

■ An Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* caught frozen in mid-air, as it comes in to land with some freshly-caught fish prey.

A TRIP TO CANADA WITH DAVID HEMMINGS  
**ON ARCTIC WINGS**

Welcome to the middle of nowhere:  
photographing breeding birds in the tundra of Churchill, Manitoba

■ *Grounded Arctic Terns*  
*Sterna paradisica*  
somewhat lack the  
exquisite gracefulness they  
display while soaring.



*Flashes of color in the barren landscape of the iced tundra*



■ An Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisica* with a fish in its beak zooms over the dark, freezing, ice-covered waters of the Churchill River and Hudson's Bay in the Manitoba province of Canada.



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DAVID HEMMINGS

When a nature photographer happens to ask you during a conversation, "Have you ever been to Churchill, Manitoba?", more often than not the first vision that comes to mind is Polar bears and freezing cold weather. It is, after all, the Polar bear capital of the world. I can tell you that most people will not think about photographing birds on the tundra in spring. If you are one of those, then you are really missing a great part of what this area has to offer other than the bears.

Every serious (and not so serious) bird and nature photographer should visit Churchill and its whereabouts at least once in a lifetime during mid- to late June. June in Churchill is fresh and full of life and there are beautiful species of birds everywhere in glorious breeding plumage. With beautiful breeding colored feathers and scenic backdrops of light purple flowered and tundra landscapes you will be sure to capture stunning images of the beautiful birds mating and nesting there.

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■ One of the most beautiful duck species seen in Churchill at this time of the year is the truly stunning Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*, the largest duck in the Northern Hemisphere. This is an adult drake gloriously showing off its full breeding plumage.



Churchill is located where the Hudson's Bay meets the Churchill River. It stands at an ecotone on the Hudson's Plains where three distinct eco-regions meet. It has boreal forest to the south, the arctic tundra to the northwest and Hudson's Bay to the North.

The climate in Churchill is subarctic, with long cold winters and short, cool summers. These cool summers are when the tundra hosts many different species of breeding arctic birds as well as Arctic Fox. More than 270 species of birds have been recorded within a 25 mile radius of the town of Churchill.

This is truly amazing in a place that looks like it holds no life at all at first glance!

Upon arrival you may think to yourself something like "So this is Churchill" or "Where is everything, all I can see are big open tundra plains?". Then you

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One of the more commonly seen, but not less interesting, species in Churchill is the Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*.

The term "semipalmated" refers to the partially webbed feet on this bird. They usually nest in areas with very little or no plant growth such as open tundra, beaches and, quite often, on gravel roadsides. They forage for food close to their nests and usually eat insects, crustaceans and worms.

*A barren, muted landscape echoing of old tales and legends*

■ A scenic view of the rather desolate but nonetheless spectacular landscape of Hudson's Bay see from Cape Merry.





might ask yourself, why have I spent all this time and money getting here? Don't worry though; many travelers have probably thought the same thing. It is not until you get settled in and spend the next few days roaming about the tundra and visiting the mouth of the Churchill River where it meets Hudson's Bay that you will have the answers to your questions. Once you have experienced beautiful lichen-covered rocks, seen and heard the gloriously colorful birds of the Arctic, seen and touched the gentle Beluga whales and gazed out at the soft glowing arctic sunset at midnight you will know why you are here. Churchill in June can be downright pleasant, weather-wise. Average daytime temperatures range from 50 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit with fresh breezes coming in off Hudson's Bay,

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■ One of the more interesting species found in Churchill is the Bonaparte's Gull *Chroicocephalus philadelphia*. This gull has a distinctive black head with red feet in breeding season.



Another █  
Bonaparte's Gull  
*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*. This species is named after a nephew of Napoleon, Charles Lucien Bonaparte, who was a leading ornithologist in the 1800's in America and Europe. An interesting fact about this species is that it is the only gull species that will often nest in trees.

■ Scant vegetation and nooks and crannies in the craggy landscape around Churchill offer refuge and nesting opportunities to many bird species.





The Parasitic Jaeger (also known as the Arctic Skua or Parasitic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus* gets its name from the two main strategies it employs to acquire food. "Parasitic" refers to the habit this bird has of chasing gulls and terns to make them drop their food so it can pillage it. The second word is German for "hunter", as the Parasitic Jaeger will at times actively hunt for its food feeding on small birds, lemmings and eggs.

■ **A Common Eider**  
*Somateria mollissima drake*  
flying low over the waters  
of the Churchill river.  
A famous colony of these  
ducks is found on the Farne  
Islands in Northumberland,  
Great Britain. This colony  
has been the subject of one  
of history's first known  
bird protection laws.  
About 1,000 pairs still  
nest there every year.



feeding the soft grasses and flowers of the tundra and creating one of the planet's nicest natural air fresheners. In June the frozen tundra springs to life. As the ice melts, birds arrive and mating and nesting begins and chicks start to hatch. Beautiful wildflowers such as Purple Paintbrush and Tufted Saxifrage blossom everywhere, creating fantastic backdrops. On my first visit to Churchill in June 2007, I stared out at the somewhat barren looking tundra landscape and thought, "Where in the world will we find birds to photograph out there?" That question was quickly put to rest as we headed out with our guide to closely explore the landscape and look for our quarry. Bird species to photograph **continued on page 19** >



A Harbour or Common Seal *Phoca vitulina* emerges from the ice-cold waters of the Churchill River. This species is found in coastal waters of the Northern Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as those of the Baltic and North Seas, making it the most widely distributed among the pinnipeds (walruses, eared seals, and true seals).

include Common Eiders, American Golden Plovers, Whimbrels, Red-necked Phalaropes, Arctic Terns, Willow Ptarmigans, Hudsonian Godwits and more - but finding the birds to photograph is the first challenge here in Churchill. The first time I came here we hired a fantastic bird guide by the name of Bonnie Chartier. She has written a great book on birding in this area and knew all the places to look. Like in many arctic towns, there are a few dirt and gravel roads that traverse around the immediate area. A good portion of the

first day or two is spent scouting the tundra looking for movement and colors amongst the lichen-covered rocks, moss and just starting to bloom tundra flowers. Once you are out there you realize just how diverse the pockets of landscapes and rock formations are in the area. We were photographing Common Eiders flying by us where the Hudson's Bay meets the Churchill River, then we were photographing beautiful American Golden Plovers in stunning tundra flower surroundings and then we found ourselves photographing Red-necked Phalaropes in a pond in

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A Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* hen takes off.



A late-afternoon  
portrait of a Red-  
necked Phalarope  
*Phalaropus lobatus*  
bathed in warm  
light. This small  
migratory wader  
commonly breeds  
in North America  
and Eurasia.



■ A colorful Common Eider *Somateria mollissima drake* "brakes" in mid-air as it comes in for a not-too-elegant water landing.



waders. And this was all on the first day! This place really produces in the spring as far as the variety of bird species is concerned.

And not only is Churchill amazing for the diversity of species to photograph in June, it is also a great place for landscape photography. The endless variety of rock formations along with the flowing rises in the tundra with all of its color in the spring make for some wonderful images.

Churchill is also steeped in history. A wide variety of mostly nomadic Arctic people have lived and hunted in the area since about 1000 AD. The Thule tribe arrived during this time and they later became widely known as the present day Inuit people. They survived by being great hunters of caribou, seals and musk oxen. In the early 1600's a

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*Arctic Tern* ■  
*Sterna paradisaea*  
calling. Notice the  
exceedingly small-  
sized feet of this  
species.



■ Above, another Hudson's Bay panorama. Right, Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*. They will often hang out on the top of small pines and call to their mate. After breeding in the Churchill area, this bird will make a several thousand mile non-stop flight to southern South America. Left, the very colorful Willow Ptarmigan *Lagopus lagopus* male is white with red eyebrows (commonly known as wattles) and rust brown colors.



Danish expedition landed and stayed for the winter where Churchill now stands. Only 3 or 4 of the 65 who ventured there survived to return to Denmark. In 1717 the Hudson's Bay Company built the very first permanent settlement known as the Churchill River Post. This was primarily a trading post for the North American fur trade. The French later invaded and took over the fort from the vastly outnumbered English and for decades this fort was used on and off as the fur trade declined. With the success of North American agriculture, Churchill eventually became, and still is, a major shipping port for the export of grains to Europe, Japan and Russia. As of today the population of Churchill is about 50% non native, the other 50% consisting mostly of Chipewyan and Swampy Cree. Only about 5% are Inuit. ●



*Parasitic Jaeger* ■  
 or Arctic Skua  
*Stercorarius*  
*parasiticus* - notice  
 its strong, partly  
 hooked bill,  
 indicative of its  
 occasional  
 predatory habits.



■ The undulating, irregular and rocky coastline environment, rich in semipermanent ponds, offers a multitude of microhabitats to all breeding bird species.



Mixed flight of  
Common Eider  
*Somateria  
mollissima* with  
three drakes and  
one hen. This  
beautiful species  
shows a strong  
sexual dimorphism.

*Three suitors and a princess flying in magical unison*

■ A common Eider  
*Somateria mollissima*  
hen shows her muted  
livery, which offers  
excellent camouflage when  
nesting among the reed  
beds of the riverbank.



# TUNDRA TREKKING TIPS

**NATURE'S PHOTO ADVENTURES OPERATES PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS IN CHURCHILL EVERY YEAR IN JUNE.** WE HAVE SPENT A LOT OF TIME THERE AND WE KNOW ALL THE BEST SPOTS FOR PHOTOGRAPHY OPPORTUNITIES.

Check out our website at [www.naturesphotoadventures.com](http://www.naturesphotoadventures.com)

Here is some information about Churchill that you should know.

**Camera Gear:**

- Your longest lens (at least a 300mm + 1.4x and / or 1.7x tele-converter)
- A wide angle lens
- 1-2 camera bodies
- Batteries and chargers
- Storage (flash cards and laptop or digital storage media is recommended)
- A tripod
- A flash
- A good bag to carry all of your gear in the van / in the field.

**Additional Gear:**

- Weatherproof Boots (Goretex hiking boots or good quality rubber boots)
  - Warm clothes – layers are best as the temperature can vary at this time of year.
  - Waterproof jacket
  - Fleece jacket
  - Long underwear
  - Warm socks!
  - Bug nets
  - Neoprene or rubber gloves (just in case the mosquitoes get nasty)
  - Bug spray
- Plus all of your normal personal items and equipment

**A note about bugs:**

Churchill at this time of the year generally has a cool breeze that keeps

the mosquitoes away (or at least bearable). The most important thing for this photo adventure is to be prepared. If you have a physical barrier between yourself and the bugs they are no problem! We are recommending that everyone bring long pants that bugs can't bite through, a weatherproof shell, gloves that are thick enough that bugs can't bite through and a bug net mask. If we all are prepared for the bugs they will not be a problem.

**Photography Plan:**

All of our days will be spent primarily within a 30 minute drive to and from the hotel. For some species we travel one and a half hours likely twice during the workshop. There is no set itinerary as we plan each day according to the weather and species we want to shoot that day. For example, if we have done really well photographing American Golden Plovers and have shot Willow Ptarmigans, but the light was not great, we may opt that day to go for the Ptarmigans again... you get the idea.

**Weather:**

Don't forget that Churchill is far north! The daytime temperatures in June range from about 2-15 degrees. Churchill is one of those places that can get all seasons in one day. So be prepared for all types of weather by dressing in layers.

Shooting in the late spring-early summer tundra environment requires a degree of motivation and specific equipment (right), but spectacular encounters such as this one with a curious - and rather endearing - Harbour or Common Seal *Phoca vitulina* are virtually guaranteed.





Left top, a Pacific Loon *Gavia pacifica*. Pacific Loons nest in the Churchill area but can be difficult to find. Right top, a Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*. Right bottom, a Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*. This species is one of the largest in the Curlew family, averaging 16 inches in length. They too nest out on the tundra and feed on small invertebrates, small crabs and butterflies. They will also fill up on berries before migration. Left bottom, female Willow Ptarmigan *Lagopus lagopus*: females are subtly camouflaged in a mixture of beautiful brown, rust and yellowish gold tones.



■ A large, colorful Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* drake takes flight from the river surface. High shutter speeds are mandatory to freeze the action when photographing fast-moving subjects such as this - notice the water droplets suspended in mid-air.





American █  
Golden Plover  
*Pluvialis dominica*  
in its beautifully  
colored breeding  
plumage.  
This species of  
shorebird is  
considered to be  
the fastest flier of all  
shorebirds with top  
speeds of 60mph!  
They fly up to  
20,000 miles per  
year to migrate  
and nest,  
sometimes flying  
nonstop over  
the Atlantic for  
3500 miles.



■ The barren, severe landscape of the Hudson's Bay in late spring. Drab-colored clothes are a must when photographing here.



■ An Arctic Hare *Lepus arcticus* in its summer coat - evolved to offer better camouflage among the barren, lichen-covered rocks of its habitat. With the coming of winter and snow its coat will turn a pure unblemished white, making it virtually invisible in the iced landscape. Together with the Arctic Fox *Vulpes lagopus* it is one of the very few mammalian species commonly seen around Churchill in spring and summer.



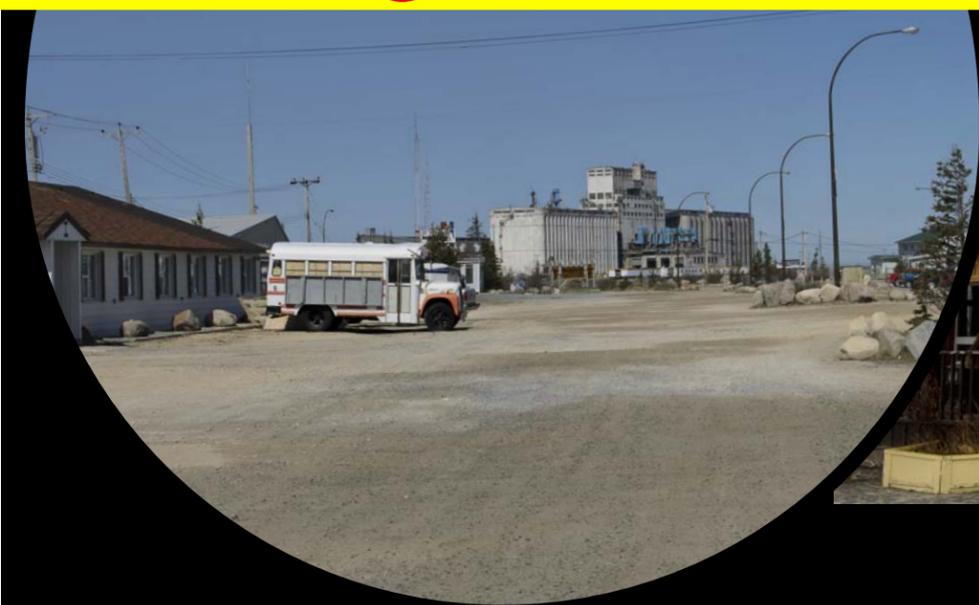
■ Another beautiful bird found in the Churchill area is the Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*: this species is very colorful in its breeding plumage. It was the last day of the trip before we actually found one foraging in a small pond by the side of a road. Never stop looking! It is fascinating to watch one of these birds feeding as it rapidly probes its beak in and out of the mud like a sewing machine.



*A muted symphony of browns, greys and ancient gold*

## At-a-glance travel guide

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: CANADA



### USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

Some simple, common sense, field-tested advice and information to make the best out of your trip and avoid hassles, worries and problems

**ROUTE:** The city of Winnipeg, Canada, is the main hub for travel to Churchill. Since there are no actual roads to Churchill, there are only two primary modes of transportation to Churchill, air and rail.

The flight from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Churchill, Manitoba is approximately two hours in length. Two airlines serve Churchill, Calm Air International (Tel: 1-800-839-2256) and Kivalliq Air (Tel: 1-877-855-1500) with daily flights to and from Winnipeg, through Churchill and into the Kivalliq District of Nunavut. Calm Air also offers three flights a week to and from Thompson, Manitoba.

The Railway train, known as the Bayline or the Muskeg Special, departs Union Station in Winnipeg for Churchill every Sunday and Tuesday morning at

9:00am. The train ride is approximately 48 hours long, arriving around 6am. The train arrives to and departs from Churchill every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturdays.

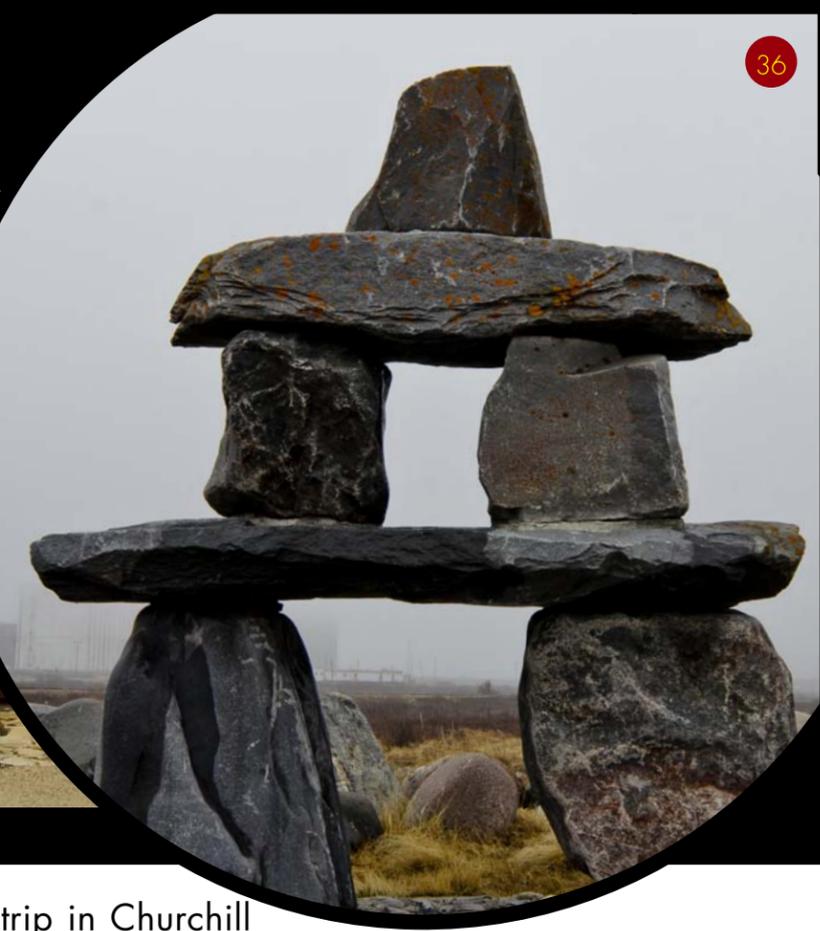
**MEANS OF TRANSPORT:** While in Churchill, your means of transport will depend a lot on the season you are there. If you are there in June photographing birds and fox your main means of transport will be a good 4 x 4 or an ATV. There are only a couple of roads that you can travel while in Churchill and except for the main road in town, they are all dirt and gravel. In the winter you will need a 4 x 4 for sure.

**CURRENCY:** Canadian currency, the Canadian dollar, is the local currency in Churchill. If you are

planning a trip to Churchill, hotels and vehicle rentals can be paid in advance. While in town most establishments accept major credit cards and of course, cash. There is also a Royal Bank of Canada in town.

**ACCOMODATION:** Do not expect any 4 or 5 star accommodations in Churchill - but the hotels are clean and very functional. Room rates per night average around \$150.00 CAD. When I stay in Churchill there are two hotels that I can highly recommend. One is the Seaport Hotel. The Seaport is Churchill's only full amenity hotel which offers a licensed restaurant, 71 seat dining room, 47 seat cocktail lounge & 200 seat beverage room with V.L.T.'s. The hotel has a 3.5 star rating thru the Canada Select hotel program. The rooms

# No-frills accommodation and the occasional rogue Polar bear



include private bath/shower, free cable tv, clock radios, hair dryers, coffee makers, microwave ovens, fridges and wireless internet. Smoking rooms are available. ATM is available. All major credit cards are accepted. Complimentary shuttle to and from the airport is available too.

The Polar Inn & Suites offers high standards of guest room comfort through their 3 Star Canada Select Rating. Whether you are traveling for pleasure or business you may select from their one bedroom apartments with full kitchen facilities or kitchen studio suites or standard units. All rooms are equipped with fridge, private bath, remote tv, free cable and movie channels, complimentary in-room tea and coffee. Non-smoking rooms, VCR's, double, queen or king beds are available. The Polar Inn & Suites is closely sited to restaurants, shops, tour offices and the train station.

**FOOD:** Gypsy's Bakery, Restaurant and Coffee Shop! Whether you are in the mood for a charbroiled burger or a gourmet meal, Gypsy's Bakery has it all. Owned and operated by the Da Silva family, this licensed restaurant can seat up to 100 guests. Their great food

and friendly service come highly recommended by the many residents, visitors and tour companies who have made Gypsy's Bakery the place to be in Churchill, Manitoba. Gypsy's has a cafeteria like atmosphere. The food is fantastic and the service is top notch. They even have wonderful espresso and lattes!

The Seaport Restaurant at the Seaport Hotel also serves up some great local and standard cuisine. Prices are in line with standard food fare and your pocket book will not be too stressed out by the bill.

**LANGUAGE:** English.

**WORRIES:** About the only worry you might have in Churchill is a rogue Polar bear around town. It is very rare but it can happen. If you ever do come across a Polar bear, back away slowly while keeping eye contact and get to a safe area asap. Report the bear immediately to the RCMP in Churchill - remember, Polar bears can be extremely dangerous to humans!

**HEALTH:** Not really any health issues to worry about in regards to local concerns. If you happen to

fall ill while on a trip in Churchill there is a fully staffed medical center in town. The Churchill Regional Health Authority is located in the Town Centre Complex.

**CLIMATE:** The winters in Churchill can be downright freezing, with average temperatures of about -27 degrees Celsius. The summer is cool with some warm days occurring in July and August. The average summer temperature is around 15 degrees Celsius daytime.

**BESIDES:** In addition to being a great place for nature photography, Churchill is steeped in Inuit culture. There is an Inuit museum in town with Inuit art and artifacts. There is also a National Historic Site, Cape Merry. This site is the former cannon battery designed to complement Prince of Wales Fort, visible on the other side of the river. The cape is an excellent vantage point for observing the Beluga whales that frequent the tidal area of the river throughout the summer. Good sunset shots of Prince of Wales Fort can also be taken here. ●