

White creatures of the North

BY KATHY RODEGHIER

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CHURCHILL, Manitoba — The kayaks glide down the river, barely breaking the mirrored surface. No sound travels through the still air. Then suddenly to our right comes a burp, then on our left a gurgle and just ahead a splash.

The belugas have found us and want to play.

The whales surface and dive all around us, their white bodies gleaming in the brown river like scoops of vanilla ice cream in a root beer float. Some swim just inches from our paddles. One bold fellow torpedoed straight toward me, surfaces and sprays from his blowhole before diving under my kayak and swimming away. I am covered with beluga spit — and I swear I hear him laughing at me.

Beluga whales no longer are hunted in the Churchill River in northern Manitoba and have no fear of humans. In fact, they're downright curious about people and eager to play.

Some 57,000 of the snowy mammals — “beluga” means “white” in Russian — inhabit Hudson Bay. From mid-July to mid-August, about the time their calves are born, 3,000 to 6,000 of them move into the mouth of the Churchill River. Why, no one knows for sure. Some theorize the warmer waters of the river (about 59 degrees in summer) aid the development of blubber in the calves. Others say the river offers better protection from predators. (In winter they camouflage themselves around icebergs.)

Whatever the reason, their presence is a boon for visitors who come to this part of Canada to see them from boats, helicopters and kayaks and swim with them on snorkel outings aboard Zodiac rafts.

Smiling and singing

Snorkeling provides an intimate view of the belugas as they swim near enough to get a good look at us odd-looking creatures in wet suits and masks. They rarely come close enough to touch and are never threatening, just inquisitive. In water with 30-foot visibility, as many as 20 belugas at a time might pass in a snorkeler's field of vision. Layer upon layer of white shadows streak below: dignified males 20 feet long and mammas nursing calves just two weeks old.

Born gray, baby belugas measure about 5 feet and weigh from 77 to 187 pounds. By the time they reach their adult weight, up to 3,300 pounds, they've turned snow white.

Being under water gives snorkelers a better chance to see their faces. Because a beluga can move its head from side to side — only it and the narwhal have this ability — it will swim next to a snorkeler, cock its head and smile.

Actually, their smiles are pretty much permanent, a wide fixed grin on a large, bulbous head naturalists call a “melon.” With a brain bigger than a human's, they memorize feeding spots and migration routes using the most advanced form of eco-location of any whale. Behind their smiles lie huge jawbones from which they pick up sound waves. They turn their heads, send out a chipping sound and pick up the echo as they make their way under ice and around rocks. They also use sound to search for food, locating schools of capelin, a smelt fish abundant in the river.

Snorkelers can hear the belugas quite clearly under water. These “canaries of the sea” chip, burp and twitter. Send out a song through a snorkel and they might sing back in reply.

“They're graceful, intelligent animals,” says Mike Macri, owner of Sea North Tours, “and they are watching us as much as we are watching them.”

On excursion boats equipped with underwater microphones, passengers can hear the singing of the whales as they swim along side. Macri says some belugas become so curious about the hydrophone they pop it into their mouths.

“I couldn’t believe how many there were,” says Mary Jean Brandt of Skokie, who took Macri’s tour during an Elderhostel trip last August. “They swam so close to the boat. They were so playful. You felt you could almost touch them.”

Other white creatures

On helicopter tours, pods of belugas seem to bloom from the murky river as passengers look down on them surfacing in unison.

But most people on helicopters are on the lookout for the region’s other big white animal: the polar bear.

Churchill is where the Arctic begins in Manitoba. When the ice on Hudson Bay melts in July the bears come ashore, spreading out on the tundra to wait out the summer. They might be spotted from helicopters as they snooze in the brush or by boat while walking or swimming along the shore.

They eat small game, such as Churchill’s other white creatures, the snow goose and the Arctic fox, but these won’t sustain a bear for long. By mid-October they’re hungry and begin to assemble along the shore waiting for the bay to freeze up around mid-November. When it does, they set off to hunt their favorite prey, the ringed seal.

For that one-month period, Churchill becomes Polar Bear Central and its population of 1,000 residents doubles with tourists on tundra buggy tours. The big-wheeled vehicles travel over the snow and ice on bear-spotting excursions. Like the belugas, bears are curious and often come right up to the buggies, stand on their hind legs and peer inside.

Unlike the belugas, polar bears have no predators and are fearless and extremely dangerous. North America’s largest land carnivore can weigh up to 1,320 pounds, pick up a scent 20 miles away and outrun a human.

Robert Rockwell, research scientist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, has spent 38 years studying polar bears in the Churchill area and estimates as many as 2,500 inhabit the region. “Polar bears are large eating machines” with no satiation point, says “Rocky,” as the locals call him. Every precaution should be taken to avoid them, but when you encounter one “you *don’t* turn your back, you *don’t* make eye contact, you *do* scream,” he says.

During polar bear season, Churchill residents leave buildings and vehicles unlocked so anyone can quickly take refuge should a bear approach, and they never step outside their homes without first peering out the door and looking in all directions.

In spite of the danger, no one has been killed by a bear in Churchill since 1983, says Paul Ratson, owner of Nature 1st Tours in Churchill. Warning signs are posted where bears have been spotted and armed patrols shoo them away from town. First they try frightening them by firing “cracker” shells that sound like firecrackers. If that doesn’t work, they shoot them with tranquilizers or trap them alive in cages built from metal culverts. They’re hauled off to the polar bear jail and eventually helicoptered 30 miles away.

“It is politically unacceptable to kill polar bears in this province,” Ratson says. The Canadian government puts a nationwide quota on the number of bears that can be killed each season. Because native hunters in Nunavut, the province to the north, are permitted to hunt bears for their livelihood, a bear killed in Churchill means one less bear for the Inuit — a political no-no.

Still, bear monitors — riflemen trained in marksmanship and animal behavior — carry live ammunition as a last resort. Monitors accompany all tour groups.

While dangerous, the bears cause more trouble by being a nuisance, Ratson says. They’ll eat just about anything and seem especially fond of petroleum products, probably because they crave seal oil. They’ll eat the seats off a snowmobile, lick the axle grease off a truck and go in a cabin, drag a couch outside and tear it apart. “I leave my truck door open at night because I’d rather a bear go in there and clean it out than smash it up trying to get in,” he says.

Ratson and his family live outside the town limits. In summer, he says, “we sit in our house and watch whales in the bay and bears walking on the rocks.”

The tundra pirouette

Ratson occasionally spots bears on the tundra hikes he leads, which explains why he carries a rifle and instructs hikers to be vigilant. Every few minutes he tells them to do the tundra pirouette: turn 360 degrees and look for anything white. "If it's moving, it's not a rock," he says.

The rocks are worth noting, actually. Ice, wind and waves carve the Churchill quartzite, granite and wacky rock along Hudson Bay into amazing shapes. Because the difference between high and low tides can be 16 feet, the shoreline constantly changes, uncovering fossils in the tidal flats. The largest trilobite ever found, measuring an arm's length, came from this area.

The shoreline also moves through isostatic rebound. During the ice age, three massive ice sheets crept across Manitoba, their weight pushing down the earth. Gradually the land is rising again, at a rate of up to 33 inches a century.

Churchill lies above the timberline among ponds and marshes on permafrost. Even at the height of summer, the ground remains frozen about 10 inches below the surface. Green, black and red lichen grow on the rocks. Wildflowers, willows and berry bushes sprout from the thin soil. A few scrawny pines fight the elements, their trunks bare on the north side from the fierce winter winds blowing off the bay. The growing season is so short, it takes a tree 50 years to reach an inch in diameter at its base.

Global warming comes up often in conversations in Churchill. Diaries of 17th-century explorers indicate ice formed on the bay at the end of September, not mid-November as it does now.

Parks Canada takes the position that higher temperatures cause the ice to break up three weeks earlier in spring than it did in 1971, giving bears less time on the ice to hunt seals. Some locals, including tundra buggy operators, say the bears are fat and happy. The ice isn't breaking up earlier in the spring, they say, it's just breaking up farther away.

"The truth is probably somewhere between," Ratson says. "If global warming is happening here, it's inconsistent."

Life up north

Living in Churchill takes some resolve and ingenuity. Just getting there can be a challenge since it is accessible only by air or rail. The permafrost makes roads too difficult to maintain and even poses problems for the railway. The train from Winnipeg arrived 12 hours late one day last August because the rails had warped.

Residents drive trucks, motorcycles and ATVs on the streets in the area, but maintaining them can be a problem. Ratson says he received a recall notice on his truck. He called Ford and was told to take it to the nearest dealer. When he convinced Ford the nearest dealer was hundreds of miles away and there were no roads to get there, the company shipped him the necessary parts.

Everyday items, such as clothing, are purchased through mail order, but shipping large goods can be expensive. A dining room set, for example, might double in price. Some residents make their own furniture and supplement costly groceries with local berries and game hunted in season.

Churchill has no traffic lights or cell-phone service, but computers and the Internet keep it linked to the outside world. Once it was on the cutting edge of high technology.

Starting in the 1950s, rockets launched just outside town carried experiments into the upper atmosphere. The Canadian Space Agency operated launches here for NASA and a private aerospace company conducted experiments until 1998. Now all that remains are the operations center, which houses the Northern Study Centre, an educational institute, and two white domes containing 16-foot dish antennas. Locals call them the Twin Golf Balls.

Most Churchill residents work at the Port of Churchill, Canada's only Arctic seaport, and in tourism. During the winter and spring off-season they follow other pursuits.

Wally Daudrich came from Winnipeg to work as a tundra buggy driver and in the off season built Lazy Bear Lodge. He and his wife, Dawn, did much of the construction themselves, expanding every year while raising their four children. The family spends the winter in Tempe, Ariz., where

Wally is finishing up studies in theology at a Baptist college.

Their oldest, a 9-year-old daughter, attends a local school when they are in Arizona. Last winter, she and her classmates were told to compose a story about their most dangerous experiences. She wrote about seeing a polar bear in her backyard. The teacher told Wally his daughter had an active imagination.

Not really, he said, she's just telling it like it is in Churchill.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Travel Manitoba. krodeghier@dailyherald.com*

If you go

Destination: Churchill, Manitoba

Go: To get to know the wildlife and people on the edge of the Arctic

No: If you prefer night life to wildlife and big cities to Arctic outposts

Need to know: Travel Manitoba, (800) 665-0040, www.travelmanitoba.com; Churchill Chamber of Commerce, www.churchillmb.net/~cccomm

Getting there: Churchill is accessible from Winnipeg by air (Calm Air, (888) 225-6247, www.calmair.com) or rail (Via Rail Canada, (888) 842-7245, www.viarail.ca)

When to go: Beluga season is mid-July to mid-August. Polar bear season is mid-October to mid-November. May, June and September are good for bird watching and the northern lights are best seen January through March. Average high temperature is 63 degrees in July, -9 degrees in January.

Where to stay: You won't find luxury resorts or franchise hotels. Most lodgings are in small, family-run hotels. Book up to a year in advance for polar bear season.

Seaport Hotel, (204) 675-8807, www.seaporthotel.ca, 21 rooms with in-room microwave and mini-frig.

Lazy Bear Lodge, (204) 675-2969, www.lazybearlodge.com, built with hand-crafted logs.

Where to eat:

Gypsy's Bakery and Deli, a local hangout serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, is known for its tempting baked goods.

The Lazy Bear Cafe specializes in northern cuisine, serving musk ox rouladen, caribou pepper steak and Arctic char.

Helen Webber, a locally known cookbook author whose family operates hunting lodges in northern Manitoba, serves Pioneer Dinners in her home in Churchill to groups of six to 14 by appointment ((888) 932-2377). A typical menu might include appetizers of vermouth goose and Arctic char, progress to caribou tenderloin and end with a wild blueberry tart or cake made from tundra cranberries.

Tours:

Sea North Tours, (204) 675-2195, www.seanorthtours.com, snorkeling and kayaking excursions as well as beluga-watching tours on a hydrophone-equipped boat with a stop at Prince of Wales Fort.

Nature 1st Tours, (204) 675-2147, www.nature1sttours.ca, nature tours, including a Roads & Trails Tour combining a driving tour with a walk on the tundra.

Kayak Churchill, (204) 675-2638 or (204) 675-2969, www.kayakchurchill.com, sightseeing tours on the Churchill River by kayak for up to five people.

Hudson Bay Helicopters, (867) 873-5146, www.hudsonbayheli.com, wildlife spotting tours of from 30 to 60 minutes.

Attractions:

Eskimo Museum, founded by Catholic missionaries in 1944, has 800 pieces of Inuit art, one of the largest collections in Canada. A good selection of books, art and souvenirs is sold in the gift shop.

Prince of Wales Fort National Historic Site encompasses the huge stone fortress built by the Hudson's Bay Co. in the 1700s.

— Kathy Rodeghier