

Part One. Manitoba, Canada.

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Last Updated Monday, 22 August 2011

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.

LOG & DAILY ACCOUNT 7 July. Chicago to Canada. From Lithuania via Helsinki, a flight of umpteen hours finally dumped we two intrepid travellers in Chicago at 4.30 p.m., local time (our heads said half past midnight, East European time). On the grass outside the terminal, two American Robins hopped about, the birding had begun. Ahead, 1600 km to Riding Mountain National Park, our first planned destination. Picked up a rental car, hit the freeway and headed north, the basic idea being to drive non-stop overnight, arriving in some sort of fit state to begin birding in Canada early next morning. Common Grackles and Mourning Doves roadside, a Green Heron flapping across the road somewhere near Rockford, then three Chimney Swifts hurtling low over a pool at a fuel stop somewhere further north, Killdeers and Brown-headed Cowbirds adding to the mix. A long night followed, semi jetlag, semi remembering it was many hours since my head had seen a pillow, lucky U.S. cars all have cruise control! 8 July. Delta Beach, Lake Winnipeg & Riding Mountain National Park. Plans to arrive at Riding Mountain by 9 a.m. took a slight dent due to the enforced need for a couple of hours of snooze somewhere in Minnesota. As it was, delayed a little further by a coffee and muffin stop in North Dakota, we crossed the U.S./Canada border to a fine sunrise, blue skies all around promising good things ahead. Roadside birding was entertaining, buzzing colonies of Cliff Swallows under road bridges, Red-winged Blackbirds by the bucketload, an exquisite pair of Upland Sandpipers surveying their territory from a conveniently-placed traffic sign. With little hope of getting to Riding Mountain before about 11 a.m., a jiggle of plans saw us re-routing - the new idea being to visit the wetlands at Delta Beach on Lake Manitoba, about an hour north of our location and midway to Riding Mountain. A most splendid locality to start the ball rolling - a mosaic of marshlands, floodplain, assorted bushland and forest, along with agricultural areas and grassland. With houses underwater and much of the lakeside inaccessible due to unprecedented flooding across southern Manitoba, I was pretty pleased we had not come a week or so earlier! Stopping at a random patch dominated by sedge and semi-dry bushland, Upland Sandpipers again appeared on the scene, alarming and most agitated, a nest clearly somewhere adjacent. Gave them a little space, then settled to enjoy the spoils - Bobolinks in all their glory in display flight, Common Yellowthroats peeping out of the undergrowth, Eastern Wood Pewees and Eastern Kingbirds on prominent snags and roadside wires. American Robins and Red-winged Blackbirds absolutely everywhere, the musical gurgling of the latter a near constant backdrop to the day. On the marshes, vastly expanded by floodwater, plenty more - a young Bald Eagle sat atop a semi-submerged haystack, Blue-winged Teals and Redheads paddling along, plus Pied-billed Grebe, a Virginia Rail creeping along an edge and, joining the oodles of Red-winged Blackbirds, the rather more localised Yellow-headed Blackbird. Black Terns in droves, Tree Swallows hawking the waters, three Turkey Vultures overhead, not at all bad for a short unplanned detour! By chance, I then passed a landfill site, aka the local rubbish tip. It was truly a pong to savour - after a quick chat to the friendly guy on the gate, I then proceeded to drive right into its stinking heart, a nice churn of rotting debris and household waste. And much to the disgust of my travel companion, there we stopped - I enjoying the hundreds of Franklin's Gulls at close quarters, my friend feeling sick and wanting to retch! Twenty minutes of scanning, Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls also common, plus a few Brown-headed Cowbirds and a nesting pair of Northern Rough-winged Swallows, then I conceded we could continue, the fresh air of Riding Mountain only an hour or so to our west. My friend looked ill! 1600 km completed, journey over. Three thousand square kilometres of boreal forest, lakes and excellent birding, we'd arrived at Riding Mountain National Park. Now mid-afternoon, we wasted no time and set off for a slow drive round to Lake Audy, one of the more remote campsites, hopefully in prime bear territory. Six Cedar Waxwings in tree tops, a Broad-winged Hawk and Northern Harrier on the afternoon thermals, one Belted Kingfisher on beaver dam, all nice stuff. But then as we rounded a corner, a big black lump in the trackside grass - stone me, a Black Bear munching on weeds! Less than an hour in the national park and already we had found a bear, I was impressed! A fairly small individual, I presumed him to be just a year old, so with one eye out for mama, I jumped out of the car to crouch and take a few photographs. One inquisitive bear, he took a little stroll towards me, then skittled back before another cautious approach. My final photograph is just nose and eyes, he edged right up to me, the little beast coming too close for my camera lens, then stopping just a metre distant, me still crouching, truly eye to eye, magical. Car door was open for a hasty jump to safety if need be, but this bear gave no bad vibes, so I purely enjoyed the moment. Then he decided enough was enough, chickened out of our encounter and ran off back to the grass. No sign of mama bear anywhere, but less than 500 metres along, we found another Black Bear, a bear of identical size, perhaps a sibling of the first. Remarkable, two bears in no time at all, this certainly exceeded my expectations. Common Loons in moanful voice, a few White-tailed Deer, we got to our campsite without further adventure, chucked up the tent to chattering of an American Red Squirrel, then thought it wise to do an evening drive. Not entirely wise, it was now 8 p.m. local time (4 a.m. Eastern Europe time), I'd had just two hours sleep in the preceding 46 hours and all too soon it was going to catch up with me with a vengeance. Got about 15 km, saw some Grey Catbirds, a displaying Wilson's Snipe and assorted others, then in a blink suddenly began hyper sleepy. The drive back was a 15 km battle to stay awake, twice going off the road, umpteen times dozing off, I crawled along at just a few kilometres an hour, a most interesting drive! Don't remember any birds, I don't think I was actually awake for any of it in reality. Back at the tent, a good night's sleep was guaranteed! 9 July. Riding Mountain National Park. Up at dawn, mist rising over the adjacent lake, Common Loons wailing a chorus, me eager to get to grips with the local dendroica and buddies. I did not have long to wait - beginning a slow trundle back along the Lake Audy road, surprising a massive bull Moose, then a sleepy Osprey, all too soon we were amongst the first warblers of the day - hyper-gaudy Blackburnian Warblers, quaint

Yellow-rumped Warblers, stunning Chestnut-sided Warblers, plus the uncharacteristically unflamboyant Tennessee Warbler, surely a cinderella amongst the group. Onward, soon the day's bird list was soaring - Red-eyed Vireos, plentiful American Redstarts, Chipping Sparrows in every other bush, a rather drab Clay-coloured Sparrow, plus Rose-breasted Grosbeak and brief glimpses of two Evening Grosbeaks, one of the bird targets of the trip. Both unfortunately were mere flashes, vivid golds and blacks plunging into dense spruce, never to return. Hopefully more to follow, I thought. A few kilometres further, past countless beaver dams and lodges, we paused at a vast swamp - Red-winged Blackbirds again much in evidence, plus a Northern Waterthrush, three Grey Jays, the first Yellow-bellied Sapsucker of the day and, making sorties after flying insects, a whole bunch of Cedar Waxwings. It was now 9.00 a.m., time for morning coffee. With a camp stove in my luggage, off to Lake Katherine we went - excellent birding, a most picturesque setting, a perfect location for breakfast. As water bubbled and coffee brewed, off I wandered, all too soon getting waylaid by yet more warblers, a buzzing flock roving through mature pine and spruce. American Redstarts, Blackburnian and Chestnut-sided Warblers again, but also a couple of quality additions - a fabulous Ovenbird on the moss-laden logs and rocks of the forest floor, plus a Black-throated Green Warbler in low shrubbery just above. Also another Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, this one working a sap patch, plus a pair of White-throated Sparrows feeding young, more Cedar Waxwings and a Swainson's Thrush. Coffee overlooking the lake, Common Loons and Goldeneye for company. For much of the middle of the day, round the east of the park we trundled, stopping in at Whirlpool Lake and Gorge Creek, before backtracking to the rather well-populated visitor centre area. Heaps of butterflies during the day, from Canadian Tiger Swallowtails and Mourning Cloak through to American White Admiral and various skippers and sulphurs, plus a few birding highlights - Boreal Chickadee at the visitor centre, Canada Warblers and a singing Ovenbird at Gorge Creek and a Ruffed Grouse on the road nearby, the latter of which really did become ruffled and attacked me when I attempted to take a few photographs! Top highlight however was a roadside treat - two stunning Evening Grosbeaks, males in all their glory, down on the track taking gravel, very nice indeed. And then it was evening, a hike to the north of Lake Audy seemed in order, Black Bears had been seen in the area in the days preceding. Battling an onslaught of mosquitos, through the forest we walked, a half dozen kilometres through old spruce, occasional meadow and burnt clearfells. Plenty of birds, Merlin and Cooper's Hawk in trees glaring down, a splendid Black-backed Woodpecker in a dead spruce, plus another Ruffed Grouse, but all eyes were for a certain large mammal! What we did see on the mammal front however was not quite so big, but certainly much rarer - a large dark mustelid darting across the track, it was a Fisher, my second in Canada and equally brief as the first, merely sprinting off into cover without a second look! Arrived back at the car, quite ready for a relaxing sundown at the campsite. I however, had good feeling about a second trail that spun off from the one we had just walked. 'Won't be long', said I, strolling off to explore. Less than a kilometre along, a rustle in a dense thicket, something hefty shuffling along. It just had to be a Black Bear, I thought. And then, 'ffffweerrrr', a snorting blow from the bush, yep, I'd heard that noise a couple of years back in California, the owner was most certainly a bear! I stood and stared, not quite daft enough to clamber in. All went silent, no shuffles, no snorts, I edged a little closer, this bear had to be literally 30 metres in front of me, but I could see absolutely nothing. A ten-minute stand-off, then a gentle brushing of vegetation, he was moving out. For a while, I thought he had gone out of the back, but then as I walked a little to the left, I finally spotted him, a medium-sized bear, now sitting in a patch of meadow, mouth full of grass! Just me and him, a perfect end to the day. Except it wasn't the end, back at the car I proudly showed off my latest photograph, then we began the drive back. A few moments more, a sudden yelp from my friend, yo another Black Bear!!! Zigzagging across a meadow, a very large brute of an animal, the sun setting beyond, now truly a perfect end to the day. Well almost, two Eastern Phobes by the tent! 10 July. Northbound, Riding Mountain to Thompson. The beginning of the grand drive north to meet the Churchill train at Gilam, today's haul covering about 750 km from Riding Mountain to Pisew Falls, just south of Thompson, boreal forest all the way. A lot of kilometres covered, but excellent birding en route, many stops and continuing glorious weather to top the lot. The day almost started with tragedy however, barely off the Lake Audy road, just beginning northbound on Highway 10, a Black Bear came scooting across the road. Drastic swerving in order, fortunately the bear eased up too - beast and machine ended up no more than a metre apart! I would truly have been upset had we hit that fine animal. As it was, Black Bear number 5 ambled off into the bushes, I swear casting an accusing glare my way! After coffee on the banks of the serene Bead Lake, Common Loons again the backdrop, a quick stroll along the Boreal Island trail notched up some fine after-brekkie servings - Cedar Waxwings around the parking lot, then after an initial very quiet spell, a buzzing flock of mixed passerines in the spruce and pine. Much effort to get on them at times, but pishing worked a treat - out popped not only the very responsive American Redstarts, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Chestnut-sided Warblers, but also my first Blue-headed Vireos of the trip and three very nice Mourning Warblers. Back at the car, one Evening Grosbeak flew over and a Spruce Grouse strolled along the gravel edge, ducking back into the deep dark depths of a spruce grove on my approach. And then it was north, north, north! As kilometres flew by, forests and tundra bogs hugging the road, so too did the bird tally rise - Solitary Sandpiper and Broad-winged Hawk on Duck Mountain, increasing numbers of Lesser Yellowlegs, Ospreys nesting roadside, a Sharp-tailed Grouse unfortunately dead on the road. Stops in The Pas area proved most productive with five White Pelicans and rafts of Canvasback and Ring-necked Duck on Grace Lake and Magnolia Warbler and Rusty Blackbird amongst the spoils at Clearwater Lake. As dusk approached, and the second Coyote of the day crossed the road, we turned off the road and made camp, Pisew Falls were just a few kilometres to our north. 11 July. Northbound, Thompson to Gilam. The train to Churchill actually departs from Winnipeg, but travelling at an incredibly slow 10-20 km/hr at times, the ride is a mind-numbingly excruciating 50 hours each way, not including the delays that are usual. It also stops at Thompson, but my rationale was to take the road as far as possible, faster, infinitely more interesting and gives the possibility to stop as the birding demands. And so it was, another dawn in the boreal forest, a rather murky start to the day this time, but spirits hardly dampened - flocks of White-winged Crossbills chirping a 'good morning' in adjacent spruce, roadside passerines including Red-breasted Nuthatch and Brown Creeper. Breakfast at Paint Lake, now already hot and sunny, the birding not bad either - the first

Bonaparte's Gulls of the trip, a couple of pairs nesting high in a spruce tree, plus a mixed bag, including both Bay-breasted and Magnolia Warblers, a Philadelphia Warbler and other odds and ends. And with that, we resumed our northward voyage. From Thompson north, the road deteriorates, a rutted gravel affair with a few nasty dips just when you were not expecting them. Travelled up rather slowly, not so much for the condition of the road, but for birds - flock after flock of White-winged Crossbills, Pine Grosbeaks on two occasions, Ospreys on nests, Bald Eagles, the list went on. Nearing Gilam, completing the 'bombycilla double', two Bohemian Waxwings appeared in a stunted spruce, a vast mere just behind. Northern Flickers too, a number of Rusty Blackbirds and my first Blackpoll of the day. As evening drew in, so we arrived at Gilam. At a few minutes before midnight, way behind schedule, so too did the Churchill train. All aboard, about six people clambered onto the train. Out from the station we creaked, the train a slow rumbling mass heading into the night. Next stop, Polar Bear Alley. 12 July. Arrival in Churchill. And boy, is that train slow! Dawn came and went, endless tundra rolling by, the last vestiges of boreal forest petering out, trees becoming ever smaller and stunted in growth. On pools lined by cotton grass, first waders cavorting, a Red-necked Phalarope, a flock of Semi-palmated Sandpipers. Parasitic Jaegers drifting over tundra tussock, Sandhill Cranes rising into the early morning skies. Grey Jays, two Golden Eagles, a Sharp-tailed Grouse on a zone of grass, onward the train rumbled. And then finally, 12 hours after boarding, a towering concrete monolith appeared on the horizon, the Churchill granary. I could not help but feel a little excited, a place I'd dreamt about since childhood was now mere minutes ahead. And in we trundled, the Churchill River to our left, a dotting of Snow Geese just visible, the small settlement of Churchill to our right, Hudson Bay lying beyond. Disembarked and strolled through town, a ten-minute walk from end to end, it already felt familiar - the Tundra Inn, Gypsy Bakery, Lazy Bear Lodge, names I'd known for years and years. What I had not expected was the glorious weather - instead of the more typical 12 C, the town was basking in a staggering 28 C, the hottest day of the year in Churchill! Enough of all the sentimentality, I dumped my bags in the little B & B that I'd selected, grabbed the bicycle that I'd arranged and set off. High levels of anticipation, a certain degree of trepidation - was I really wise to be seeking Polar Bear on bike and foot? My friend perhaps wisely opted for an easy start to Churchill, staying in town. I however started with a sedate pedal out to the rocky peninsula of Cape Merry, here the broad Churchill River enters Hudson Bay, the historic Prince of Wales fort sits on a headland opposite, the boulders of Eskimo Point just beyond. Warning signs bar the way "Polar Bear Alert, Do Not Walk in this Area" In reality, a Polar Bear could just about lurk anywhere, I ignored the sign. The waters were a feast for the eyes - both river and sea, picture perfect, sparkling blue and as calm as a millpond. And there, in pods of ten, twenty, perhaps a hundred, Beluga Whales the length of the river and extending out to sea. Gently breaking the surface, the gleaming whites of the adults, the greys of the young. Off Cape Merry itself, attracted by kaplin shoals, yet more Belugas, many dozens feeding in a concentrated circle. Arctic Terns abundant, Parasitic Jaegers harrying, two Long-tailed Jaegers too. Gingerly, I took my first steps on the rocks, the search for Polar Bears started! A few Common Eider on the water, Harbour Seals bobbing up, I walked the whole of Cape Merry, then settled to scan the rocks of Eskimo Point. No Polar Bear, but it looked just perfect, jutting out to sea and catching a cool breeze, just where I would be if I were a bear! I deemed to return to this point again. Next, I had a quick look at the famous Granary Pools - a collection of shallow pools next to the massive granary that I'd seen from the train. Alive with birds - ducks including Greater Scaup and American Wigeon, but better still a whole bunch of waders. All dressed in their summer best, Short-tailed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers, Hudsonian Godwits and Lesser Yellowlegs the bulk, but also quaint Red-necked Phalaropes, Semi-palmated Plovers and Semi-palmated Sandpiper. From there, I then cycled back to town, passing the beach where the unfortunate Polar Bear incident had occurred the previous Monday. A quick top-up with tea, then out again. To the west, along Hudson Bay, about 20 km of gravel tracks meander along the coast, a couple more tracks also run inland. Feeling a tad vulnerable, I cycled about 10 km of this in the late afternoon, stopping at regular intervals and clambering down onto rock outcrops to check the nooks and crannies and scan the beaches. Glorious landscapes, a few Bonaparte's Gulls drifting about, no bears though. A Merlin low over the tundra, White-crowned Sparrows two a penny, day one at Churchill was drawing to an end. I was in high spirit, many a day still lay in front of me. 13 July. Churchill. Back at Cape Merry at dawn, carefully picking my way across the rocks. Tiptoed around the whole peninsula, then sure there was no bear lurking to pop up behind me, I sat and started to scan the opposite shore - plenty of Belugas in the water, rafts of dabbling ducks near the river mouth, nothing much beneath the Prince of Wales fort, Arctic Terns buzzing Eskimo Point. I started a second scan, rock, rock, rock, then a leap of joy in my heart, a great lump of white with what appeared to be legs paddling around in the sky! A true moment of excitement, I quickly set up my scope and there he was, a top-class Polar Bear spread-eagled on the rocks, legs flaying in the air, quite distant, but pure magic. And there he stayed, near an hour I watched, the bear rolling around, sitting up, having a sniff. And then, from the ridge behind, another surprise ... a big white head! Wo ho ho, Polar Bear number two!!! Up onto the boulder he sauntered, a massive hulk oozing power, yet elegance, Two Polar Bears together, this was getting good! With thought to my friend still sleeping back at base, I trotted off to my bike and returned to town. My smile said it all, it was clear what I had seen! A quick breakfast and back we went, perching down on the very same rock that I'd spent the earlier hours. No Polar Bears in sight! I checked the waters and the peninsula we were on, nothing. Hmm, but before despondency had time to set in, one of the bears was back - a most magnificent image, the bear rising to the ridge on Eskimo Point, then strolling along and plonking himself down on a pebble beach, shuffling around for a while, then drifting off to sleep. Well, the day could hardly get better ... and it didn't, but it was still a corker. Again glorious and sunny, we spent most of the day wandering the tundra. And wonderful it looked, full of flowers and butterflies. Excellent birding too - a large raft of mixed seaduck sporting all Black, White-winged and Surf Scoters in good numbers, plus Merlins at the nest, a whole bunch of passerines, including American Tree, Savannah, Lincoln's and White-crowned Sparrows. As evening approached, a trip to Goose Creek added Snowshoe Hare, plus a couple of Bald Eagles and a good variety of breeding waders and wildfowl. It was, however, the morning adventures that will leave this day long in my memory. 14 July. Churchill. Today was just the bee's knees, quite unforgettable.. After a quick dawn jaunt back to Cape Merry, where my Polar Bear again

lounge on the rocks, we decided to rent a half-ton truck to explore the outer extremes on Churchill's very limited network of gravel tracks. With the engine a mean growl, westward we began our travels, broadly following the coast, stopping on virtually every brow, mere and tundra patch to explore on foot. Absolutely fantastic, wildlife everywhere - a pair of Parasitic Skuas here, Sandhill Cranes there, Lesser Yellowlegs common, Savannah and White-crowned Sparrows everywhere. I however was still keen to find more of the big white one, preferably close enough to get a few photographs. Wandering across a low hill, territorial Merlins harrying us to move a little quicker, my friend enquired if Polar Bears could be so far from the coast. A pair of Tundra Swans sailed upon a small pool, 'could be', I said, 'a little unlikely though'. And then the inevitable occurred. Had a little stop to admire Least Sandpipers and chicks, then clambered back into the truck and continued our way. Barely a kilometre had passed and a sudden gasp from my friend - strolling parallel to us, a mere hundred metres to our right, one magnificent Polar Bear on the tundra! And what a magnificent beast, truly amazing. Onward over the tundra, swimming across small pools, barely breaking course, we tracked the bear for several kilometres, absolutely amazing views. As the bear entered short turf tundra, it seemed to pause a little, so I took the chance for a hike, slowing walking level, this truly memorable encounter taking me to about 60 metres from the Polar Bear, the stuff dreams are made of. Kept an open door to the truck just 40 metres or so to my rear, but beyond occasional glances my way, this bear seemed intent on other thoughts. Where he was headed I have no idea, but in a straight line he continued to go - lake, ridge, track, no matter, on he went. Eventually, now approaching the coast, he crossed the track we were on and it seemed we would lose him. Backed up and took a small side track down to a nearby beach. No sign of the bear to begin with, but a wonderful spot to linger a while, a few waders on the intertidal flats. And then he appeared, still going the same way, striding straight past, over a small headland and directly into the sea. Scans of distant sandbars and islets revealed yet another bear, then another! Three Polar Bears on show, a shipwreck adding atmospheric backdrop, terns and gulls completing the picture. On swam our bear, last seen vanishing off towards the horizon! What a corker of a day, we continued onward, pausing and wandering again and again, a little stop in a stunted growth of pines adding Orange-crowned Warblers and plenty of both Blackpolls and Yellow Warblers, and then we turned for home. Two birds flying over the tundra ... the first a Northern Harrier, but the second an American Bittern! And so ended an excellent day, we dropped off the truck ... and almost fell over backwards at the bill for petrol, gee that truck just drank the stuff! 15 July. Churchill. High cloud drifting in the evening before hinted at change. And waking at dawn indeed it had changed - after days of unbroken sun and temperatures sitting in the high 20s, Churchill was now reverting to a rather more typical state of affairs - belting down with rain and a right chilly 10 degrees. Ten minutes of stomping about the puddles early in the morning was just about enough to convince me of the folly of further adventures till things brightened up, so virtually the whole of this day was a write-off, lying on my bed reflecting on the fortunes of the day before, planning the days to come. Eventually, when boredom was getting me pacing the window, I decided on a mid-afternoon slosh along the river - decked head to toe in waterproofs, almost snug as a bug in a rug, I managed an hour or two before the rain just became heavier and heavier. And the rewards for my endeavours, two soggy Bald Eagles, a pair of equally bedraggled Sandhill Cranes and a flock of 80 Pectoral Sandpipers that seemed to give no hoot as to the weather. Also assorted other waders and two Tundra Swans. 16 July. Churchill. Saving the best till last. Today was scheduled to be my final day in Churchill, so with the weather again bright, albeit a chilly 10 C, I decided for an excursion along the river flats south-east of town. For several days I had been eyeing these flats with some eagerness - low waterlogged saltmarsh and river grasses, littered with boulders and bisected by shallow channels. From afar, they seemed choc'a'bloc with birds, a soup of waders and wildfowl, with Bald Eagles dotting many of the boulders. It also seemed ideal location to have a sticky end with a Polar Bear should one wander by, and I was fairly sure they sometimes did! It was certainly with a healthy dose of caution that I set off, the basic concern being that I would be on flat open terrain on foot and some kilometres from any possible means of exit should a bear arrive. There seemed to be three possible scenarios that I needed to be ready for - first, that a bear would happen to be sleeping behind a boulder, in which case I would be mightily stuffed; second, one might approach from the sea, hopefully giving me plenty of time to exit back to my bicycle; or third, one could appear from the tundra, not sure what I would have done in such case, hide behind a boulder maybe. I can confirm this is an excellent way to be 100% alert to your surroundings, I'd basically sit atop a boulder carefully scanning sea and turf repeatedly for bears, then scope all birds within eyeshot, before walking another couple of hundred metres to repeat the process again and again. Fantastic for birds - amongst the most remarkable, a huge creche of Canada Goose goslings numbering perhaps 3000 individuals, adults included. And in with them, about 45 Snow Geese with assorted gaggles of young, plus oodles of American Wigeon and Northern Pintails. Also, as I sloshed along in water up to my ankles, a pair of stately Sandhill Cranes, the expected Bald Eagles, a pair of Tundra Swans and, best of all, waders a'plenty - mid-July not being a peak migration time, numbers were not excessive, but the variety was pleasing enough. Pectoral Sandpipers in a flock of 250, with Hudsonian Godwits, Lesser Yellowlegs, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Short-billed Dowitchers and Red-necked Phalarope all present in small flocks. Also Semi-palmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, my only Ruddy Turnstones of the trip, Wilson's Snipe and Semi-palmated Plover. Three to four hours of enjoying this, and slowly becoming far too laid-back about the possibility of bumping into a bear, I decided to head back, a tad disappointed to have not only failed to have found a Polar Bear, but also drawn a blank on Arctic Fox, a species I was sure would be scavenging on the flats. So alive and well, I arrived back in town, just a few hours till the train was due to depart on the southbound leg. There I happened to meet a German guy who, despite having been in Churchill for some days, had not seen a Polar Bear. Well, that was a sorry state of affairs I thought, so I offered to go out to Cape Merry with my telescope. I had actually already been out there early morning and not seen hide or hair of a bear, but it seemed to offer the best possibility in the limited time left. Three of us went, myself, my friend and the tourist. Before we arrived however, a local stopped in a car and warned us that there was a Polar Bear actually on Cape Merry itself, rather than the opposite side of the river. Hmm, a surprising lack of debate over the sanity of further approach, we all walked out onto the rocks of the peninsula. Working the whole of tip of the cape, a fairly small area, we encountered

nothing and began to wonder if the local had actually been joking. To double-check, we spread out and checked crannies where the bear may have been lurking, this now getting a tad not too clever it should be noted. Remembering a small beach on the south side, I scrambled over onto a boulder and, bingo, there was the bear, my sixth Polar Bear of the week and a fairly big brute of an animal at that. Paddling through the sea about 20 metres offshore, we all three gathered on boulder top to admire the animal cruising past. Then it went behind a large rock and didn't come out the other side! A little alarm bell started to ring in my head, we were very close and safe haven was quite far. 'We need to move back', I said, 'if he comes out of the water, we are much too close'. No arguments from anybody present, we walked slowly back to an outcrop just behind of us. And then, there he was, the Polar Bear strutting up the beach, already on the grass. 'Jeepers, how did it get there?'. Tactical retreat was in order, we moved back from boulder to boulder, always ensuring the bear was in sight. The Polar Bear continued to advance, not a random walk in a direction, but a purposeful tracking of us, the bear just 150 metre off, pausing and smelling our scent at every spot where we had stopped. We were being stalked, absolutely fascinating! Back a rock or two we would go, forward a rock or two the bear would come, raising his head to catch airborne scents, occasionally stopping to watch our way. Though this held potential to be dangerous, to be truthful there seemed little real intent on the bear's part. A little way back, we had to make a decision, any further retreat on our part would put us in blind terrain, not a good position. There was a ranger post at that point though, locked and unoccupied, but the outside toilet was unlocked and would offer safe retreat. I cannot really say the idea of three of us barricading ourselves in a small single loo appealed, so we took the other option - with the bear still approaching at last view, we walked steadily onward, watching our rear, but no further pauses. All got back to town without mishap, what a fantastic ending to the Churchill experience! Boarding the train. I was a most content chappy, six Polar Bears, hundreds of Beluga Whales, excellent birding and weather far kinder than I had expected, Churchill certainly exceeded my expectations, the gamble had paid off! 17 July. Southbound, Gillam and Beyond. If the train north had been slow, southbound it was painful - a staggering 18 hours to cover the 300km to Gillam! I pitied the unlucky souls that were on board till Winnipeg, another 1000 km to endure. Still, a few birds to keep the eyes open - a Golden Eagle in the same location as northbound, a pair of Sandhill Cranes, a family of Northern Shrikes and a trackside Spruce Grouse amongst the best, also a few White-winged Crossbills as we neared journey's end, plus a couple of Bald Eagles and a Sora Rail on a small pool. From Gillam, back to the car. Basically there are two north-south routes. Coming north, I'd opted for the western route via The Pas, so southbound we chose the more easterly, a route that runs down between Lakes Winnipeg and Winnipegosis, both vast waterbodies, the former boasting a surface area of 24,500 square kilometres, larger than the entire country of Wales. After the late arrival of the train however, I was to appreciate little of the two lakes, my transit south a fairly speedy affair, the remainder of the first day covering 700 km with few stops, the most notable being at the river crossing at Grand Falls where a pickle of American White Pelicans consorted with Double-crested Cormorants, Great Blue Herons and, in the approaching dusk, a sizeable roost of Black-billed Magpies. Home for the night was the tent, pitched a few kilometres south of Grand Falls on a low glacial ridge, now carpeted in dense boreal forest, apparently home to a number of good bird species. Our chosen spot was clearly prime location, a Spruce Grouse had also selected the very same patch to sleep, roosting in a pine above the tent. 18 July. Return to Riding Mountain. With the rising sun, I discovered that our chosen campsite was a slither of forest between a disused sand quarry and a heath, the former full of Bank Martins, the latter home to a pair of Northern Harriers that were most narked at my morning intrusion! Quietly slipping off into deeper forest, a gentle mist rising from swamplands afar, there was an eerie silence, these northern forests so frequently appearing devoid of birdlife. Persevere however and the rewards appear amongst the trees, a Warbling Vireo, a Magnolia Warbler, a pair of Hermit Thrushes popping up. Another long period of tranquility, then the holy grail of the elusive denizens, a Connecticut Warbler sneaking away through the undergrowth, a quick pish bringing him back for a moment, before forever gone. Pishing actually works wonders with American warblers, especially American Redstarts and Yellow-rumped Warblers - the birds almost bouncing of the trees in their enthusiasm to perform acrobatics before your face! A few more quick pish pish and low and behold, my first Pine Warbler flicking about, saying good morning. Overhead, White-winged Crossbills, nearby Northern Flickers, an Olive-sided Flycatcher and several Red-eyed Vireos. It was now time to make coffee, then resume the southbound trek. Another 400 km and I'd be back in the wooded hills of Riding Mountain, maybe chance to eek out another Black Bear or two. En route however, a couple of very pleasant stop-overs, the first at the river crossing at Fairford. I hadn't planned a stop here, but one quick glance and I just had to pause for a half hour or more - to a backdrop of Forster's Terns and Double-crested Cormorants, White Pelicans were having a mass feeding frenzy on the billions of minnows that were surging against the rapids. Fantastic, the pelicans not in the least fussed by human onlookers and driving the minnows right up to the shore before scooping them up in their humongous bills. Right photogenic fellas, the birds were coming so close it was difficult to get anything above their bills in the pictures at times! With pelicans sorted, it was back to the highway, cruise control speeding us down to Ashern for a quick photostop at the enormous Sharp-tailed Grouse that adorns the roadside, three metres tall and guaranteed not to run away! Best find of the day however was a big cardboard box in the middle of the road - crammed full of Ritz crackers and loaves of bread, yum yum, enough food to last the rest of the trip! And from Ashern, a westward turn, crossing Lake Manitoba at a land bridge and then it should have been an easy drive all way to Riding Mountain. Southern Manitoba however was now in the midst of a stonking hot heatwave, temperatures were touching 35 C, humidity was high and the shady trees aside Lake Manitoba seemed most welcoming. So too were Eastern Chipmunks that hopped across to see us as soon as we stopped. I believe my friend had a snooze, but I decided on a little wander - a very good choice. The bushes were alive with little delights - Northern Flickers, Baltimore Orioles, House Wrens, Yellow Warblers and Grey Catbirds, all abundant. Late afternoon, we lazily sauntered back into the environs of Riding Mountain, starting with a little exploration of the eastern escarpment, a region forested by deciduous trees and home to a quite different bird fauna to the rest of the national park. Amongst the many rewards, a couple of Hermit Thrushes, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, dozens of American Redstarts and Chestnut-sided Warblers and, the gem of gems, a smart

Black-and-White Warbler creeping up a tree trunk. Also, a couple of Ruffed Grouse, a Belted Kingfisher and, both additions to the trip list, one Nashville Warbler and one Least Flycatcher. Northern Parula and Golden-winged Warbler, both specialities of this part of the park, both unfortunately failed to show - they remain species that I have only ever seen in the UK! Call me greedy, but I was still very eager to notch up another bear or two. It took to near dusk, but I was not going to be disappointed - after a most stately mother Moose and calf, I finally round a corner to spot yet another big black blob in the bushes to the left. A gentle wander over and there he was, a fine individual, Black Bear number six. Onto his rear legs he stood, the long grass hampering his view, a brief period of giving me a cursory glance and then back down, munching his grass, lumbering off into meadows beyond. 19 July. Southern Wetlands, Manitoba. With Polar Bear and Black Bear now numbering six a piece, phase two of the trip was ready to swing into operation, a shift half way across the continent to the mid-west and Rocky Mountains, hopefully a Grizzly Bear popping up somewhere to complete the Grand Slam. Before that however, it would have been a great shame to desert Manitoba without a gander at the excellent wetlands and prairie grasslands that typify the far south-west of the province. And so it was, two days of relative relaxation enjoying the spoils of this region. Relaxation is perhaps an exaggeration, much of North America was in the grips of a staggering heatwave, Manitoba no exception - the temperature was to hit 35 C this day, not so bad, but there was also a crippling humidity of near 90 %, that was rather more impressive! A little birding at Riding Mountain at dawn, the tops including a Ruffed Grouse with chicks, a couple of Cedar Waxwings and a whole bunch of hyper-coloured warbler types, Blackburnian Warblers leading the bunch, it was then time to depart. Snowshoe Hare, American Red Squirrel and Least Chipmunk amongst the farewell entourage. Our next destination was the Minnedosa potholes - not gaping holes in the roads, but a vast area of small pools dotting the agricultural plains south of the town of Minnedosa. Relicts of the glacial era, most of the pools are small, generally a couple of hundred metres across, the odd one somewhat larger. For birds however, they are cracking - frequently each pool just had a single pair of birds or perhaps a small flock, but all too soon, the totals were soaring - Lesser Scaups all over the shop, Ruddy Ducks abundant, Green-winged Teals, Northern Shovelers, Canvasbacks, all present and trailing strings of ducklings, plus Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead and, prize of the morning, a female Hooded Merganser on one middle-sized pool. Also both Red-necked and Pied-billed Grebes, heaps of American Coots and a scatter of the usual waterside passerines, Red-winged Blackbirds and the like. Special mention must also go to the right cute Richardson's Ground Squirrels, a few large colonies encountered, the inhabitants up on their haunches with a beady eye as we passed. One Coyote with a beady eye on them too! Lunch was the Brandon branch of McDonald's, a culinary delight it has to be said. And with that, off to one of the highlights of Manitoba, the superb Whitewater Lake. Though many of the access roads and nature trails were still underwater due to the regional flooding, and despite being very hot and very humid, this lake and its environs were absolutely cracking - the south shore bustling with birds, hundreds and hundreds of ducks of all conceivable species, gaggles of White Pelicans and a right nice bevy of breeding grebes, the line up starting with Eared Grebes bobbing up beside the track I'd parked on and continuing with stately Western Grebes, full-plumage Red-necked Grebes, a posse of Pied-billed Grebes and, late in the day, a single Horned Grebe. Also thousands of Franklin's Gulls, dozens and dozens of American Black Terns, along with herons and allies in abundance, Cattle Egrets and Black-crowned Night Herons both numbering minimums of 35 plus, plus a couple of White-faced Ibis to add to the list. Due to highwater levels though, it looked as though I was going to have a fairly tough time with waders, the pickings at that point just the odd Killdeer here and there and that was about all. All that changed when I decided to drive round to the northern shore - after pauses in the grassland for both Ferruginous and Swainson's Hawks, I then met a dead-end road, the track vanishing into the floods only to re-emerge some hundreds of metres beyond. But what a sight, the track and grassy islets to either side were alive with waders, a dozen species and a count of perhaps 700 birds in total. An excellent hour followed, ranks of Long-billed Dowitchers, heaps and heaps of Lesser Yellowlegs and impressive numbers of Willet and Pectoral Sandpipers. And amongst them, some real treats - dainty American Avocets, at least 60 Wilson's Phalaropes, a small group of Marbled Godwits and assorted others, including Greater Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpiper and Black-bellied Plover. Also Muskrat in the water, Yellow-headed, Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds in roadside reeds and hirundines of many sorts in the air, Tree Swallows, Bank Martins, Cliff Swallows and Barn Swallows. As the mugginess just got ever muggier, we decided this night we would splash out on a motel, the 'By the River Motel' in Melita seeming the obvious choice, putting us in a good position to explore neighbouring prairies next morning. An expanding Souris River however had turned the 'By the River Motel' into an 'Under the River Motel', this birder's favourite was not going to be accommodating anybody this night! An alternative motel was found in the town centre, a fortunate selection as the car park had a little colony of Purple Martins, the only ones I was going to see on the whole trip. With air-con on full blast, some crap American series on the T.V., it was a night of semi-civilisation, time to catch up with notes and prepare for the west. 20 July. Melita Grasslands. Seven o'clock, up to my shins in dew drenched grass, Bobolinks hurtling out, Western Meadowlarks launching skyward and fluttering down. Conditions were conspiring against productive birding, it was already near 30 C and these dawn hours were a heavy cocktail of humidity and sweat. The prairies north, west and south of Melita however are renowned for a number of specialities, so onward I trudged - hopes for a number of sparrows detracting attention from my sodden shoes and trousers now sticking to my legs. Savannah Sparrows proved easy enough, but these were not amongst the desired ones. Nor were the abundant Red-winged Blackbirds and Brewer's Blackbirds. An half hour or more however and results began to flow, first a family of Loggerhead Shrikes on roadside fences, then the first of several Grasshopper Sparrows, sitting on a low post giving its distinctive buzzing song. And then another, and another. Baird's Sparrow proved a little harder, a few translocations required before I finally began to run into this species, a total of only five identified by mid-morning. Also a Brown Thrasher, several Horned Larks, both Swainsons and Ferruginous Hawks and a Northern Harrier. The morning's mugginess was now being replaced by a very hot wind, resulting in conditions becoming even worse for birding. I returned to Melita, collected my friend who had opted for the luxury of a lie-in, then set off on a long slow loop of the prairies, crossing Poverty Plains and ending up very close

to the Saskatchewan border. Not a huge amount to show for the effort, a few more Grasshopper Sparrows, three Eastern Bluebirds, a Willow Flycatcher and a couple of Eastern Phoebes. Late afternoon, after finding a very exotic looking toad, we turned to the south, a few kilometres away lay the U.S. border. A bit of an ordeal getting through the interrogation, our answers not quite matching the results of a car search, but eventually we were through, leg one of the trip over. Another mammoth drive ahead, 1350 km across North Dakota, Montana and into Wyoming.