

AN EARLY SUMMER'S BIRDING AT CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

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A visit to Churchill, on the southwestern edge of Hudson Bay, is high on the wish list of many birders throughout North America. The town and its surroundings allow the easiest access to the near-Arctic anywhere in North America and numerous bird species rarely seen in the south can be observed here in numbers and at close range. From early June to mid-July, the area teems with migrants and breeding birds; consequently, this is the time of year when most birding tours occur. Visiting later in the year may also be rewarding, particularly in late fall, but daily tallies will be lower and some of the most sought-after species will be harder to find or may be absent.

Spring normally starts in earnest in early June, with the break up of ice in the mouth of the Churchill River and on the bay, but the spring of 1999 was exceptionally early. Apparently the bay ice had only been 4-5 feet (1.2 - 1.5 m) thick, as compared to the usual 8 feet (2.4 m), and May weather had been more like what one would expect in June. How advanced the season was became clear as I approached Churchill from the air on June 3. As the plane banked for its landing, Hudson Bay stretched to the north, uniform blue, with a few scattered icebergs on the horizon. Below, the tundra was brown — not a trace of snow. On the ground Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*) had already finished blooming, Mountain Avens (*Dryas integrefolia*) were in full flower, and Alpine Milk Vetch (*Astragalus alpinus*) and Northern Hedysarum (*Hedysarum mackenzii*) were well underway. At this time of year, open water is usually scarce and the mouth of the Churchill River often harbours hundreds of loons and ducks. The town dump normally hosts numerous gulls. But they were gone, lured to the north by the balmy weather.

The exceptional conditions resulted in one of the strangest seasons on record. While hoped-for northern migrants, such as Red Phalarope and Sabine's Gull, never

appeared, a host of "southern" birds more than made up for their absence. Between June 3 and 18, the two birding groups I led recorded 137 species (Table 1), many of them very rare locally. A few of the highlights are worth mentioning here. Pomarine Jaegers appeared briefly in mid-month. Some of us were treated to a flyby on the 15th, while all had good looks at an adult circling over Cape Merry on the 17th. This was a "lifer" for most! Rare larids seen included Mew Gull and Little Gull. Unfortunately, we missed the Ross's Gull spotted by a lucky few of the other visitors. This mythical bird has been present annually in Churchill since 1980, but numbers have dwindled in the past few years and its future in the region is uncertain. A Hairy Woodpecker in the Twin Lakes burn on 11 June was the first for the Churchill area since a possible record prior to 1845! This was a male bird; amazingly, a female was noted about a week later. Also very unexpected were Olive-sided Flycatcher and Eastern Kingbird, both new on my Churchill list. A very elusive Black-billed Magpie, so ho-hum on the prairies, finally revealed itself after our many days of searching. It seemed that everybody else had seen it, except for us. The final highlight was a Rock Wren, which was found and videotaped by a group of Swedish birders during their lunch break on the rocks along the coast. This little sprite became a star attraction for all the birding groups during the week after its discovery. Thrice before had this species been found in Churchill; twice it had even attempted to nest.

Besides birds, there are many other natural attractions. Beluga Whales frequent the mouth of the river, increasing in numbers as the summer progresses, and Harbour and Bearded Seals can often be seen hauled out on the rocks in the river or on a chunk of ice in the bay. The occasional Caribou is sighted and Polar Bears may come off the bay ice at this time of year, but both species are relatively rare in spring and summer. Still, birders should exercise care when

clambering over rocks or hiking along forest trails. For the botany buffs, the profusion of wildflowers will be a delight. Insects are the scourge of the north country and, in this respect, Churchill is no different. While early groups sometimes arrive before the mosquitoes and black flies do, most visitors will not be able to escape the bugs on warm and calm days. If you plan to visit, arm yourself with DEET or a bug jacket, or live with the consequences.

A visit of five days to a week is adequate to check all local hot spots a number of times and to find most of the species present. A trip list of about 100 species can be expected. Favorite haunts of the birding crowd are Cape

Merry, at the mouth of the river, Akudlik Marsh, between the town site and the airport, Goose Creek and Hydro Roads, and the Twin Lakes area. Detailed information on these sites and others is provided in *A Birder's Guide to Churchill*, written by local expert Bonnie Chartier, and published by the American Birding Association. This guide also has useful information on transportation, accommodation and the historic sites around town. Don't leave home without it!

The summer of 1999 proved to be out-of-the-ordinary, but then, that is the lure of Churchill. Expect the unexpected. Put the town on your list of places to visit and you will not be disappointed.

Table 1. Bird species observed by Churchill Northern Studies Centre birding groups between 3 and 18 June 1999.

Red-throated Loon	American Golden-Plover	Common Raven
Pacific Loon	Semipalmated Plover	Horned Lark
Common Loon	Killdeer	Tree Swallow
Horned Grebe	Greater Yellowlegs	Barn Swallow
American Bittern	Lesser Yellowlegs	Boreal Chickadee
Snow Goose	Solitary Sandpiper	Brown Creeper
Ross's Goose	Spotted Sandpiper	Rock Wren
Canada Goose	Whimbrel	Winter Wren
Tundra Swan	Hudsonian Godwit	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Gadwall	Ruddy Turnstone	Gray-cheeked Thrush
American Wigeon	Sanderling	Hermit Thrush
American Black Duck	Semipalmated Sandpiper	American Robin
Mallard	Least Sandpiper	European Starling
Blue-winged Teal	White-rumped Sandpiper	American Pipit
Northern Shoveler	Dunlin	Bohemian Waxwing
Northern Pintail	Stilt Sandpiper	Tennessee Warbler
Green-winged Teal	Short-billed Dowitcher	Orange-crowned Warbler
Canvasback	Common Snipe	Nashville Warbler

Redhead	Wilson's Phalarope	Yellow Warbler
Ring-necked Duck	Red-necked Phalarope	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Greater Scaup	Pomarine Jaeger	Palm Warbler
Lesser Scaup	Parasitic Jaeger	Blackpoll Warbler
Common Eider	Long-tailed Jaeger	Northern Waterthrush
Surf Scoter	Little Gull	American Tree Sparrow
White-winged Scoter	Bonaparte's Gull	Chipping Sparrow
Black Scoter	Mew Gull	Clay-colored Sparrow
Oldsquaw	Ring-billed Gull	Savannah Sparrow
Bufflehead	Herring Gull	Le Conte's Sparrow
Common Goldeneye	Thayer's Gull	Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow
Hooded Merganser	Glaucous Gull	Fox Sparrow
Common Merganser	Common Tern	Song Sparrow
Red-breasted Merganser	Arctic Tern	Lincoln's Sparrow
Osprey	Black Guillemot	Swamp Sparrow
Bald Eagle	Snowy Owl	White-throated Sparrow
Northern Harrier	Short-eared Owl	Harris's Sparrow
Red-tailed Hawk	Hairy Woodpecker	White-crowned Sparrow
Rough-legged Hawk	Three-toed Woodpecker	Dark-eyed Junco
American Kestrel	Black-backed Woodpecker	Lapland Longspur
Merlin	Northern Flicker	Smith's Longspur
Peregrine Falcon	Olive-sided Flycatcher	Snow Bunting
Spruce Grouse	Alder Flycatcher	Rusty Blackbird
Willow Ptarmigan	Eastern Kingbird	Pine Grosbeak
Sora	Northern Shrike	Common Redpoll
American Coot	Gray Jay	Hoary Redpoll
Sandhill Crane	Black-billed Magpie	House Sparrow
Black-bellied Plover	American Crow	

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Barn Swallow

Photo by Jean Harris