

BIRDING CHURCHILL MANITOBA

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Young Boreal Owl

Though renowned for its polar bears, Churchill, Manitoba is an amazing area for birding. Since 1999, I have birded this area eight times in June and each visit has been different, be it bird life, mammals, weather conditions, ice conditions on Hudson's Bay or the mosquitoes!

The Churchill area is a transition zone between the boreal forest and the tundra. As a result, it gives birders a rare opportunity to sample some of the tundra bird life without the expense of traveling to the high arctic. It is common to see such species as nesting Parasitic Jaeger, Willow Ptarmigan, Common Eider, Arctic Tern, Hudsonian Godwit, Whimbrel, Smith's Longspur and Harris's Sparrow. This is just a sample of the many arctic treasures. For a number of years, this had been the only location, easily accessible in North America, that had regularly occurring

and sometimes nesting, Ross's Gull. Recently, these birds have been less regular in the Churchill area.

The boreal forest plays host to a number of interesting species, including Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay, Spruce Grouse, Pine Grosbeak, Bohemian Waxwing, Common Redpoll, Three-toed Woodpecker and Blackpoll Warbler. This year, unlike on previous visits, there was a high population of rodents. Our group had a family of three juvenile Boreal Owls, which was a 'lifer' plumage for me, a pair of Northern Hawk-Owls, a

pair of Northern Shrikes and two pairs of Merlins.

Snuggled in along Hudson's Bay near the mouth of the Churchill River, the small community of Churchill can only be accessed by train or plane. Over the years, I have been welcomed to the area with varying weather conditions, anything from a 30°C heat wave to two-metre snow drifts and a frozen Hudson Bay and Churchill River. Despite it all, the birding is fantastic.

Churchill is the "Pelee of the north" and for a northern location, proudly boasts a list of over 287 bird species. Then, of course, there is the amazing wildlife. Nothing beats the beauty of watching beluga whales entering the Churchill River as they feed at Cape Merry, the arctic hare and arctic fox or the caribou. I was fortunate to see one polar bear in June 2004. And for the ultimate in birding pleasure, there is listening to the vocal courtship of Common Eider and Long-tailed Ducks as Red-throated and Pacific Loons feed off Cape Merry. For the avid birder, Churchill is paradise. The sun rises at 4:30 a.m. and sets at 11:00 p.m. What more could one ask for!



Willow Ptarmigan