

Arctic Bay, Baffin Island, Canada 20 June -28 June 2014

Two years ago one of my travel buddies decided she wanted to see narwhals. She found a trip that was offered by the Canadian company Arctic Kingdom called “Great Migrations of the Northwest Passage”. Not only did the trip talk of seeing one of the greatest congregations of narwhals possible, but also the chance of seeing large numbers of belugas (a species I had seen before), and bowhead whales. The chance to snorkel with whales was also something offered by the company. After checking the trip out and reading Jon Hall's similar account in Pond Inlet, I decided that this looked like a great opportunity for me, and invited myself to my friend's trip.

Day 1 – uneventful. I left my home in the US and spent the night at the Albert at Bay Hotel in downtown Ottawa. The hotel has a good central location, but nothing to make it stand out from any of the similar suite type hotels in the city.

Day 2 – took a three hour flight from Ottawa to Iqaluit where I met up with the rest of the group on the trip ,then flew onwards to Arctic Bay for an additional three hours. There is only one airline, First Air, that takes this route and this was by far the most expensive plane ticket I have every purchased. I am pretty sure I could have gotten an around the world ticket (maybe twice and in first class) for the same price. When asked by our company why the tickets are so expensive, the airlines response was , because we are the only ones that fly there, and we can. Arctic Bay is a small community of about 900 individuals that are predominately Inuit. It sits on the northern portion of Baffin island and is surrounded by hills on three sides. A large gravel spit faces Adams Sound that feeds into the nearby Admiralty inlet. This drains into Lancaster Sound that borders the Northwest Passage. It would be here, at the ice floe edge, that we would be doing the majority of the wildlife viewing. I was told that unlike Pond Inlet, the majority of the narwhals are not just in transit mode going by the floe edge quickly, but stop and rest for periods of time. This is what makes the area a favorite spot for wildlife film crews and photographers for the species. In Arctic Bay we stayed at the Tangmaaruik Inn, the only hotel in town for the night. That night we went out to an area called Uluksan Point that is roughly a mile from the town proper

on the right hand side if you are facing the water. We went to watch Inuit throat singing (our cultural experience that seems to be in every tour). This was also the area I was told that was good for lemmings. Both brown and collared lemmings are reported in the area. I was also told it was not a great lemming year, and this proved true as I spend a few hours walking back to the town climbing the nearby hills looking for them with no luck.

Day 3 – We took a small school bus to Victor Bay to meet up with our Inuit guides who would be transporting us to our camp on the floe ice and assisting with wildlife viewing safety on the floe edge. The Bay is also the starting point for the hunters in the community and I counted six ringed seal carcasses that were scattered around where we were departing, that the hunters left for the locals to feed their dogs. Just like Jon Hall, we were transported in small wooden sled like vehicles called iglutuks that came equipped with suspension seats. The iglutuks were dragged by snowmobiles across the ice. We also had a dog brought with us (with her 4 week old puppies) that was used as a bear alarm system in case a polar bear decided to get close to camp (which never happened).



The temporary camp had been set up by some of the Arctic kingdom workers about 70 km from Victor bay. The iglutuk ride took about 6 hours, this however including times we needed to traverse ice cracks, watching a lone ringed seal on the ice, and snack stops. The camp itself consisted of a large “mess hall” type tent where we ate, a bathroom with two marine type toilets, and tents for sleeping

that each had two twin beds, a table, and at night we could use small propane

heaters to stay warm.

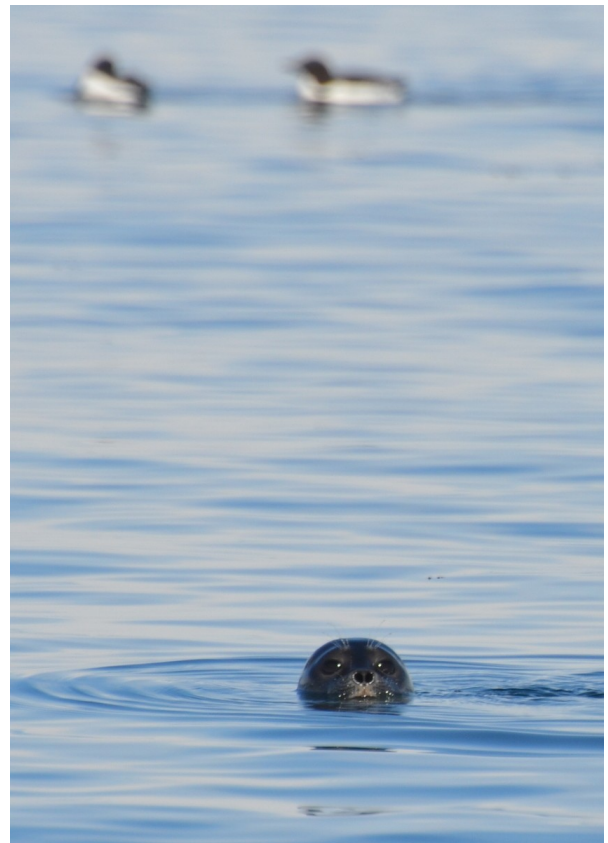


That night we took our first trip out to the floe edge. Each day we were there the edge looked different. This night a large piece of ice had broken off and created a small inlet. The majority of the whales we saw that night were on the opposite side of the ice and too far to get adequate pictures.

Day 4 – This time of year Arctic Bay gets sunlight all

day long. We were also there during the solstice which made it even brighter. Every place I had ever been in the arctic always at least had some dusk like lighting, and this was my first experience with virtually being able to track the sun going around in a circle above the horizon over the course of the day. It was also the first “safari” type trip I have ever been on that getting up really early was not necessary. We got to sleep in until at least 9-9:30 am each morning, eat breakfast, then leisurely go to the floe edge which was about 20 km from the camp. The narwhals I was told are most active around 1pm ish, and sure enough this seemed true every day. This day the chunk of ice from the previous evening had floated off and we got to stand within a few meters of the actual floe edge. We were treated to large numbers of narwhals, a small group of belugas, and my first ever bowhead whale that virtually was right up against the floe edge. The large number of cod and other similar sized fish that are just under the ice edge are what attracts the whales so close to the floe edge. Besides the bowhead being so close, the narwhals at times would swim right up to the edge at the base of our feet, go under the ice, then come back out in the same spot. The company also placed a hydrophone into the water to listen to the whales. I had heard before that bearded seals noises sound like bombs being dropped and at times it sounded like dozens of seals were around us getting ready to explode the ice. The narwhal underwater noise sounded like a chain saw to me (while above the water they sound like

they are passing gas in both directions), and of course the belugas had high pitched clicks, squeaks and whistles (maybe not so canary). I also saw three adult ringed seals in the water and one juvenile right up against the edge staring at us.



Day 5 – the best day of the trip. Large pieces of ice that had previously floated out to sea, had come back and created small pools. One of the pools we could safely walk up to and small groups of female narwhals with their calves were using the pool as a resting spot. Some would just float right in front of us for 5 minutes, and others would semi jump out of the water to have a look at us. This was also something all the calves were doing repeatedly. This was by far the best baby whale experience I have ever had minus the gray whales in San Ignacio, Mexico. We had prolonged views of very close whales. We also were able to watch our first polar bear through binoculars on the ice, followed by a female with two cubs, also through binoculars, on the way back to camp.







Day 6 – we saw more ringed seals on the ice on our way to the floe edge.



Again today all the fragment ice had drifted away and we were directly on the floe edge. We literally saw hundreds of narwhals in full feeding frenzy going by us and under us as well as about 10 belugas in the start of the day. This was also the day that they started to offer us the chance to snorkel. While they had dry suits, there was still a large portion of your face that would be exposed to the cold water. I had every intention of doing it, well in theory. As much as I like the animals that live in the cold, I hate the cold. I put my hand in the water and within a few seconds of not really being able to feel it any more I figured the kayaking option with the narwhals would be the better option for me. I also watched as a few of the people in my group got into the water, went into what I would consider partial shock, then had to be helped out of the water while being dragged by the kayakers. A few more sturdy people seemed fine with the temperature and were in the water for prolonged periods of time. The kayaking satisfied me enough, and I enjoyed watching the narwhals swim under and by me. I also enjoyed watching a large bearded seal consider jumping up on or maybe pushing over one of my group mates kayak.

Day 7 – our last day on the floe edge. People were given the option to snorkel and only the Inuit guides opted to do it. We again were right at the floe edge and saw large numbers of narwhals, mainly large males with tusks go by. I also saw three different ringed seals.

Day 8 – we made it make to Arctic Bay proper. This was the only bad weather day we had and it either sleeted or rained on the way back. What took six hours in the beginning, only took three on the way back. Once in town I was determined to try for lemmings again. The point had not worked well for me, so per the advice of one of our guides trying the rocky hill behind the hotel was the next best bet. I was also given the advice to try to talk one of the small boys in the town into looking



with me, something that had worked well for Jon in Pond Inlet. Not having what I consider to be great large human-small human interpersonal skills, I talked one of my group mates into approaching some of the children. At first groups of them would either run away from us laughing, talk to us in the local language, or tell us they had no idea where the lemmings were/while



looking at us like we were crazy. We were finally able to convince a group of 5 boys, led by one named Vincent, to help us look. Right before we had approached them, the boys had gone to the local grocery and bought a container of jalapeno peppers that they were each taking turns eating whole. There is nothing like being

on a hill looking for wildlife with the sound of small boys choking, spitting and gagging, then repeatedly getting asked if I had any milk on me that they could drink to counter the burning sensation in their mouths. Despite this distraction, Vincent did give it the “all out” trying to find me a lemming. I ended up seeing a lot of lemming droppings, as well as those from arctic hares, but no lemmings themselves. After what seemed like forever I asked Vincent when the last time he had seen a lemming on the hill we were standing on, and he replied never.

Day 9 – another 6 hours back to Ottawa and back at the Albert at Bay hotel. We ended up watching 5-6 of the black phase of eastern gray squirrels that were located in the trees by the apartments across the street from the hotel.



Day 10 – back to the US. Along the way to the airport in Ottawa we drove along Colonel Bay Drive that went by Carleton University. In front of the gates of the University there is a small grassy area that was filled with groundhogs in close proximity to each other. By groundhog number 16 ,I stopped counting.

A couple thoughts about my trip -

-It really is one of the most beautiful places in the arctic I have been. The lack of darkness only added to how majestic it looked.

-I am pretty positive I can never look at a jalapeno pepper the same.

-In August of 2007 National Geographic had an article about the narwhals and more specifically about the hunting practices of the Inuits in Arctic Bay . The article did not paint a pretty picture of the hunting and talked about the large number of whales that were shot and killed and were not able to be retrieved ,and also about the some of the poor rifle skills and young age of some of the hunting Inuits. After the article came out the community, not happy with their poor portrayal, closed its door to tourism and also wildlife photographers and film crews. Arctic Kingdom is the only company that currently doing floe trips to Arctic Bay and they helped with turning around the closure. When I signed up for the trip I was made aware that the area we were going in was not a national park, and the fact that the narwhals were so easy to see there, was also the reason it was one of the best places to hunt them. I was told that maybe we would see hunters nearby but that we would be kept far away from them. This was not true. Every day we were on the floe edge we would be in the middle and on the far edges to to either one side or both sides people were hunting. I saw multiple dead whales, heard multiple gunshots and saw a few whales hauled out after being shot. I also saw a large number of whales with gunshot wounds. My decision to not eat the flesh of mammals is my own, and I understand that not everyone feels this way and understand the whole subsistence living situation and harsh conditions the Inuits live in. I was just surprised that in my opinion , a large portion of the whales was not harvested. The raw skin and blubber (called mattak), the muscles along the back, the fins and tail and of course the tusk

from males were taken. Everything else was left on the floe edge. I had one of the guides try to tell me nothing was wasted as the carcass would go out to sea and feed something. Most of the whales I saw killed were males. I realize the killing is traditional (well maybe not the rifle part) but I was also concerned with the fact that they were the main ones targeted so they could sell the tusks. I also really couldn't get a straight answer from anyone about the actual whale quota for the community. Doing an average of all the numbers I was given I came up with 231. I was told the number was closely monitored by the community. From what I saw the rifle skills of the hunters were good, and I didn't think there were a lot of misses based on the number of shots I heard and the number of dead whales I saw. I had never been on a nature trip with so much hunting around me, and I had never seen a dead whale before. In retrospect even though I had some amazing encounters with the whales, I am not sure I would do the trip again if I had known what I would see. I'll stop my soapbox here and not even get into my conversations about polar bears with some of the Inuits.

Species seen

Arctic Bay

1. Narwhal “*monodon monoceros*”
2. Beluga whale “*Delphinapterus leucas*”
3. Bowhead whale “*Balaena mysticetus*”
4. Polar bear “*Ursus maritimus*”
5. Ringed seal “*Pusa hispida*”
6. Bearded seal “*Erignathus barbatus*”

Ottawa

1. Eastern gray squirrel “*Sciurus carolinensis*”
2. Groundhog “*marmota monax*”