

At Home With the Polar Bears

BY LYNNE SCHUYLER

Nose-to-nose encounters with these white lords of the North are nothing unusual in Churchill, Manitoba

ONE OF North America's largest and most fearsome predators is just ten metres away from me, but I feel no fear. The creamy-yellow polar bear gracefully rolls onto her back like a big, playful dog. Her mischievous cub pounces onto her round belly, and the pair roll around in a tangle of thrashing limbs and playful nips. Suddenly her forepaws encircle her cub, as if giving it a loving hug.

"Beautiful!" croons a photographer next to me, as a battery of cameras explodes in a whirl of clicks, capturing the touching moment.

Every window in our tundra vehicle is open, with camera equipment worth tens of thousands of dollars mounted on every centimetre of available window space. Our breath hangs in the -7°C air, but no one complains. Serious amateur photographers, this group of ten will wait hours for a chance to shoot the most famous polar bears on earth.

Every year from early October to mid-November, about half of Manitoba's estimated 1,200 polar bears gather along the western shores of Hudson Bay. It's one of the largest fall concentrations of polar bears in the world. Some 100 to 200 bears end up on the flat, frozen tundra 55 kilometres east of Churchill, waiting for the sea ice to freeze so they can again venture out to hunt seal.

Around the same time the bears are ambling along the coastal bogs and salt marshes, planes bearing tourists, scientists, photographers, naturalists, adventurers and film crews descend on Churchill from every corner of the globe. Part of the throng, I've come to witness this amazing spectacle along the headlands of Cape Churchill.

Steeped in the fur-rich history of the Hudson's Bay Company that dates back to the 1600s, windswept Churchill clings to the rugged Canadian Shield on the western shores of Hudson Bay. Proudly proclaiming itself "Polar Bear Capital of the World," it is transformed each fall from a quiet subarctic community of some 1,000 into a cosmopolitan rendezvous for more than 10,000 polar-bear watchers.

The polar bear's legendary reputation as a predator only enhances its mystique. It's been said the bears can detect a seal breathing hole buried under a metre of snow from a kilometre away. Their elongated necks and powerful hindquarters make it easy for them to rip an 80-kilogram ringed seal through a narrow breathing hole in the ice, crushing many of the bones in its body. Fabulous swimmers, they can cross bays 100 kilometres wide. Weighing up to 850 kilograms and growing almost three metres long, blanketed in layers of fat, the shore-stranded bears fast for four months or more until the pack ice returns. Their antics captivate polar-bear watchers like me.

THERE'S a shotgun at the ready in our tundra vehicle, but it's the furthest thing from my mind as I watch the mother and cub play. It's hard to reconcile their roly-poly bodies, coal-black eyes and expressive faces with danger. I quickly rethink that notion when the expedition leader tells me a story.

Daniel Poleschook, Jr., has led photography groups to Churchill since 1985 with few incidents, yet he still maintains a healthy respect for the bears. In 1996 a massive, dominant breeding male -- one of the largest Poleschook had ever seen -- calmly walked up to their tundra vehicle and ripped off a gas cap. After crunching the cap in his powerful jaws, the bear straddled a tire, then jammed his massive head through an open window of the bus. People snatched their equipment and backed away. When the bear ripped a huge chunk out of a seat and ate it, they knew it was time to go.

"CHURCHILL was a scary place in the early '80s," says Bonnie Chartier, a naturalist who was the first to establish wilderness tours there. "From our living-room window, we watched as bears strolled in front of our house. At times we didn't dare walk to the grocery store or school."

Aggressive bears invading the town site may have stemmed from the mid-'60s military pullout from Fort Churchill, a base of 3,000 personnel. Before that, bears were routinely killed in defence of life or property, or sometimes for sport. Once the military left, the bear population ballooned, the animals spending much of their time at the town's garbage dump, wryly nicknamed the polar bear cafeteria.

By 1983 Churchill's bear problem had reached a crisis, and the bears started roaming even closer to town. They were drawn to the dump like a magnet, and one night a local man was attacked and killed.

Manitoba Natural Resources established Polar Bear Alert, a surveillance program for the area around Churchill and the dump. A hot line for sightings was set up and culvert traps placed around the town. Conservation officers began patrolling the dump. Bears that violated a "control zone" were tranquilized, tagged and "jailed" in cinder-block cells before being airlifted out.

"In 1997 we handled 117 bears, a record number, and captured 67 in four days," Natural Resources officer Wayne Roberts tells me as his truck bounces over the rocky roads of the control zone. Thanks to his department's efforts, bears seldom enter the zone anymore, but when they do, it can be frightening. Steering past a well-lit house on the outskirts, Roberts points to its

large living-room window. "In late November 1997, after most bears had left for the pack ice, a bear jumped up and tried to smash through that window. Two little girls were inside watching TV." Sighted earlier, the bear had eluded officers for three days. Too difficult to tranquillize, it had to be shot.

I HAVE bears on the brain one night as I trudge down Kelsey Boulevard, Churchill's main drag. It's 5:30 p.m. and ghostly swirls of snow barrel through the nearly deserted street.

I pass the picturesque '30s-style train station. Travellers on the 36-hour ride from Winnipeg are often kidded about looking both ways before hopping off -- ravenous bears may await them on the platform. I grinned when I first heard this story, but now, in the murky gloom of the lonely street, it doesn't seem that improbable.

Heeding a Parks Canada employee's advice, I take my street corners wide should any bears be lurking around a building. Later I hear a resident puzzle over why tourists always seem to be walking down the middle of the street.

PEOPLE have found ingenious ways to coexist with the white lords of the North. One solution is to have an escape hatch under the floor or on the roof of a home. Some property owners in the countryside around Churchill use commercial heavy-duty freezer doors to protect storage sheds and even the main entrances of their cabins. Others line their porch steps and windows with sharp, protruding nails.

Wildlife photographer and guide Mike Macri, a 33-year resident, built his cabin a metre and a half off the ground. "If the cabin's up high enough," he says, "the bear can't throw his weight against the door and cave it in." Bears have been known to rip whole walls off cabins; so, as an added precaution, Macri placed his wall nails just seven centimetres apart. He also built a ramp to his door sturdy enough for people but too wobbly for bears.

Macri has used the escape hatch installed on his roof more than once when persistent bears weren't scared off by warning shotgun blasts or small bombs called bear bangers. Once, when a bear gnawed at his door, an exasperated Macri squirted ammonia-based window cleaner through a small hole at the bottom. The bear took off like a rocket.

AS CHURCHILL learned how to cope with its marauders, the bear-viewing business grew apace. In the late '70s, Bonnie Chartier wanted to watch the Cape Churchill bears for fun. But how to do it without getting eaten? Her husband rigged up a small tracked machine to traverse the rugged tundra. Photographers eager to get close to the bears often hitched rides with her.

"Back then, the bears were wary of anything that moved," she says. "We learned to wait and let them come to us." One photographer's work landed on the front page of the *Chicago Sun Times*, and from then on Chartier's phone never stopped ringing.

Meanwhile, down the street, mechanic Len Smith was busy creating his own version of a tundra vehicle. Using parts from a gravel truck, a snowplough, a front-end loader and a school bus, he built his first tundra buggy. Its crop-sprayer tires thrust the homemade widebody cab three metres into the air, away from curious bears. Later, more rugged versions sat on eight wheels.

"Can you get 18 of us out to see the bears?" a tour operator from Texas asked him one year. A worried Smith said yes. "I thought people would get bored. It was just the opposite -- they couldn't get enough."

The early years were rife with adventure. It took ten hours to cover the treacherous 55 kilometres to the cape. When the homemade vehicles weren't breaking down, they got stuck in the mud or crashed through the ice on deep creeks. "We sometimes had to walk back to town," Smith recalls.

Worldwide exposure through articles and films soon brought thousands of tourists to Churchill. Chartier has since sold her business, but Smith now runs 11 vehicles out on the tundra, carrying 7,000 to 8,000 people in a six-week season.

IT'S MY last day on the tundra. Our vehicle rounds a rocky shoreline and I'm startled by the exquisite, cobalt-blue skies over Hudson Bay.

We thread our way past frozen lakes and bogs along the eight-kilometre track designated for bear viewing, the vehicle lurching over the rugged terrain like a heaving ship at sea. All day we shiver in the cold, snapping endless rolls of film. The fluid movement of bears sparring and dancing mesmerizes us all. Some bears quietly snooze and, like dogs, rest their black noses on their paws. Cooling off, others are spread-eagled on the ice, their fur shimmering in the pale sunlight.

In a 360-degree scan, I spot a bear pouncing up and down on the ice with his massive forepaws, either practising for the soon-to-come day when he'll hunt seals or maybe just playing with air bubbles trapped in the ice below. Three or four bears amble in from the rocky shoreline. A nearby mother and cub stand alert, ready to flee from an approaching male. Everywhere I turn, I see polar bears playing, sleeping, completely at home in their environment.

Now I understand why so many people travel so far to see them.