remain, says Kyostia, adding that polar bears are a flagship species. In particular, because the Churchill population is at the southern extreme of the bears' range, the effects of climate change turn up here first. In 2009, for example, the season was marked by a late breakup of ice on Hudson Bay, so bears had more time to hunt and fatten up to

presents an immediate threat, it is immobilized with a dart gun.

Bears that persistently get too close to town wind up in Churchill's polar bear jail, a former military warehouse that can house up to 30 animals. In the early days the bears were fed – until it was determined they were returning to the jail for the guaranteed meal. The feeding wasn't necessary anyway; on the outside, the bears are in the midst of their traditional summer and early-fall fasting periods. When Hudson Bay freezes, the captive bears are returned to the tundra by helicopter. Potential in-town food sources aside, the area is actually a pre-feeding gathering place, hence Churchill's standing as the Polar Bear Capital of the World. Bears wait until the ice builds first along the coast near Churchill, then they move out to feed on the ring seal, a polar bear delicacy.

survive my first nighttime walk through town, but not without hearing about the only two people reportedly killed by polar bears in Churchill. In 1968, teenagers tracked a bear through fresh paw prints in the snow and threw rocks at it. The bear attacked and killed one of them. In 1983, a man discovered meat in the freezer of the burned-out remains of the Churchill Hotel and decided to carry it

GUIDE WITH A GUN (l-r) Dr. Paul Watts on the Hudson Bay shoreline; a polar bear crosses the tundra; another one greets tourists in a tundra buggy, which moves at an average of four km/h with a top speed of 40 km/h; red currants pop out against the boreal forest backdrop.

time from the traditional Atlantic crossings. The governments of Manitoba and Canada, along with private sector investors, have committed millions to upgrade the rail lines to Churchill as well as the port itself.

Now, cue the bears. Churchill was formerly home to a United States military base, established in 1942 near the present-day airport. The base was used for cold weather exercises, training soldiers and testing equipment in harsh conditions. For years, polar bears would feed at the base's dump ground. In the late '70s, the base closed and the bears came nearer to town. A Polar Bear Alert program was devised with a goal to minimize the chance of human/bear encounters, and it continues today. Operated by Manitoba Conservation, the Polar Bear Alert team's first response is to try to move a bear out of the area by scaring it away. If the bear cannot be encouraged to move or isn't present when the team arrives, a live trap is set. If a bear

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prepare for their time on shore. However, the fall freeze up came two weeks longer than expected. Climate models predict a decline in ice cover on Hudson Bay over the next 20 years. And without ice to hunt on, bears are spending more time on shore without a ready source of food.

As we talk, we spot a bear – and he spots us. He circles the buggy, rises up on his hind legs, leans his massive front paws onto the side of the vehicle and peers inside. I'm almost eye-to-eye with a 405-kilogram polar bear – and I'm thrilled. I feel a bit like Little Red Riding Hood meeting the wolf. "My, what big paws you have . . ."

When the buzz of the encounter wears off, I realize my initial fear has been overtaken by a stronger one for the future of

the bears, and with it a new sense of responsibility. The safe distance I wanted to maintain was also a safe mental distance from my part in their future. For me now, though, Churchill's bears are no longer an abstraction. Rather, as Kyostia points out, they're unwitting motivators.

"Modern life is filled with so many distractions, all within arm's reach," he says. "Here, people can escape that. They can see one of the most amazing creatures up close, and be moved to make a difference at home." □

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the bears cometh

WHEN DEBBY (shown above) passed away on November 17, 2008, her death left a void in many Winnipeggers' hearts, and an empty enclosure at the Assiniboine Park Zoo. Debby's life was remarkable. She was orphaned in Russia, and arrived in Winnipeg in 1967. She and her mate, Skipper, were the parents of six cubs. Skipper passed away in 1999, while Debby lived to age 42 – notable as polar bears in the wild only live 10 to 20 years. During her lifetime, she became a star at the zoo, with millions of visitors coming to see her.

The zoo was unable to acquire another polar bear because the enclosure no longer met

provincial standards. That's about to change with the zoo's \$90-million reconstruction, the first phase of which is the International Polar Bear Conservation Centre. When complete (date to be determined at press time), the former bear exhibit will have been transformed into a transition centre for orphaned, injured or problem bears, or those affected by a catastrophic event such as an oil spill. The conservancy also plans to construct a new arctic exhibit in 2012, including three polar bear enclosures with room for up to six animals, complete with hills, swimming pools and an underwater viewing area for visitors. □ –C.G.

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