

## CHUKOTKA, RUSSIA 4 August 2013- 21 August 2013

About two years ago I watched a special on Animal Planet about Wrangel Island. It talked of huge numbers of polar bears, walrus and arctic foxes. I was hooked. I had seen polar bears in Churchill before, but felt a bunch of hungry bears leaning up against tundra vehicles and drooling outside tundra “lodges” was less than a wild experience for me. I wanted to see bears on some ice. After doing some research on how to get to Wrangel Island, I found a company called Heritage Expeditions that offers a few far east Russian cruise opportunities. The tour called “Across the Top of the World” included Wrangel Island as well as a small portion of the northern Siberian coast in the region of Chukotka. This was my first expedition to the arctic.

Day 1 – I started my trip one day early in Nome, Alaska. I had been to Alaska before, but never this far north. I stayed at the Dredge No 7 hotel which is just outside Nome. Signs on the door reminded visitors to take caution in the parking lot, as it was frequented by itchy musk ox that liked to scratch their back ends on the dredges the owner had put in front of the hotel for decoration. Unfortunately for me the parking lot stayed oxen free while I was there. I took a day trip with Nome Discovery Tours to go down the Teller Highway to look for wildlife. The highway runs 72 miles from Nome proper to the Inupiat village of Teller, all along gravel roads. Sadly the day I went it was raining. This made watching mammals difficult. Distant views of reindeer, a single arctic ground squirrel, and a lone male musk oxen were all I saw that day. The squirrel and musk oxen were very close to mile marker 36 near the feather river bridge. I did however on my day trip learn more about gold mining/dredging than I thought was possible. Reindeer had been reintroduced to the Seward peninsula in 1891 and small groups of musk ox in 1970 and 1981.



Day 2/3 - Involved a charter flight on Bering Air to Anadyr, Russia. A port city, Anadyr is also the capital of Chukotka. Arriving involved one of the most interesting immigrations I had to go through. Photos were taken of each of the passengers coming off the plane by “less than happy” looking immigration officers. I was impressed however with the female officers choice of 5-6 inch stiletto heels with their uniforms. We were then herded down several

hallways to a small room to fill out immigration cards. Two guards blocked any possible escape from the room. The actual passport control area looked like cattle chutes. It took what seemed like ten minutes for me to get the clearance to go through, with the officer

multiple times looking at me and frowning, then typing multiple things into her computer. We then went to a waiting/holding area before we were put into small vans to drive to the Anadyr airport ferry terminal. The ferry takes about 15 minutes to get to the actual city of Anadyr. As our trip was at the same time as a salmon run was going through the Anadyr estuary, dozens of Beluga whales with calves and Largha seals were near the ferry terminal in a feeding frenzy. We continued to see both species in lesser numbers along the way to Anadyr.



Coming off the ferry we were again photographed by immigration officers as well as videotaped. As we had a few hours to kill before getting on the boat, we took a city tour that involved the city's wooden Russian orthodox church, the city museum, and numerous statues and monuments around the city. The only wildlife I saw were a group of 15-16 year boys that told me they loved me in broken English. If I had been a 15-16 year old girl, it would have been magical. From Anadyr we took another ferry to get on our ship the “Professor Khromov”.

Day 4 – We had already started heading north and stopped in an area of Preobrazheniya Bay to look at some bird cliffs. Various species of auklets, guillemots and horned and tufted puffins were along the “mammal free” cliffs.

Day 5 – We were originally supposed to stop at a place called “Whale bone alley” which I will talk about later, however bad weather forced us to change plans and stop at Arkamchechen Island. The water in the bay around the island (Glazenapa Bay) was filled with Larga seals! I had never seen so many seals in the water at one time. They seemed very curious and many surrounded the ship, however whenever I would raise my camera to take a picture they would dive underwater. This happened to me over and over and over. The island itself had several rocky areas that I was told by some of the workers on the ship would be a good habitat for Northern Pika. I asked one of the naturalists on the ship what would be a good “pika viewing method” and she told me to just listen for what sounds like a bird call. This all seemed well and good at first, until multiple noisy small birds kept flying by me and tricking me while I was perched on the rocks. After what seemed like an eternity, I finally saw my one and only pika for the

day.



The second stop of the day was an area in the Gilmymyl Bay that had another small island that contained some hot springs that we could relax in. The group was split into three-the first to go to a house owned by a native Chukchi man named Ivan, the second to soak in the hot springs, and the third to go along a small river bed to look for wildlife. I of course picked option number three. Despite multiple burrows in the tundra that should have produced small mammals, I saw nothing. This was most likely because of the fact that two juvenile Rough Legged Hawks were screeching at each other for 20 minutes as they were flying around,

landing, then flying around again. I walked back to the spit near the landing zodiacs where some of my shipmates told me that a very friendly arctic ground squirrel was hanging out by Ivan's house. There was a small shack that Ivan had been drying some salmon that the squirrel was under. I only had about 20 minutes before we were supposed to leave the area, however as I only had a crappy view of an arctic ground squirrel in Nome, I wanted to see it. I was warned however that Ivan had just been at a funeral and had been "drinking" so to be careful. Despite my trying to convince one person to walk over with me, I went alone. I felt comfortable with the fact that I was wearing three pairs of pants, two shirts, a fleece, an arctic jacket, a headband and a hat, that drinking or not, no man would want to approach me. I cautiously walked over to the shack area and saw no one was around, including the squirrel. I looked over at the actual house area only to discover Ivan and three smaller versions of Ivan were sitting on the roof staring down at me. Undaunted, I turned back to my task at hand. So I have read over and over people talking about "squeaking" for chipmunks and squirrels to get their attention. Despite all my observations of the three eastern chipmunks that come to my bird (actually squirrel) feeder on a daily basis, I have never heard a good repeatable squeak to mimic. I think I might be secretly patiently waiting for Jon to come out with a "Squeaking with Squirrels" instructional video on this web blog..... I can however do a mean otter squeak sound and opted to try it out. Sure enough after about 20 seconds of my otter noise, the squirrel came barging out of a hole and started making noises back at me. Excited, I maybe started squeaking really loud, only to the amusement of the four Ivans on the roof behind me. A piece of salmon had dropped on the ground near to where the squirrel was. It then went over to the salmon and started gorging itself. I was not sure which was more disturbing to me, the fact that I had never seen a flesh eating squirrel before (yeah, yeah I know it can happen), or the grunting/clucking noises it was making while chewing, then looking up at me repeatedly with salmon all over its face. Needless to say I referred to this squirrel as the Zombie squirrel for the rest of the trip.







After going back to the ship, I decided a quick nap would be in order after all my hard lemming searching. I was quickly awoken to one of my shipmates screaming POLAR BEAR outside my door. I then had adequate views of a female bear with a cub running away from the ship. One of the zodiacs full of passengers went right by her on the way to the ship. I called down to them to alert them of the bears and they ended up getting spectacular views of her. I should have jumped into the zodiac first before telling them..... Live and learn.







Day 9 – We were stuck in the ice for the majority of the morning. A lone male polar bear on a piece of ice and bearded and ring seals in the water were the mammals for the morning.

In the evening around 8 pm we took a zodiac landing to a place called Dragi Harbor. It was a base camp for the survivors of the Karluk wreck. A lone male polar bear was chewing on a walrus hide when we got there. He allowed us to

watch him for about 20 minutes before walking away. There was also a very old looking bear laying on the beach nearby, however he also walked off when we got close.



We landed and were all taking pictures by the Karluk monument when a few people looked up on the hill above us and saw a lone Musk ox staring down at us. Instead of walking away he proceeded in short increments to charge down the hill at us making



snorting type noises. When he got to what the rangers thought was “close enough” we all got back into the zodiacs.

I could only imagine the musk ox thinking “my beach, my beach!!!! the whole time. Musk ox are also an introduced species to Wrangel Island.



Day 10  
– we  
went on  
another  
bird

cliff excursion to a place called Ptichy Bazar. My XX chromosomes requested that I put in this cute picture of a pair of Horned puffins. Enjoy.

In the afternoon we did a landing at a place called Cape Florence. We were told we could walk around by ourselves. I went on a lemming safari by myself to look for the Vinogradov's species. As a I was walking from hole to hole, I heard someone shout out “ARCTIC FOX!!” Sure enough about 20 meters from one of the groups, a fox was running. She came pretty close to me and I turned around hoping to get the attention of some of the other people walking around to see her (I met a lot of mammal loving Aussies on this trip). When I turned back around she was gone. Surprised, I tried to look for a possible den where she could have gone down into, only to almost trip over her as she was hulking down by some vegetation staring at me. I had to back up to get pictures of her. She seemed very relaxed and stared at me for about 200 photos worth of clicking





before getting up and slowly walking off. As arctic foxes are heavily researched on the island, I was told many are pretty laid back with humans. I did not see any lemmings.



In the evening we went to a place called Komsomol and I had distant views of 4 polar bears on the beach including a mother and cub. We took a zodiac landing and walked around a small beach area. On the way back to the ship heavy fog set in making getting back difficult. A gray whale was in the water and started breaching. Pretty amazing to watch in the fog.



Day 11 – we stopped at a place called Dreamhead Mountain. We again were split into groups. One to look for birds by the beach and one to do a tundra hike to look for snowy owls. I like owls so thought it would be a good option. I quickly learned that walking long distances on tundra is not easy. I did however see another Siberian brown lemming as well as one snowy owl. Running behind the owl I also saw my second arctic fox.



In the afternoon we took a zodiac landing to an area called Nahodka Island. The fog was still pretty heavy but we did see a ringed seal pretty close to the zodiac. I saw a lot of lemming holes, but no lemmings.



Day 12 -our last day on Wrangel. We stopped off at the Roberts Harbor Settlement where most of the researchers are stationed and where we dropped off the rangers that had been with us. I searched in vain for the other lemming species, but was only teased with more siberian brown lemmings.

Day 13 – We headed towards a place called Koluchin Island that had previously been a Russian Polar Research station back in the times of the USSR. We were supposed to make a landing on a small beach to walk up to some of the previous research buildings, however a large haul out of a few hundred pacific walrus blocked our paths. We took zodiacs close to the area of the haul out and watched then for about 2 hours. This was by far the part of the trip I enjoyed the most. We also saw several humpbacks whales by the island.



In the afternoon we went to a place called Kolyuchin Inlet. It was a stop for the birders on the trip as numerous waterfowl including impressive looking emperor geese were in

the area. I enjoyed however watching two juvenile arctic foxes chasing small white birds behind the geese.

Day 14 - We were headed to a place called Uelen Village for the one cultural part of our trip. One of the workers on the ship was giving a talk about marine mammals when we got a call that several whales were seen. What they didn't tell us is that the ship was SURROUNDED by humpback whales and one lone gray whale.



I have never seen so many humpbacks at one time, there must have been hundreds! The culture part of our tour involved us again getting photographed by border guards as we were coming off our zodiacs, a trip to a walrus ivory carving museum and a trip to a small school. We were brought into a room that is used to teach the children of the area about the Chukchi language and culture. It also contained multiple photographs of walrus and gray whales in various stages of being slaughtered. They still have a quota for the number of whales they are allowed to “process” each year. One of the group members asked when the last whale hunt happened and we were told four days prior to us getting there. One of the people also said while they no longer need the whale meat to survive, they enjoy the taste of it and since it is part of the culture they want future generations to continue to hunt. On the way back to the boat there were still large numbers of humpbacks in the water. As we got back to the boat a group of five transient orcas were going after one of the whales. Heavy fog had just set back in so we were unable to follow the orcas and the whale to see what happened.

Day 15 – our last stop. We made it back to Whale Bone alley and Yttygran Island. Whale bone alley is an ancient site that contains a large number of bowhead whale bones in various formations. It was thought to be either a shrine or ritual site or a collective center and meat storage area for whale processing. It was also a great site to see more Northern Pikas (I saw about 10-15) and the non Zombie subspecies ( :) ) of the arctic ground squirrel. My otter squeaking noises worked wonders on the squirrels there as well.







Day 16 – this was a travel and wrap up day on our way back to Anadyr. One of the ships leaders Elena Sabanina gave a talk about Kamchatka where she is from and leads tours. This is also a place I really want to see in far east Russia. She had amazing photos of Kamchatka bears, as well as black capped marmots and sable. I asked her about the marmots and sable and where good places were to look. The base of Mutnovskiy and Goreliy volcanoes are good for marmots and the Nolichevo Nature Reserve for sable according to her. Her sable photos were amazing. She told me she sees them every time she visits and on her last visit about three weeks prior to our trip, she watched one in a tree for close to 40 minutes.

Day 17 – back in Anadyr we went back to the airport, saw more largha seals by the ferry and picked up our flight to Nome.

A couple thoughts about my trip.

1) If you have never seen a polar bear this might not be the trip for you. While I made the comments about Churchill in the start of my blog, the bears there were easy to see and all seemed relaxed. Wrangel Island is known as the largest polar bear maternity den site in the world, however every year numbers are diminishing. For the majority of our trip Dr. Nikita Ovsyanikov was with us. He is a famed polar bear researcher and supporter. All the bears I saw seemed very skittish. Poaching pressure on the Siberian coast and being chased by helicopters in Alaska by researchers were his reasoning for this. He gave multiple talks about polar bears and I have never listened to someone in person be so passionate about a species. While he is a believer in global warming, he is of the belief that the polar bears will adapt to changes in temperature. Poaching and legal hunts in Canada he felt were bringing down polar bear numbers and would be the cause of extinction of the species in his opinion, not global warming. He had harsh words for the Canadian government, native cultures that say hunting polar bears is tradition so they should be able to do it, and the WWF's recent non support for changing the US-Russian backed CITES status change for the polar bear. The rangers also on Wrangel have never had to kill a bear. While some rangers do have guns as per instruction from the Russian government, rangers use large sticks to ward off bears. We watched a video of him full on protecting himself from a mother with a cub that charged and tried to bring him down twice with his stick. While I think he understands ecotourism, he multiple times said we should stay away from them and not do any "back country" camping in polar bear territories. All the recent human and polar bear deaths in Norway he felt were preventable. I have a trip to Baffin Island planned next year, it will be interesting to see how the bears act there and what the attitude of my guides will be. I doubt they will just be carrying sticks.

- 2) having to jump from one zodiac to another in the open water is not as hard as you would think
- 3) Heritage Expeditions has some pretty amazing looking Far East Russia trips. They have a trip that goes to the Sea of Okhotsk where previous trips have seen ring seals, western gray whales, northern right whales, and large numbers of northern fur seals. This is now on my bucket list.
- 4) If you need to apply for a Russian Visa make sure your passport is next to you, you can type fast and you have a lot of spare time. I had been to Russia years before on a Moscow-St Petersburg based trip and do not remember the visa process being so hard. If you pause for like 20 seconds they bump you out of your page that you were typing on. I really "enjoyed" the list every country you have been to in the last ten years with your dates of travel question. I frantically listed what I could on this question. When I called the embassy about how specific this



question was, I was told to list what I could, then laughing, the embassy agent asked me if I had ever seen the application for a US visa, fair enough.

## Species List

1. Reindeer - *rangifer tarandus*
2. Arctic ground squirrel – *urocitellus parryii*
3. Musk ox - *ovibos moschatus*
4. Northern pika – *ochotona hyperborea*
5. Wrangel island siberian brown lemming -*lemmus sibirius portenkoi*
6. Polar bear -*ursus maritimus*
7. Largha seal- *phoca largha*
8. Beluga whale -*delphinapterus leucas*
9. Ringed seal -*pusa hispida hispida*
10. Bearded seal- *erignathus barbatus*
11. Pacific walrus – *odobenus rosmarus divergens*
12. Gray whale – *esrichtius robustus*
13. Humpback whale – *magaptera novaeangliae*
14. Orca -*orcinus orca*
15. Arctic fox – *vulpes lagopus*