

Birding Manitoba's Boreal Forest Mosaic of Blue

Jeff Wells

After more than a year in planning, I joined a group of 12 intrepid explorers from Audubon Pennsylvania in Winnipeg, Manitoba on June 1, 2013 for nine days of birding. Specifically, we had our sights set on the Boreal Forest, a vast green canopy that hugs the northern portion of our continent from Alaska all the way to Newfoundland. Manitoba's Boreal Forest lies uniquely positioned between the western and eastern portions of the forest, attracting an impressive diversity of birds and wildlife.

While it may be more well-known among avid birders and those who live further up in the north, the importance of the Boreal Forest is still, unfortunately, not widely understood among everyday citizens and casual birders. Not only is it the largest intact forest remaining on Earth — more so than even the Amazon — but it is especially critical to the impressive variety of migrants that breed there.

No less than 350 bird species rely in part on the Boreal Forest for survival — around half of the species commonly found in the United States and Canada — including nearly 100 species with at least 50% of their population breeding directly within the Boreal. Each spring, between 1 and 3 billion birds descend upon the forest to take advantage of the abundance of food and lush breeding habitat, the total population swelling to 3 to 5 billion birds once the young have hatched and fall migration ensues. More than 1 billion of these birds eventually become the common wintering species we have come to know and love throughout the United States.

Deciding on Manitoba's Boreal Forest as a destination was a rather easy one: not only did the largely untouched wilderness feature countless options for great birding, but some of North America's most exciting opportunities for large-scale forest conservation — ones that could have large impacts on North America's birds for generations to come — are taking place right there in Manitoba. This was our opportunity to get a better glimpse into both.

On our first day, we drove three hours northwest to Riding Mountain National Park to start our adventure. Despite an evening arrival at our lodge, our local guide and birder extraordinaire Cal Cuthbert brought the group out in the last rays of light in search of the elusive Great Gray Owl. We scanned fence posts and fields just south of the park for an hour until it was too dark to see, constantly serenaded by the beautiful whistled "Oh-sweet-Canada-Canada-Canada" song of countless White-throated Sparrows, but without sighting an owl.

The next morning was our one full day for exploration of Riding Mountain Park, which is on the southern edge of the Boreal Forest region and is almost an island of boreal habitat largely surrounded by agriculture. Before breakfast, we did a walk around the little village of Wasagaming. Blackburnian Warblers were everywhere, with the males showing off their bright orange throats atop the expansive stands of tall white spruces.

One male Cape May Warbler gave us a quick look at his flashy yellow breast and reddish cheeks. A pair of Merlins, certainly nesting nearby, called and displayed while we watched them through our telescopes from point-blank range. Loud, boisterous Black-billed Magpies squawked and fluttered by. Scanning Clear Lake, we were witness to one of the oddest things we had ever seen in the bird world. A breeding plumaged male Long-tailed Duck was on the lake, which was an oddity in itself, as the species typically breeds 500–1000 miles further north. We assumed it was just a migrant that had been grounded by the rainy weather that had persisted throughout the region until a few days before. It was then that the bird took things to a new level. It began displaying and calling to a female Common Goldeneye and aggressively trying to deter the male Common Goldeneye that had been escorting her around the lake. We watched for at least 10–15 minutes as the confused but amusing duck tried to drive away the male Common Goldeneye and show off for the female.

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After a great morning at Wasagaming, we drove up into Riding Mountain National Park and walked the gravel road to Lake Catherine. Life birds for many in the group were coming swiftly. After announcing its presence with its wheezy version of the “chick-ah-dee” call, a Boreal Chickadee posed in the sun for us.

We joked about our near-clean sweep of the warblers named after cities and states when we watched singing Tennessee, Nashville, and Cape May Warblers. We missed the elusive Connecticut Warbler, which were not in yet because of the late spring. After being teased by numerous flyover Evening Grosbeaks, we finally found one that landed in a tree and provided beautiful views through the scope.

After a scenic lunch overlooking the lake, we drove further north to the Boreal Trail where we caught our highlight of the day—a pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers, a boreal specialty species that is often very hard to find in the eastern part of its range.

The next day we took an early morning bird walk at a marshy spot on the road south of Riding Mountain National Park where we had looked unsuccessfully for Great Gray Owls the two previous nights. As we stepped from the car, a Red-necked Grebe gave its reedy call, and we spotted a female on a nest nearby. Common Loons were letting out their eerie call and a Lincoln's Sparrow sang from the top of a small willow while a Wilson's Snipe winnowed overhead. A highlight for me was hearing a Nelson's Sparrow singing from a sedge-filled area.

After breakfast at Elkhorn Resort Lodge, we headed off on our three hour drive to Oak Hammock Marsh where Ducks Unlimited Canada has its Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre and national headquarters. There we were met by Paula, the center's naturalist, who took great care of us and was amazing in her birding and naturalist skills.

It was a delight to step out of the vans to the sights and sounds of Yellow-headed Blackbirds all around us. The Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre has world-class displays, viewing areas, and most amazing for a nature center a really nice café with a menu of sandwiches with bird names.

After lunch, Ducks Unlimited Canada scientist Stuart Slattery gave the Audubon group a fabulous presentation on the Boreal Forest region and how Ducks Unlimited Canada and the International Boreal Conservation Campaign are working towards its conservation. As mentioned previously, there are some great conservation initiatives taking place across Canada's Boreal Forest, particularly within Manitoba. The province is currently rolling out a series of green initiatives, of which Ducks Unlimited Canada has been an instrumental partner.

In particular, Manitoba is developing a peat lands stewardship plan that will eventually place many of the province's vast networks of peat lands off limits to development. It is also working on a broader Boreal Forest conservation strategy that would, ideally, do the same. While waterfowl and wetlands are understandably Ducks Unlimited Canada's main areas of specialty, they understand how interconnected these Boreal habitats and species are and are working with the province on seeing more of these large, interconnected swaths of forest and wetland habitats protected. With more than three-quarters of Manitoba's Boreal region still untouched by modern day development, the opportunity for large-scale conservation is immense.

Paula then took us out for a one-mile walk through a portion of the roughly 9,000 acres of wetlands that have been restored over the last 40 years. Ducks were everywhere, including Northern Shovelers, Ruddy Ducks, Canvasbacks, Redheads, Ring-necked Ducks, and many others. Two Black Terns flew overhead and we saw a Bald Eagle on a nest. Our group was pleased to get great looks at Clay-colored Sparrows, a Sedge Wren, Marbled Godwits, and a singing Western Meadowlark. It is safe to say that the stroll packed a lot of 'bird punch' for being a one mile walk.

It was almost 5:30 p.m. before we were able to pry the group away from Oak Hammock and head to the Norwood Hotel in downtown Winnipeg. We had the incredible good fortune and pleasure to be joined by Sophia Rabliauskas of the Pimachiowin Aki project for dinner. The project, which is being led by five forward-thinking First Nations partnered with the provinces of Manitoba and Ontario, is seeking to enshrine a sweeping eight-million-acre expanse of rugged boreal forest as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Not only is the

region a stronghold for birds and wildlife—as many as 216 bird species rely on the region for breeding or migratory stopover habitat—but it has also acted as home for indigenous cultures for thousands of years. If accepted, it would become Canada's first UNESCO Site designated under both natural and cultural classification.

After dinner she gave us a presentation on the Pimachiowin Aki project despite the fact that she had only arrived a few hours before from Australia after an 18-hour plane ride. Sophia gave us the history of the project and updated us on its current status.

We capitalized on the opportunity to sleep in before heading to the Winnipeg Airport for an 11:00 a.m. Calm Air flight to Churchill, a must see region for any birders travelling to Manitoba. For some reason we expected a jet; instead, the flight up was on a big turbo prop plane, but the flight was as calm as advertised. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that the flight was one of the last ones that still served a nice meal, not to mention a testament to just how vast Manitoba's Boreal Region is given nearly the entirety of the flight was spent above the deep blues and emerald greens of the Boreal. All of us, but especially those that had never traveled in the North, were blown away by the expanses of wilderness stretching away to the horizon and the varied landscape of lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams.

After being greeted by some welcoming Common Redpolls in the parking lot, we were settled into the Seaport Hotel. We then met Paul Ratson from Nature 1st Tours, who would go on to drive us and guide us around the Churchill area during our stay. Paul has been in Churchill since the 1970's and contains a fountain of knowledge about the ecology and history of the region. He did show us the rifle that he always keeps on hand since we were now in the land of polar bears. But he also explained that he has never had to use it and didn't intend to ever get himself or any of his guests in a position where he would have to use it. No polar bears had been seen in the area for months.

Paul took us first down to Cape Merry, the northern tip of land at Churchill that overlooks the mouth of the Churchill River as it empties into Hudson Bay. We were enthralled by the sight of an American Pipit

as he did his flight song and display above the open, rocky landscape. Dozens of ringed seals were scattered around on the ice to the east. Common Eiders were in scattered small flocks along the edges of the ice while group after group of Red-breasted Mergansers buzzed by us. A blue-phase Snow Goose stood on the ice edge. Small flocks of Tundra Swans and larger flocks of migrating Canada Geese passed overhead. We watched Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs through the scope.

Later, we drive down to the Granary Ponds, an undistinguished looking set of small ponds behind the grain elevators that are famous for hosting lots of good birds. We were not disappointed; the ponds were full of ducks, including Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Greater Scaup, American Wigeon, and others. A very rare-for-Churchill American Avocet put on a show for us, and we were dazzled by breeding plumaged Hudsonian Godwits, Short-billed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers, and Red-necked Phalaropes. In the background, several of Churchill's famous polar bear buses were parked until next fall. The famous Akudlik Marshes were our starting point soon after Paul picked us up the following morning. This was the location where a bird species nested that renewed Churchill's place in the birding pantheon of must-visit places. I say "renewed" because Churchill was famous among ornithologists as the location where George Sutton and other ornithologists raced to be the first to make the first ornithological discovery of the Harris's Sparrow nest in 1931 despite the fact that the species had been first described 91 years earlier. But in the late 1970's and continuing perhaps to about 1990, one or more pairs of Ross's Gull nested at Churchill, primarily at Akudlik Marsh. The species was virtually unknown to most North American birders because the few other known nesting sites are in remote High Arctic locations, and individuals only very rarely make it south to southern Canada or the northern United States.

Not surprisingly, we did not see any Ross's Gulls when we stopped by Akudlik Marsh. We did, however, enjoy beautiful views of lush-looking Pacific Loons and Hudsonian Godwits, as well as the rather incredible breeding displays of Lesser Yellowlegs and Wilson's Snipe. A stop at the Legion Park yielded a pair of displaying Merlins, a Bonaparte's Gull sitting in a

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tree — they nest in trees, unlike other gulls — and lots of snow still on the ground.

The next stop was the feeder at local resident's house down Goose Creek Road. All we had been able to find there was more of the abundant White-crowned Sparrows. Almost everyone had returned to the bus when suddenly a large sparrow with a black face and throat and pink bill appeared under the feeder. It was the Harris's Sparrow — the only breeding species endemic to Canada and one rarely seen by birders on the east coast of North America.

Spirits were high as we moved further down Goose Creek Road to where there were pools of standing water filled with Bonaparte's Gulls, Short-billed Dowitchers, Lesser Yellowlegs, and tiny Red-necked Phalaropes.

But from the west came the unmistakable low rumblings of thunder, and soon we could see the dramatic, blazing lines of yellow lightning. Here in Churchill, the topography is so flat that distances are highly misleading. The thunderstorms ended up being much further away than we realized, so we continued onwards. Just north of the observation tower that overlooks the Churchill River, we came across a very bird-friendly area where two male Blackpoll Warblers were fighting over a territorial boundary and gave us stunning eye-level views. We wondered if these could have been the same Blackpoll Warblers that we had been seeing in Pennsylvania and Maine just a couple of weeks earlier as they migrated north from their wintering grounds.

Greater Scaup, Green-winged Teal, and Northern Shovelers seemed to be in every nook and cranny. We even found a single male Ring-necked Duck in Goose Creek, which Paul said was unusual for the area. We ended the evening searching through several small flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls in search of an elusive Little Gull that had been reported earlier in the week, but we had no success. On the way back, however, we were blessed with a gorgeous Rough-legged Hawk in the open land south of the old Navy base.

The following morning dawned bright and warm, and the group appeared happy. This was to be our day to make the long trek on the 37 miles of road that are

available surrounding Churchill. Paul took us out on the Nature 1st Tour minibus along the Coast Road and Launch Road to the Northern Studies Centre, and after that on to Twin Lakes to search for the Hawk Owl that Tim Barksdale had seen there a few days before. The first stop was Paul's house out toward Bird Cove, where we looked across a valley to see a flock of Sandhill Cranes foraging in some old piles of chaff from the wheat granary operation at the harbor.

The bunches of beautiful Purple Saxifrage that seemed to erupt from the ancient sand dunes were a bonus, as were Paul's tales of the polar bears that regularly stop by his house in the late fall. Like all of the Churchill residents, Paul lives carefully and cautiously with the bears and takes it all in stride. He did mention being annoyed when a bear broke a back window and reached in and grabbed some clothes while they were away on vacation. Another time a bear started to sleep on a cushion on the back porch that they had left out for the dogs to use, so they had to get rid of the cushions.

A little further along, we stopped by a sand and cobble beach near the mouth of a small stream to marvel at the throngs of nearby Arctic Terns, breeding displays of Semipalmated Plovers, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Least Sandpipers. Several flocks of Snow Buntings — the males bright white and black — foraged along the shore within yards of us.

One of the more amusing parts of the trip occurred when we stopped to look for Willow Ptarmigans behind the home of one of Paul's friends. After searching around the back yard without luck, we were about to get back in the bus when Paul spotted a female at the base of a nearby telephone pole. We had stunning views of the close bird for around 10 minutes before she scampered away. It was then that we heard the comical, nasal calls of a ptarmigan from above our heads. Upon looking up, we discovered that a male Willow Ptarmigan had been sitting on the cross bars of the telephone pole the whole time.

We tried again to get into the bus when Paul noticed a distant flock of birds flying in from Hudson Bay. As they got closer, we could see the distinctive shapes, flight style, and coloration of White Pelicans — yet another oddity here.

Two dueling male Willow Ptarmigans put on a lovely show for us at the Scout Camp as we had lunch, where we were also fortunate to spot a rare-for-Churchill Clay-colored Sparrow nearby. After lunch and an unsuccessful search in the afternoon heat for a Smith's Longspur — it reached nearly 80 degrees Fahrenheit that day — a pair of Parasitic Jaegers perched on the ground to give us great views through the scope.

As we trailed back to the bus, a Whimbrel suddenly rose from across the tundra, displayed, and settled onto the top of small spruce within twenty feet of Winston, who had stayed back to take some photos.

We continued down the rather long, bumpy road to Twin Lakes. Halfway through, we heard the stuttering trill of an Orange-crowned Warbler, so we stopped to enjoy some great views of it as it hopped around in the tamaracks. The road headed south along a glacial esker that was the only dry land among a sea of low, boggy peat land that makes up much of the Hudson Bay lowlands.

The lowlands, which hug the coastline of Hudson Bay and sometimes extend hundreds of miles inland, are a highly unique and ecologically critical part of Manitoba's boreal forest. Known more for its expansive networks of wetlands and peat lands than trees and larger plants, the Lowlands not only store enormous quantities of terrestrial carbon — helping keep our planet cool — but they form idyllic habitat for a wide variety of shorebirds, seabirds, waterfowl, and even songbirds like the Palm Warbler. Manitoba is currently underway on creating a new provincial park to protect polar bear denning habitat, which, when joined with nearby Wapusk National Park, would set aside a lot of critical habitat for birds and bears alike.

Further on, the road descends into a flat network of tundra and peat land that Paul called the 'Barrens.' Here, we hit upon the mother lode of shorebirds, with lots of brightly plumaged American Golden-Plovers, along with Short-billed Dowitchers, Hudsonian Godwits, Stilt Sandpipers, and a few Dunlin sporting their black belly patches.

Everyone was hot and tired when we reached the end of the road at Twin Lakes, which halts at the edge of a large area that had been the site of a forest fire

many years ago and is now growing back with a carpet of green willow shrubs. We scanned the countless dead tree stubs across the horizon for the telltale silhouette of a Hawk Owl, but without success. We finally had to give up our search, but we enjoyed views of the vast landscape as we made our way back to town.

Churchill is like an island in many ways. It is only accessible by a single rail line, by air, or, for a few months in summer, by boat. It has about 37 miles of roads, and most of them are unpaved. Thus, birding in the area usually means visiting many of the same places multiple times. For our final day and half at Churchill, we did just that. Like many visitors to Churchill, we were drawn every morning and one evening to Cape Merry and several Churchill River overlooks near the massive grain elevators. It was here where we finally witnessed close-up views of two Beluga Whales as they repeatedly surfaced, exposing their white, bulging foreheads. We also marveled at flocks of brightly colored Ruddy Turnstones taking a break on floating ice sheets—these could likely have just flown up from Delaware Bay on their way to their High Arctic breeding grounds.

Peering out from the old fort at Cape Merry, we were amused by the antics of Ringed Seals as they jumped partly out of the water and splashed around. Every time we stopped by Cape Merry, regardless of time of day and even when the wind was howling, a male American Pipit was there exuberantly belting out his repetitive song as he rose up into the air in a breeding display flight. A pair of dangerous-looking Parasitic Jaegers chased around Arctic Terns whenever one caught a small fish. Common Eiders huddled around the shore and fought for space on small ice floes in front of us. It is hard to believe that this particular subspecies survives the long dark winters on Hudson Bay by finding open leads in the vast ice sheets in order to dive for shellfish.

Goose Creek Road was another favorite spot for us to bird on several occasions. One of the group's most enjoyable stops was at Bill's Up the Creek bed and breakfast. Bill is a wonderful older gentleman who left his native New Jersey years ago for Churchill and has never looked back. His log cabin-style house is surrounded with bird feeders, and the yard rings with bird song and bird activity. As we arrived, a male

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Rusty Blackbird flew in with food in his bill to feed nestlings in a nearby spruce-top nest. In fact, we saw at least four separate Rusty Blackbirds carrying food over the course of the trip. Common Redpolls called and chased each other around the house and fed on seeds Bill had spread under a nearby shed. But the highlight was the incredibly tame male Pine Grosbeak that flew in and landed on a platform feeder about four feet in front of us — almost too close for the binoculars to focus — and we soaked in views of its beautiful, rosy plumage. Before we left, Bill regaled us with stories, including one about a time he slept through as a Polar Bear broke in and ransacked his kitchen.

An important stop for me personally was the Old Dene Village on Goose Creek Road. After reading the powerful story of the forced relocation of the Sayisi Dene to Churchill in 1955 in the book *Night Spirits* by Ila Bussidor and Ustun Bilgen-Reinart (University of Manitoba Press, 2000), it was especially meaningful to visit the site where much of the story took place. Tragically, more than a third of the community died over a 40 year period. Finally, community leaders returned the remaining people to a new community within their traditional lands far from Churchill. It was fitting of a story of rebirth now that the area around the monument to the Old Dene Village was teeming with singing birds, including White-crowned, White-throated, Lincoln's, and Fox Sparrows, and even another rare singing Clay-colored Sparrow.

Further on down Goose Creek Road, we had more incredible birding. Just before the Goose Creek Bridge, we watched and listened to the beautiful fluty song of a Gray-cheeked Thrush. In the marshy expanses beyond the tour, we scanned through the Bonaparte's Gulls and finally spotted the distinctive black underwings of a flying Little Gull — one of the more sought-after species by many North American birders.

After breakfast on our final day in Churchill, we had the good fortune to have the Mayor of Churchill, Michael Spence, stop by and chat with our group. He described the days when he was a kid and Churchill was bustling with thousands of people from the U.S.

and Canadian military bases. He talked about how the community coped with the changing economic conditions when the bases closed and the population declined to its current level of around 1,000 permanent residents. Churchill has worked hard to maintain a positive quality of life for its residents. Along with its ecotourism economy based largely around tours in the late fall and early winter to see polar bears, Churchill is also a key staging area for communities further north as well as for transporting equipment for mining exploration and development further north — yet another reminder that although the North remains largely intact and pristine, large-scale development is continuing to push further into the heart of Canada's northern wilderness each year.

Later that day, we flew back to Winnipeg on one of Calm Air's small jets. We enjoyed freshly baked cookies as we gazed in awe at the incredible boreal landscapes of northern Manitoba below.

In our nine days in Manitoba, we had just sampled the ecological riches of this vast province that is nearly as large as Texas (250,900 square miles). It is easy to forget that it is over 600 miles from Winnipeg to Churchill. Manitoba also has some of the largest blocks of unfragmented Boreal habitat in Canada — around 115 million acres of it supporting an estimated 100 to 300 million breeding birds. We had tallied 169 species in our Manitoba journey and had learned much about some of the critically important work being done to conserve more of it. However, we also left knowing that there is much more conservation work to be done in Manitoba, and fortunately there are many good people hard at work to see that it gets done. Our friends from Audubon who were fortunate enough to share this journey are among those who will be supporting and watching because, as we all now know, the birds of Manitoba are also the same birds of our own backyards, wetlands, parks, and preserves.

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