

# Arctic Canada

## A Greentours Itinerary

### Day 1

#### Yellowknife

We arrive into Calgary in the early afternoon with plenty of time to catch our flight to Yellowknife, the capital of Northwest Territories, though a town of only about 25,000 people!

### Days 2 - 9

#### Arctic Canada - Bathurst Inlet

On Day 2 we'll fly northwards and within a few miles of leaving town the already stunted trees disappear as we fly over an incredible landscape of lakes and tundra. Other than two mines, which have an ice road built to service them each winter, there's no buildings in two and a half hours of flying until we descend from the Barrenlands into the tiny settlement of Bathurst Inlet.

Bathurst Inlet is very isolated. The red-roofed lodge buildings and perhaps twenty local Inuit homes sit prettily on a spur of land jutting between an arm of the Arctic Ocean and a huge river delta. And that's it for mile after mile after mile of untouched Arctic wilderness. Its hundreds of miles to the nearest settlement bigger than Bathurst and fifty or more to even the nearest house!

The landscapes are immense. Much of the Canadian Arctic is low-lying but here the high Barrenlands plateau is dissected by the cascading waters of the Hood and Burnside Rivers, these emerging from deep gorges as the land drops abruptly to the sea. For Bathurst inlet is a classic 'graben', a section of land that has dropped between parallel fault lines.

The lodge is thirty miles north of the Arctic Circle and in mid-summer is bathed in twenty four hours of sunlight, yet at these latitudes the summer is very short and the lodge is only open for a month each year! Patches of sea ice will still occupy the inlet's waters and there are banks of snow against the great rocky ridges. Yet much of the water and land will be open with the latter covered in a colourful mass of flowers. There are blue lupins, purple and yellow milk-vetches, yellow and white anemones and pink rhododendrons.

By now Caribou will be moving south, though we'll see individuals and small groups near the lodge and on the inlet's islands. Caribou in the Arctic rarely if ever see humans and often behave strangely when they do, sometimes trotting back and forth right near us, as if they are not sure what to do! There are several large predators in the area. And in such an undisturbed wilderness one can actually get to see them! Most obvious, and becoming much commoner, are Grizzly Bears. Though they do take Caribou the bears' diet is varied and they consume plenty of vegetable matter - we'll likely see them digging up the liquorice-root (*Hedysarum alpinum*) which is one of their favourites. They can seem quite frenzied about the

whole thing almost as if they've got to eat as much food as possible during the short time available! You should expect to see several during your stay. Arctic Wolves are also becoming much easier to see with numbers increasing. These stunningly beautiful thickly furred almost totally white Wolves have been seen more frequently in recent years particularly close to the settlement. In 2017 they had a den across the delta from the lodge and could be seen from the lodge itself or from the settlement on most days, sometimes coming to within a hundred metres of the buildings.

Musk Oxen encapsulate the very essence of the Arctic. These stocky Bovids have thick shaggy brown coats covering surprisingly pure white socks! The males often stand alone amongst the cotton grass and rhododendron that cover the landscape behind Swan Lake in a pinky-white haze. Herds of females search out the reticulate-leaved willow that they so like. These animals are relatively easy to approach though one has to beware males who might fancy a spot of sparring - luckily they have rigid behavioural patterns so it'll be easy to tell if we need to back away! We'll certainly see them during our stay but how often and how close is a matter of chance.

The lodge has its own boat which ice-permitting is used to visit various islands in the bay and to travel along the 'Snye' to Swan Lake. It is a giant zodiac covered with a wooden platform and so allows us to sit in comfort in chairs and is so stable that one can easily use a telescope from the deck. One often sees Ringed Seals popping their heads up to stare inquisitively at us. Wolverines are sometimes spotted from the boat (average about one every three weeks or so) and this is also much the best way to get close to any of the Grizzly Bears we might find! Fabulous almost metre-long Yellow-billed Loons and noisy Red-throated Loons are a common sight. Golden Eagles are very visible and there's a very good chance of seeing Gyr Falcons as they usually breed near Swan Lake - white phase birds too! Perhaps the commonest mammal is the 'hick-hick' as the Inuit call the Arctic Ground Squirrels which inhabit burrows throughout, including in the settlement where they are one of the Inuit children's favourite playthings! Willow Ptarmigan frequent the settlement, the pairs walking along the paths between buildings with their tiny babies. White-crowned and Harris's Sparrows sit atop alders as Least Sandpipers give their little song flights. Red-necked Phalarope breed on the nearby ponds and Glaucous and Thayer's Gulls sit on sandbars offshore.

The flora is quite exceptional. No less than seven louseworts decorate damp tundra including the beautiful Woolly Lousewort and crimson-tipped *Pedicularis sudetica*. *Primulas stricta* and *egaliksensis* join various buttercups in wet flushes whilst scree is covered in lichens, Arctic River Beauty and the lovely pink Pallas's Wallflower. There are many saxifrages, magnificent shows of *Cassiope* or White Arctic Heathers, the vari-coloured Painted Cup, abundant Bog Rosemary and even a couple of orchids, the Coralroot Orchid and *Platanthera obtusata*. By the coast we'll find Marsh Felwort, Oysterplant, massed displays of Beach Pea and on stony beaches the gorgeous Arctic Poppy. False-asphodels, the minute moss-inhabiting *Pinguicula villosa*, and the striking Fireworks Flower are part of a rich tapestry of flowers perhaps surprising so far north.

One of the features of a stay at Bathurst is the involvement of the local community. The Warner family co-own the lodge with the local Inuit. Perhaps half the inhabitants of Bathurst will be cooking, guiding, driving the boats, or searching for wildlife for us during our stay. And those that aren't will probably feature in the Inuit fashion show where the local children love to show off some beautiful traditional clothing still used for hunting in winter and for 'going out'! The lodge has a wonderful collection of local artefacts with tools, bows and even kayaks all made in the traditional way.

## **Day 10**

### **Yellowknife**

Arriving back into Yellowknife we'll have an evening and a morning to enjoy Yellowknife's quirky atmosphere and to explore the stunted taiga forest in local nature reserves and take a drive to Edzo-Rae with the immensity of Great Slave Lake always close by. Hooded Ladies' Tresses flower in mossy forest and the bare Canadian Shield rock hosts beauties such as pink and yellow *Corydalis sempervirens*. There's a variety of birds to be seen ranging from Bald Eagles and Ruffed Grouse to Canvasback and the gorgeous Horned Grebe.

Around lunchtime we fly down to Edmonton with plenty of time to catch our evening flight back to Europe.

## **Day 11**

### **Arrive Europe**

Or....

### **Wood Buffalo National Park Extension**

We've decided to describe this as another version of the tour rather than as a tour with an extension because after visiting Bathurst Inlet on this version you go straight on to Hay River and thence Wood Buffalo National Park. So the tour follows that described above until the morning of Day 10.....

## **Day 10**

### **To Hay River**

We journey from Yellowknife to Wood Buffalo National Park, the road skirting just half of Great Slave Lake, but as this is one of the world's largest freshwater lakes then clearly it's some way. Over 600km in fact, though all on good roads. To break the journey we spend the first night at Hay River. American Bison have recently colonised this area, and they enjoy the roadside grazing, so we are sure to get close to them. We'll seek Beaver and Black Bear and there's a variety of birds to be seen ranging from Bald Eagles and Ruffed Grouse to Canvasback and the gorgeous Horned Grebe. 'Silver' phase Red Foxes are a very strange and beautiful form of this familiar animal and they are common in the area.

## **Days 11 – 14**

### **Wood Buffalo National Park**

We'll arrive by lunchtime and settle into our hotel in Fort Smith, our base for exploring the Wood Buffalo National Park. The superlatives for this incredible place are many. It's the largest national park in North America, indeed, it could swallow the whole of Switzerland. It has the largest inland delta in the world – the magnificent Peace-Athabasca Delta. It contains the largest undisturbed flora-rich grass and sedge meadows in North America. It is these that support the largest free-roaming herd of Wood Bison (a larger, darker version of the Plains Bison) in the world. Numbers have risen considerably from a low in the 1920s when the park was created and there are now in excess of five and a half thousand of them. Not surprisingly, in a wilderness of this size, there's a full assemblage of mammal species including Wolves, Lynx and Black Bears. The first two are hard to see, though sightings of either can occur and we might hope for one or the other on our visit. However Black Bears are very common and we can expect to see several daily, though they are not always as compliant regarding photography as their Rockies counterparts. Other mammals in the park include Woodland Caribou, Moose, Beaver and Woodchuck. The first two are very shy and rather scarce and a sighting would be a bonus, however the second two are common and easy to photograph.

We'll be staying in a hotel called Pelican Rapids which is a clue to another of Fort Smith's claims to fame. Groups of American White Pelicans are attracted to the various rapids on the vast Slave River that cuts through the forests right by the town. The half mile wide river has a series of rapids all of which host pelicans and where you can go down and sit on the rocks as they do their thing within metres of you – absolutely perfect for photography.

Another of the park's claims to fame is that virtually the entire world population of Whooping Cranes breeds within its boundaries. These are in a strict protected zone to which there is no access so sightings are unlikely, however there are plenty of other great birds including Sandhill Cranes which are common, and we'll hope to see Great Grey Owl, Whistling Swan and Bald Eagle. Wood Buffalo has some of the world's finest areas of Karst limestone (and an associated special flora such as the Saline Shooting Star), with sinkholes and underground waterways, and is famed for its 'salt plains' where strange 'evaporite' formations produce a weird landscape. This vast wilderness receives far fewer visitors each year than most of Canada's protected areas largely because it is so far from anywhere, and this helps to maintain the incredible experience of being in a true wilderness for those that do manage to get to Wood Buffalo. During the afternoon of Day 14 we'll drive down to High Level and spend a night there.

## **Day 15 to Edmonton**

We'll drive south through some wonderful wild country with sightings of Elk, White-tailed Deer and yet more Black Bears likely on the way. Coyotes too. We'll arrive into Edmonton in plenty of time for our evening departure for the UK.

## **Day 16 Arrive UK**

### **Vancouver Island Pre-Tour**

#### **Day 1 to Vancouver Island and to Qualicum Beach**

We'll arrive into Victoria's Airport at the southern end of Vancouver Island. It is a little over two hours from there to Qualicum Beach where we will settle into the eponymous Inn before heading out to explore the coastal habitats roundabout. The beautiful Anna's Hummingbird speeds between blooms whilst Song Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos seem to be everywhere. Among the trees we'll find the lovely Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Northern Flicker and Spotted Towhee, and along the coast itself we can look for Belted Kingfisher, Northwestern Crow, Black Turnstones and the immaculate Black Oystercatcher.

#### **Day 2 Little Qualicum Provincial Park and transfer to Ucluelet**

After breakfast we'll explore Little Qualicum Provincial Park. Here is an ancient forest, the huge Red Cedars interspersed with Western Hemlock, Large Leaf Maple and Arbutus trees with their strange peeling bark. The unusual saprophytic orchid the Western Coralroot blooms here and we'll find Prince's Pine and the lovely Chocolate Lily, not actually a lily but a fritillary. The extraordinary Vancouver Groundcone, a strange purple apparition that parasitises the roots of the Salal is not uncommon in Little Qualicum. Later in the morning we'll head for Ucluelet and the wonderful habitats of the Pacific Rim National Park. Here we'll settle into the rather lovely Blackrock Oceanfront Resort for a three night stay.

A trail from close to our hotel takes us through rock pools with a stunning array of large almost lime green anemones, whilst various gulls and Common Loons will be offshore. An incredibly scenic trail takes us round a spectacular headland, through contorted and twisted Red Cedars, to the Amphitrite Lighthouse. Myriad fungi decorate the mossy woodland floor including orange-yellow stacks of Chicken-of-the-Woods. There are many viewpoints from which we'll be able to watch for sea-going wildlife. Gray Whales, Humpback Whales and Orcas are all possible, as well as Steller's Sea Lions, Sea Otters, and Harbour Porpoises. The birding is excellent too with elegant Black Oystercatchers, Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots. The stunted twisted Shorepines emerging from the thick moss along the Sphagnum

Bog Trail make for surreal scenery, the trees growing sideways instead of upwards because of the very poor growing conditions. The bog flora here is good with species such as Labrador Tea, Bog Laurel, Crowberry, Bog Cranberry, Sundew and Sweet Gale all present and there's a decent chance of spotting a Columbian Black-tailed Deer or two in the Muskeg forest.

### **Day 3**

#### **Pacific Rim National Park: Tofino Boat Trip – Black Bears & Sea Otters**

We'll take our first boat trip out from Tofino where our local boatman will soon have us meeting our first unimaginably cute Sea Otters. These lovely animals have returned in numbers to the Pacific Coast after being driven to the verge of extinction. They have increased dramatically in numbers in recent years which has been great news for the underwater kelp forests as the Otters prey on their main herbivore the sea urchin. The study of the change in habitats brought about by the return of the Sea Otter has been fundamental in elucidating the idea of Trophic Cascades, an important concept now in ecological understanding. Sometimes we'll see them nuzzling their chests – blowing air into the fur to warm up. Sometimes we'll see them holding purple spiny sea urchins, clutching the urchin with their front paws as they swim on their backs, watching us all the while.

Black Oystercatchers feed on the rocky shore, groups of Surf Scoter loaf off the little bays and Belted Kingfishers hunt along the shore. The black backs of Harbour Porpoises surface from time to time around us. There can be a lot of Sea Otters in the waters here and we may see rafts of them wrapping themselves in strands of kelp, so that they can rest up or even sleep without drifting away. We've also a good chance of see babies at this time of year. We've a decent chance too of finding Orcas too. The pods that occur here at this season are the 'transient' mammal-eating form, isolated in breeding terms from the populations that occur in the Gulf Islands and in ecological terms too. Vancouver Island is famed for its bears and this trip is at the peak time of year for watching and photographing 'Beach Bears' (Black Bears) foraging along the shore line. We'll see a number of them on our boat trips, all busy 'beach-combing' – it is great fun watching them turning over rocks in search of a tasty snack.

We'll have time to explore the trails in the Pacific Rim National Park either before or after our boat trips each day. Here we can look for Ruffed Grouse, or if we are lucky the rare Sooty Grouse, and we'll note the vertical lines of drilled holes in tree bark that are the indications of Sapsuckers (woodpeckers) feeding. Tasty Red Huckleberry, Himalayan Blackberry (introduced from India via England), Thimbleberry and Oval-leaved Blueberry line the trails that lead to some ponds where we'll look for Beavers.

### **Day 4**

#### **Pacific Rim National Park: Whale-watching Boat Trip**

Common Seals haul out on the perfectly-formed rocky islets just out of the harbour. As we pass wooded islands, Bald Eagles gaze at the scene from beautiful

Shore Pines draped with mosses. A population of around two hundred Pacific Gray Whales spend April to November in Clayoquot and Barkley Sounds. We'll have the chance to get close to this oddest looking of the great whales. Humpback Whales will also be on the agenda and we've another chance of Orcas though sightings are only every couple of weeks here! We'll also see Harbour Seals and, as everywhere, Bald Eagles and Great Blue Herons. Wolf sightings are also possible here.

## **Day 5**

### **Cathedral Grove and to Moonwater Lodge**

Wandering Vancouver's old-growth temperate rainforests is an experience that will leave you awed. The moss and fern-laden understory is peppered with giants – Western hemlock, Yellow Cedar, Western Red Cedar, Douglas-fir, Amabilis Fir and Sitka Spruce - these are some of the largest trees in North America. Red Squirrels scold us as we watch Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Pacific Wrens and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. Cathedral Grove has an 800 year old Douglas Fir that stands 76 metres tall and has a circumference of 9m.

The giant moss-covered trunks shine in the golden light streaming down from the high canopy – hence 'Cathedral' Grove. Varied Thrush is amongst the more beautiful of the birds we might see and others include Northern Goshawk, Hammond's Flycatcher, Brown Creeper and Hermit Thrush.

In the afternoon we'll continue along to Malahat where we'll find the lovely Moonwater Bay Lodge, our home for the last two nights of the tour.

## **Day 6**

### **Whale-watching trip for Orcas and Sea Otters**

The boat trips out from the Victoria Island are well-known for their almost guaranteed (95% success rate) wildlife shows with pods of Orcas frequently observed at close range. These are exceptionally dynamic animals and every encounter seems to reveal a new facet of their daily lives – it is astonishing just how well one can see these incredibly powerful inhabitants of the island's seas. The Orcas we'll likely see in the Gulf Islands near Victoria comprise three pods totalling about eighty animals – collectively they are the Southern Resident Orcas. These Orcas specialise in feeding on salmon preparing for the spawning runs in the autumn. We'll have plenty of time amongst the Orcas and will gain an insight into the behaviour we'll be witnessing as well as learning about their lives so well-known now to the boat guides. As we watch them small groups of Rhinoceros Auklets swim nearby in rafts, some with beaks stuffed with small silver fish. Harbour Porpoises appear briefly from time to time and we've a good chance of seeing a Minke Whale or two, and we've another chance of watching Humpback Whales. We'll encounter huge sleek Steller's Sea Lions swimming under the surface of the crystal-clear water eyeing us disdainfully as they pass. Steller's Sea Lions are not much smaller than a Grizzly Bear. We've another chance of seeing those

incredibly cute Sea Otters on this trip and there's a possibility of seeing River Otters in the harbour too.

## **Day 7 Departure**

Indigo-hued Steller's Jays are common along the trails at Moonwater Bay. Bald Eagles nest in the bay and we'll likely see Downy Woodpecker, Violet-Green Swallow, Red-tailed Hawk and White-crowned Sparrow, before returning to the lodge for breakfast. From Moonwater we've a one hour drive to the airport in Victoria. We'll fly via Calgary to Yellowknife to join the Main Tour on Day 1

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