

Bears, Birds and Belugas, Manitoba and the U.S.

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July 2011, a journey of mammoth proportions - just the first leg, after a trans-Atlantic flight of 11 hours, was an epic 3200 km drive north (including the planned detours) to the end of roads in northern Manitoba. From there on, nothing but boreal forests, Arctic tundra and a slow trundling train, the only land link to my primary destination - the remote outpost of Churchill on Hudson Bay. A bleak landscape of awe and beauty, where the sea remains frozen into mid-summer, this was the realm of the Ice Bear. After success in Manitoba, leg two would take me far to west of North America, Grizzly country in Wyoming and thereafter Colorado.

And so to the goals of my trip - an ambitious attempt to see not only Polar Bear, the number one goal, but also the other two bear species in North America - Black Bear and Grizzly Bear.

The basic plan of action: 1. Polar Bear. Destination - Churchill, northern Manitoba. Though famed for its Polar Bears, summer sightings are relatively rare and far from guaranteed. A trip in late October-November, when the bears congregate to await the return of sea ice, offers potential to see many of the animals from the comfort of tundra buggies, specially adapted vehicles for bear watching that travel out to Cape Churchill. In summer however, there are no tundra buggies and, as the ice breaks up on Hudson Bay in June, the bears disperse along the coast and onto the tundra - the only chances to see the animals are if any choose to linger at the accessible Cape Merry or along the nearby coast. Late June to early July is probably the best period in this summer window, but prior to my trip, I considered the odds of seeing the bears as low, perhaps just 20%. Summer in Churchill does however offer attractions that autumn can not - hundreds of white Beluga Whales that mass in the shallow rivermouth, plus some of the best summer birding in North America, a tundra full of displaying waders and Arctic birds. So Polar Bears in summer, it's a gamble - strike it lucky and you get bears, birds and belugas; if misfortune falls your way, and there is a very good chance it will, then you miss Polar Bear, a cake without the icing, a tragedy if having travelled so far. 2. Black Bear. Destination - Riding Mountain National Park, southern Manitoba. The easiest of the the North American bears to see - my plan was to spend some days in Riding Mountain on route north, then do the same on the way back if still unsuccessful. With some luck, Black Bears can also be encountered on route through the boreal forests. 3. Grizzly Bear. Destination - Yellowstone, Wyoming. Grizzly Bear does not occur in Manitoba, so any chance for this species requires a trip of many kilometres to the west, either the Canadian Rockies or Yellowstone National Park in the United States. As Yellowstone is another destination I have long desired to visit, and one of the premier mammal-watching localities in North America, I opted for this, a trip that added a minimum of another 1250 km each way before any excursions. Seeing Grizzly Bear in Yellowstone is reasonably assured if a few days are dedicated to the search, plus more chances of Black Bear, a possibility of Wolf and, of course, heaps of American Bison et al. Just to add flavour to proceedings, incidents with bears occurred at both Yellowstone and Churchill in the week preceding my trip - a Grizzly killing a hiker and mauling his wife at Yellowstone and a Polar Bear unfortunately shot to prevent a certain human fatality after going on the rampage in the centre of Churchill town, the bear having ventured in from the beach. Elsewhere in Canada, a woman was also killed by a Black Bear during the same week, a rare incident for this more docile species of bear. It goes without saying that respect of bears is required in their presence. That said, as per usual, the underlying principle of this trip is to travel independently, not utilise guides and to do as much as possible on foot - and bicycle in the case of the Polar Bears. For ease of reading, this report is divided into the following parts: a. Part One. The first half of the trip, covering all the Canadian sites, from the boreal forests in Riding Mountain National Park up through the Thompson area to the arctic tundra at Churchill, thereafter returning south to Riding Mountain again and finally to the wetlands and prairie grasslands in the extreme south-east of Manitoba. Click [HERE](#) to read. b. Part Two. Wyoming and Colorado. A journey focussing on the mammal-rich national parks of Yellowstone and Grand Teton, before then continuing southward to sample the best of the wildlife in the canyons and prairies of southern Wyoming and Colorado. Click [HERE](#) to read. Thereafter, a checklist of species, birds and mammals.