

## **NORTH OF 58°**

**by Doris Ames**

**February 2005**

We left Winnipeg early one sunny morning in mid-July (of 2004). We had everything with us; bottled water, lunches, snacks, clothes for hot weather, cold weather and rainy weather, insect repellent, lots of film and the two books every naturalist needs on a trip to Churchill, "Wildflowers of Churchill" by Karen Johnson and "A Birder's Guide to Churchill" by Bonnie Chartier. Karen's book is the only complete reference guide available for the plants and Bonnie Chartier's book has, as well as information on birds, some exceptional maps, which show all the little roads and trails in the area, plus all the major tourist attractions. Our plan was to drive to Thompson and then take the train to Churchill where we hoped to see the tundra in bloom.

We drove north on Highway #6 and soon began to see many lovely wild flowers along the road. These included Large and Small Yellow Lady's-slippers, Showy Lady's-slippers, Yellow Pond Lilies, Wood Lilies, Smooth Camas, Harebells, Roses and Blue-eyed Grass. At 12:15PM we arrived at Devil's Lake Rest Stop and saw Small-flowered Columbine, the one with blue flowers. We stopped at several places along the way, finding many orchid species in the Jackpine forests until we arrived at Long Point at 2:40PM. The road was lined with Showy Lady's-slippers, Yellow Lady's-slippers and Rose Coreopsis. We drove to the overlook where you have a perfect view of Long Point on Lake Winnipeg. You can see the fishing shacks on the spit of land going out into the lake. We carried on to the end of Long Point Road and came down to the stony beach. White Pelicans and Ring-billed Gulls wheeled overhead while little Checkerspot butterflies fluttered on the sand.

At 6:15PM we arrived in Grand Rapids and checked into the Northbrook Lodge. The room cost \$62.70 and contained two beds, a double and a single. After supper we went down to the Hydro Dam at the base of the big hill and photographed the white pelicans that were fishing at the base of the dam. An Otter was swimming in the foam.

The next day we visited Pisew Falls near Thompson. Pisew Falls, on the Grass River, is Manitoba's largest accessible waterfall and a really spectacular sight. We took the path over to the Rotary suspension bridge and saw a number of native orchids and other rare plants lining the way.

We reached Thompson in the late afternoon, parked our cars in the McCreedy Campground and caught the Via train for Churchill at 6:30PM. We had supper on the train. It wasn't bad and cost \$19.50. The train's speed varied between 20 and 40km/hr. It was daylight until about 11:30PM, and the sun rose again about 3:30AM. I found it difficult to sleep on the train even when the seats were arranged to make a sort of bed. It would be better to rent a bedroom especially if you were planning to travel by train all the way from Winnipeg but it is much more expensive. The long day gave me plenty of time to enjoy the remarkable scenery. There was a surprisingly short transition between boreal forest and tundra. In spite of all the oil cans, old telegraph poles and other garbage left here and there, the tundra was a beautiful sight. It was all covered in white Reindeer Moss about a foot thick, and growing on top

was a multitude of flowers of every colour. The surface of the tundra wasn't frozen very hard and it felt more like we were riding in a boat that was pitching and rolling, rather than on a train over permafrost.

We arrived in Churchill at 9:30AM the next morning, having breakfasted on the train. The people from the Churchill Northern Studies Centre (1-204-675-2307 and website [www.churchillmb.net/~cnsc](http://www.churchillmb.net/~cnsc)) picked us up on our arrival. Our group was staying at the Centre about 20 miles out of town on the tundra. It is the old U.S.A.F. rocket-base barracks on Launch Road. From near the end of World War II to the early 1960's the US airforce conducted meteorological and other research in Churchill. When the station closed the U.S. government left everything there and the Federal Government gave it to the Churchill Northern Studies Centre for a research centre. When we arrived we put our luggage in our rooms (each room had four bunk beds) and picked up the keys to the 10-seater van and the "cracker gun", a noise-making pistol we needed to scare away bears. Immediately upon arrival in Churchill we realized this was a very special area. Churchill itself lies in the transition zone between the tundra and the boreal forest and has a greater abundance of wildlife than areas to the north or the south of it. The entire Churchill area is located at the junction of three distinctive ecosystems: Tundra, Northern boreal forest (taiga) and Marine, and this location gives it a very rich diversity of plants and animals.

After lunch we drove out to the old Dene Village. There is a plaque there explaining some of their sad history. Today nothing remains but the old concrete footings overgrown by rare and beautiful shrubs and flowers. The delicate, pink Lapland Rosebay and the snow-white Mountain Avens blossomed everywhere. I took out my Global Positioning System unit to mark the site and realized, for the first time in my life, I was north of the 58th parallel.

It was amazing to see all the different species of willow and lousewort. They were small but they all had the most gorgeous flowers. It seemed as if every flower in North America was represented on the tundra by either a willow or a lousewort. One of the first things that you notice is the stunted white spruce trees. They are very short and crooked and have only a few branches on the north side. This is because of the harsh climate and is known as the "krummholz effect".

We drove to Cape Merry and saw the old, grey Precambrian rocks covered with orange lichen. Reindeer Moss and tundra flowers grow in every crack. The image of these beautiful rocks along the coast of Hudson's Bay will stay with me always. I saw a Richardson's Collared Lemming there. We returned to the Centre for supper and afterwards when travelling on one of the roads off the Dump Road we came upon "dog city". This is the area where they keep the sled dogs in summer. There were all sorts of huskies and malamutes and their puppies living there. I finally got to bed a midnight and began to realize that in "the land of the midnight sun" workdays would be long.

The next morning we were in the cafeteria by 8:00AM, ready for breakfast. The food at the Centre is both delicious and nutritious but you have to take your turn washing the dishes. They take good care of you, rooms cost approx.\$65 a day and researchers won't get a better bargain anywhere in Churchill. They also conduct special educational vacations for those interested in learning about this special area at different times of the year. You can contact them by phoning 1-204-675-2307 or on their website at [www.churchillmb.net/~cnsc](http://www.churchillmb.net/~cnsc). We spent all day exploring areas of tundra and boreal forest near the Centre and were rewarded by finding a patch of blooming Fairy Slipper orchid (*Calypso bulbosa*). This was 280 miles further north than Flin Flon, the most northerly location previously reported for it. We

saw a large pile of snow still unmelted in the forest and sat down on it to cool off. We saw lots of lovely plants and birds on the muskeg mounds along the roads.

That evening we went on a tour to see old Fort Prince of Wales and the beluga whales in the Churchill River. We set out on the Seanorth II, crossing the Churchill River at high tide, on our way to the fort. Malcolm, a Parks Canada guide, showed us around Fort Prince of Wales. We admired the cannons and old fortifications and took many pictures. It was an amazing feeling to be standing where the fur trade began so long ago.

After our tour of the fort, Captain Macri took the jet boat out into the river and shut off the engines. They had hydrophones in the water and we could hear the whales clicking and squeaking. We waited for them to come over and visit us and soon they did, blowing and chattering all the way. There are several thousand belugas in the bay at this time of the year fishing for Capelin.

The next day we went into town to see the Eskimo Museum and to shop. The museum contains many amazing artifacts including one of the world's finest collections of Inuit carvings in wood and stone that are interpretations of cultural myths. The stuffed Polar Bear and the huge Narwhal tusks in its collection were very impressive. After visiting some of the shops, we took a little tour of the town of Churchill. The main street is Kelsey Avenue a.k.a. The Highway. There are approximately 1000 permanent residents, down from 6000 during the 1960's when the rocket base was operating. We met a Dene woman and her Inuk daughter-in-law downtown. I bought a dream-catcher from her and we talked awhile. We had lunch at Gypsy's Bakery one day and enjoyed it too. People in Churchill are friendly.

We went down the Coast Road again to see the Lambair C46 cargo plane that crashed on the rocks there in 1979 - the famous and much photographed "Miss Piggy". On the way back along the Coast Road we saw two Arctic Hares and a family of Polar bears. We first sighted the mother bear and her two fat cubs on the rocks. When she noticed us she took the cubs into the water and they swam briefly but then she turned around and they climbed back up on the rocks. We were all taking photographs like mad; from inside the van, and the bears eventually walked across the road and disappeared on the other side. We got some marvellous pictures.

Another day when the weather was colder, we saw a pair of ptarmigan and their ten chicks. The chicks seemed quite unafraid and ran over our shoes when we were taking pictures. That same day, we were also lucky enough to spot a Pacific loon with her chicks. We could hear her calling every night from the Centre. We walked among the rocks on the Coast Road and we could see Beluga whales spouting gently out in the Bay. Eugene and I walked right down to the water's edge and I tasted the water. It was very salty, slightly bitter and very clear and cold. I found brown seaweed with tiny bladders, tiny Bent-nose Clam shells, spiral-shaped Lean Dog Whelk shells, Mussels and the old carapace of a Spider Crab in this marine environment.

We went to photograph the "Ithaca" at sunset one evening. The Ithaca is an old British steamship that ran aground in September 1960 during a storm and became stranded on the rocks at Bird Cove. On the way back we saw another large Polar bear.

We spent our last day in Churchill revisiting some of the sites we had seen previously. There was a wonderful lot of Alpine Arnica, a golden sunflower-like plant, growing between the old railway tracks leading to the Metal Dump where it crosses Goose Creek Road. On the way back to the Centre we photographed the wonderful purple Northern Hedysarum that was lining the sides of the gravel road as if it were part of a formal garden. It was hard to leave. Northern Manitoba turned out to be more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. Most people visit Churchill in the late fall, to see polar bears, but they should try visiting in mid-July too, to see the flowers and the birds on the tundra. It is truly unforgettable. There are several outfits that can organize tours to see wildlife at various times of the year. Paul and Pam Ratson's Nature 1st is one that comes to mind. They can be reached at [www.nature1sttours.ca](http://www.nature1sttours.ca) or by phoning 1-204-675-2147. We saw many different kinds of wildlife on this trip. Lists of the native orchid species, rare native plant species and some of the birds we saw appear below. Highlights of the trip were Pisew Falls, finding that patch of Fairy Slipper Orchid *Calypso bulbosa* in bloom and being lucky enough to see Polar Bears so close-up.

### Native Orchid Species

Small round-leaved Orchid	<i>Amerorchis rotundifolia</i>	X
Fairy Slipper Orchid	<i>Calypso bulbosa</i>	X
Long-bracted Orchid	<i>Coeloglossom viride</i>	
Western Spotted Coral Root	<i>Corallorhiza maculata</i> var. <i>occidentalis</i>	
Early Coral Root	<i>Corallorhiza trifida</i>	X
Ram's-head Lady's-slipper	<i>Cypripedium arietinum</i>	
Sparrow's-egg Lady's-slipper	<i>Cypripedium passerinum</i>	X
Small Yellow Lady's-slippers	<i>Cypripedium pubescens</i> var. <i>parviflorum</i>	
Large Yellow Lady's-slippers	<i>Cypripedium pubescens</i> var. <i>pubescens</i>	
Showy Lady's-slipper	<i>Cypripedium reginae</i>	
Lesser Rattlesnake-orchid	<i>Goodyera repens</i>	
Loesel's Twayblade	<i>Liparis loeselii</i>	
Northern Twayblade	<i>Listera borealis</i>	X
Heart leaf Twayblade	<i>Listera cordata</i>	X
White Adder's Mouth	<i>M.monophyllos</i> var. <i>brachypoda</i>	
Northern green bog-orchid	<i>Platanthera aquilonis</i>	X
Tall green bog-orchid	<i>Platanthera huronensis</i>	X
Blunt-leaf Orchid	<i>Platanthera obtusata</i>	X
Large round-leaved orchid	<i>Platanthera orbiculata</i>	
Hooded Ladies'-tresses	<i>Spiranthes romanzoffiana</i>	X

X = species found in Churchill

### Rare Native Plant Species

Yellow Star Grass	<i>Hypoxia hirsuta</i>	S3
Showy Lady's-slipper	<i>Cypripedium reginae</i>	S3
Ram's-head Lady's-slipper	<i>Cypripedium arietinum</i>	S2
White Adder's Mouth	<i>M.monophyllos</i> var. <i>brachypoda</i>	S2

Large round-leaved orchid      *Platanthera orbiculata*    S3  
 White Mountain Avens *Dryas integrifolia*            S3  
 Lapland Rosebay            *Rhododendron lapponicum*      S2  
 Trailing Willow *Salix arctophila*    S3  
 Northern Twayblade      *Listera borealis*    S2  
 Net-veined Willow        *Salix reticulata*    S3  
 Erect Primrose *Primula stricta*    S2  
 Alpine Azalea    *Loiseleuria procumbens*            S3

**Birds**

Common Loon with chicks  
 Pacific Loon with chicks  
 Tundra Swan  
 Canada Goose  
 Common Merganser  
 Eider Duck with chicks  
 Pelican  
 Parasitic Jaeger  
 Bonaparte's Gull  
 Ring-billed Gull  
 Arctic Tern  
 Sandhill Crane  
 Semi-palmated Plover  
 Golden Plover with chicks  
 Marbled Godwit  
 Hudsonian Godwit  
 Whimbrel  
 Willet  
 Greater Yellow-legs  
 Lesser Yellow-legs  
 Phalarope  
 Buff-breasted Sandpiper  
 Willow Ptarmigan with chicks  
 Northern Harrier  
 Northern Goshawk  
 Bald Eagle  
 Turkey Vulture  
 Osprey  
 Raven  
 Grey Jay  
 White-crowned Sparrow

Pictures:

For pictures, see the slideshow: Orchids and Wildlife in Churchill - 2004.