

A polar bear is sitting on a wooden ledge, looking out a window. The window looks out onto a scenic view of a lake or bay with a rocky shoreline and a wooden pier. The water is blue, and the sky is clear. The foreground shows green grass and purple flowers.

# called to the WILD

Manitoba's Hudson Bay offers up a mesmerizing surf-and-turf extravaganza: beluga whales and polar bears.

By Robert Earle Howells

The Seal River Heritage Lodge, situated on the southwest shore of Hudson Bay, hosts wildlife-watchers as well as the occasional wildlife that watches.

**H**ow I came to be snorkeling in Hudson Bay not far from 3,000-pound beluga whales is the story of a growing obsession. Over the past few years, I've watched humpback whales feed off the British Columbia coast, hovered offshore in a kayak while grizzly bears munched on tender late-spring grass, cast a flashlight beam on skulking caimans (crocodile cousins) from a canoe in the Amazon, watched elk rut on a Banff golf course, and tiptoed through a herd of wild bison on an Oklahoma prairie.

In a world teeming with virtual adventures, encountering wildlife in their natural settings is a refreshing dose of reality. Increasingly, it's what I seek in my travels. When I can hear the splashing crescendo of a whale's breach, smell the pungent muskiness of a herd of elk, or catch the glint of a gator's eye, I know that a bit of the real world endures. I like being reminded that separation from the natural world is an illusion. Indeed, here I am, as alive and breathing as the creatures I'm watching.

Or the creatures watching me.

I'd been floating in Hudson Bay for maybe two minutes when the first three whales sidled into my narrow snorkel-mask view. A tight echelon of ghostlike white swimmers emerged from the murk and glided beneath me until their heads were almost directly under mine. What happened next was so surreal that even re-

playing it in my mind seems like fantasy. Amid a swelling symphony of grunts, clicks, and whistles, all three whales rolled their heads up (belugas have necks) and affixed single-eyeball gazes upon me. No question who the curio here was. I lay silent and still, bobbing with the light chop. Rendered immobile by my dry suit and breathing apparatus (and looking like a bloated garbage bag), I hovered in the cold water, unable to whistle or click back. It was unnerving at first. But as I anthropomorphized that semblance of a smile on the belugas' faces and settled into watching their steady movements, I relaxed. A sense of intimacy came over me. Never had I been so close to something so large that felt so benign, I mused, perhaps even friendly.

And then: "Bob, there's a polar bear in the water!"

Uh-oh.

CHURCHILL, MANITOBA, IS BEST KNOWN for its annual fall mustering of polar bears. Hundreds of lumbering animals pace the shoreline, awaiting the freeze-over of Hudson Bay and a return to their icebound lives as hunters of ringed seals. Visitors huddle in big-wheeled buses to witness the world's

largest land predators cooling their heels. In the course of checking into polar bear trips, I learned that the bears take a summer vacation of sorts not far from Churchill. Summer is supernova time in northeastern Manitoba. Wildflowers erupt, Canada geese breed, polar bears laze about, and—here was a revelation—beluga whales gather by the thousands in the shallow mouths of three rivers that flow into Hudson Bay. The whales congregate in the Churchill, the Nelson-Hayes, and the Seal to feed, breed, and even to molt; they rub the sandy bottom to shed a thick layer of skin.

Several outfitters make the most of this irresistible conjunction by packaging trips. The one I settled on, led by Churchill Wild, is a weeklong trip called "Birds, Bears, and Belugas," which they base out of their small Seal River Heritage Lodge, about 40 road-

less miles north of Churchill. Mike Reimer, a veteran fishing/hunting/nature guide, runs the lodge with his wife, Jeanne, who comes from a family of Manitoba wilderness lodge owners.

"We have an exceptional location," Mike Reimer had told me before my trip, "where we're able to closely observe polar bears, beluga whales, caribou, and wolves." Reimer added a philosophical note that echoed my city-dweller's enthusiasm for wildlife-viewing vacations: "We want to make sure that people are able to renew their severed connection with land and sea. I think that is what brings people north to our wild places—it's that pull to go back to a wilderness where you can feel a closeness again with the Earth."

A trip to Seal River entails an overnight in Churchill, a town of 1,000 that takes its

polar bears—and bear tourism—seriously.

"If you see a bear," said Rose Preteau, Churchill Wild's town-based driver and hostess, "just head for the nearest house. No one in Churchill locks their doors for that very reason." I didn't have to test the locals' hospitality during my Churchill strolls, but within a five-minute walk of my motel I came upon a sobering warning sign near the bay: "Polar Bear Alert. STOP. Don't Walk in this Area."

More inviting were the gift shops, where stuffed polar bears and associated souvenirs abound. Belugas, I noticed, garnered only second-class status; bear geegaws outnumbered whale trinkets five to one.

When I made the 40-mile flight by Turbo Beaver floatplane from Churchill to Seal River Heritage Lodge the next day, the lodge was the only dot on the horizon I saw.



**A TIGHT ECHELON OF GHOSTLIKE WHITE SWIMMERS EMERGED FROM THE MURK.**



No roads lead to the Seal River—the action-central Hudson Bay tributary for spotting belugas (left) and polar bears. Floatplane is the way to go hereabouts.

Tour participants bed down at the Seal River Heritage Lodge, a remote place with drift logs, caribou antlers, fireweed, and the “calls of loons and twittering shorebirds,” says photographer Dennis Fast.



It's perched on a lonely Hudson Bay promontory a few miles north of the Seal River. Big living room windows aim south across a tidal inlet of the bay and toward the river. A spotting scope is at the ready for whatever opportunity might arise. And two towers, one inside and one out, might give the lodge a penitentiary aspect, but they afford excellent, and safe, perspective should a polar bear amble by. Which happens frequently—and dictates lodge policy: No one leaves the compound without

an armed guide. For my stay, that guide was naturalist Ian Thorleifson, a burly Icelandic Manitoban who spent six years in the field researching polar bears for the Canadian Wildlife Service in the 1980s.

“You wouldn't think a white, thousand-pound bear could hide in a patch of willows,” Ian said. “But it can, and we don't want to surprise one.” Not that the bear is lurking and hoping for a human meal. Most likely it's sleeping. “If you encounter one close up, forget those stories about playing

dead,” Ian cautioned. “Stand firm. Make yourself big. But whatever you do, don't run. He'll take you for food for sure.”

So much for the illusions one might have of polar bears as friendly or embraceable: “. . .the most predaceous of all bears,” writes Stephen Herrero in the morbidly fascinating book *Bear Attacks*.

Fear notwithstanding, I feel a bit conflicted whenever I'm in wildlife-voyeur mode. Thrilling, sure, but what impact does my presence have? What if I were to stum-

DENNIS FAST

ble over a sleeping bear, and Ian had to put it down? Could I bring harm to the very creatures I so value seeing?

“My opinion always has been that if you really care about something, don't go see it,” Mike Reimer said with a hint of sarcasm. “But that kind of thinking is bad for business. We always try to balance what is best for the wildlife and environment with a memorable experience for guests. We always allow the wildlife plenty of space to let us know we are not welcome in their

sphere of activity. They have myriad signals they send indicating when it's time to back off.”

Misgivings aside, I was dying to see a polar bear. And I only had to wait till the next morning, when Reimer roused me with a sharp knock at my door. “Polar bear headed your way, Bob. He might beat you to breakfast,” he said. I lumbered out with three fellow guests to watch a distant white dot become an 800-or-so-pound bear making for the lodge, which was emitting tantalizing breakfast smells. He moved gracefully across the wet boulders exposed by a low tide and paused occasionally to rise and sniff in our direction.

Within minutes he had strolled up an embankment covered in bright purple fireweed and began to pace a berm just outside our windows. Mike and Ian agreed that he was well shy of fully grown, but still, this guy was big and handsome—fairly fresh off

semipalmated plovers, and all manner of godwits, curlews, and sandpipers. Flocks of Canada geese would fly by. Marsh hawks ran strafing missions, and red-throated loons growled overhead. Lots of siksiks—cute little arctic ground squirrels.

On these walks, I had to quell my preference for more charismatic fauna and cultivate a subtler attunement to and an appreciation for the spare landscape. No mountains, no forests—virtually no trees—but there was space. Lots of space. Green spongy tundra from the bay to the western horizon, spangled with wildflowers. The feeling was primordial, prehuman. Nature in full abundance. No human sights or sounds. No, it wasn't nonstop, big-game action. But it was peaceful.

BY MIDWEEK, ALL SYSTEMS WERE GO for a day of whale-watching. We piled into twin inflatable Zodiacs, one of which was

## SPACE, LOTS OF SPACE. THE FEELING WAS PRIMORDIAL, PREHUMAN. NATURE IN FULL ABUNDANCE.

the ice, so his coat was clean and his physique full, though his breath left much to be desired. Kidding. But he was just a few feet away from us by the time he'd moved to the back of the lodge, though on the outside of the fence. When he reared up aggressively, Mike had had enough. He banged hard against the side of the building, which prompted Dakota, the lodge's black Lab, to woof wildly. The bear backtracked, looped around the front of the lodge, and disappeared toward the north.

Afterward, it occurred to me what had really transpired. I had watched with my naked eyes one of Earth's most magnificent animals move across his native landscape, heeding his most fundamental instincts. All without the aid of television wildlife programming. Amazing.

TIDES AND WEATHER DICTATE WHEN you can go out snorkeling with belugas, and both conspired against us. Wind-whipped chop on the water, wrong tides at the wrong time meant easy walks across the tundra and tidal flats for a couple of days. Excitement on these strolls came largely as bird sightings: bald eagles, tundra swans, a sandhill crane. Shorebirds were in abundance: tiny Bonaparte's gulls, huge herring gulls, arctic terns, eider and pintail ducks,

outfitted with a welded-steel crow's nest of sorts, and motored five or so miles to the Seal River estuary. I already had a sense of the ubiquity of whales there. I'd seen hundreds of clustered white humps in the river when I'd flown over it a few days before, but being among them in vivo was a different matter. As we chugged slowly into the river mouth, we began to see the undulating humps of white whale backs, alternately submerging and surfacing to breathe. Their expirations sounded like so many weightlifters hoisting iron in a gym.

As we turned slow circles (it seems that whales are less likely to spook when the motor's running), I pulled on my dry suit, which both keeps water out and provides buoyancy by way of tight gaskets around neck and limbs. I mouthed my snorkel and eased myself overboard.

Shortly after that first trio of whales eyed me and disappeared, a quartet appeared. Then individuals, mothers with calves—groups of four, five, six—slid up in turn. When I couldn't see whales in the cloudy water, I could hear them. Belugas are among the most vocal cetaceans. Their sounds have more to do with echolocation than chitchat, but I couldn't help imagining their amazement at the bloated thing floating in their midst.

I was well aware, of course, that these singers were big wild creatures with teeth. I had asked our guide if they'd experienced any untoward whale-human encounters. "No," he'd said. "We've never even had anyone scared by the whales. Sometimes they nose a snorkeler, or suck a bit at a dry suit. It's just their curiosity. But if you reach out to try to pet one, it will almost always swim away." I didn't try. There was never any question which was the huge beast in its own domain, and which of us was the awkward visitor. I remained motionless.

Still, I had to wonder if our presence had some impact on the whales.

Weeks later, I put the question to Pierre Richard, a research scientist with the Canada Department of Fisheries & Oceans' Arctic Aquatic Research Division. He chuckled. "Impact? They might actually like it." There

have been no scientific studies, he said, but "my guess is that there's no deleterious impact of that kind of tourism whatsoever." Richard went on to add that the western Hudson Bay whales are the largest beluga population in the world (some 57,000). Scientists are much more concerned about the belugas that are threatened by pollution in the St. Lawrence Seaway and by over-hunting in Alaska's Cook Inlet than by the impact of swimmers on the thriving whales in western Hudson Bay.

When our guide spotted a polar bear swimming maybe a couple of hundred yards away from me, he reeled me back into the boat (I'd been tethered by my feet), and we switched seamlessly back to bear-watching mode, bobbing in the outflow of the Seal River. *Ursus maritimus* is a powerful swimmer. This one looked fiercely

determined as he paddled with his huge forepaws and loudly exhaled the force of his effort, which to me was movingly heroic. But this was a routine swim for him, I learned. Bears might paddle as far as 300 miles after ice breakup. We backed away to let him continue in peace.

Also upon my return I corresponded with Ian Stirling, senior research scientist for the Canadian Wildlife Service, author of *Polar Bears*, and probably the world's foremost authority on the subject. I asked him about the net value of tourism when it comes to polar bear protection, wanting to know if the consciousness-raising value of bear-watching outweighs the impact of our presence.

"I am a strong supporter of properly done, non-harassing ecotourism," Stirling wrote back. "I think it is one of the most

important things we do ecologically." Like Pierre Richard for the belugas, Ian Stirling has a greater concern for the polar bears in this area. No great surprise here: global warming. He sent me a paper he wrote for the journal *Arctic* that cited a decline in population size, condition, and survival of young bears "as a consequence of earlier breakup of the sea ice brought about by climate warming." Early ice breakup means less time hunting seals and more time fasting on shore.

We spend the morning of our last day at the lodge, back on the water's edge. Fewer whales this time, but lots of polar bears, no doubt a causal relationship. Twice we see mothers swimming with their cubs. Fero-cious or not, small soggy polar bears swimming with Mom are as cute a sight as I've seen in the animal world. On land, we spy

through binoculars a huge polar bear chasing off two others. Two more join the tussle. Five bears now, out on Fishing Point, in the middle mouth of the Seal River. The biggest guy is feeding on something, and a closer look (still from hundreds of yards offshore) shows that it's a beluga.

Sometimes a whale gets stranded by a low tide, I learn. Bears will leap in, club it repeatedly with their front paws, and hold its head underwater until it drowns. Then it's a prolonged dinnertime. Interestingly, no one really noticed this bear-beluga phenomenon until about ten years ago. Concomitant with global warming?

"We'd had six years of warm springs and hot summers with fires in the denning areas, the ice was late in forming in the fall, and we started noticing bears feeding on belugas," guide Thorleifson explains. Pierre Richard, on the other hand, is skeptical about a global-warming link: "Bears will take advantage of anything they can lay their teeth on," he told me.

In any event, it's a reminder of the rawness of nature in the far north.

We pull away from the feast and find ourselves again among the wheezy respirations of a pod of belugas. Slipping into the water feels like coming back to a special performance in progress—a little slice of eternity, power, and beauty. And

symphony. When I reluctantly signal that I'm ready to return, I get reeled in, ease over the gunwale, and sit silently in the boat.

Few travel episodes have lodged so vividly in my consciousness as my underwater sojourns with the beluga whales. At home in the city, I can close my eyes and become transported to places of astounding beauty, where I see grizzlies grazing beside a fjord, bald eagles swooping down from the heights of Sitka spruce, bison silhouetted against a tallgrass prairie sunset. I know also that somewhere in a frigid northern ocean, a polar bear is heeding its ancient instinctive call to swim home, and beluga whales are filling the sea with melody.

It is the solace of wild places. It is, for me, the meaning of the beluga's song.

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**LOGISTICS:** Churchill Wild's seven-day, six-night "Birds, Bears, and Belugas" package is offered in July and August for \$5,700 and includes all meals and wildlife viewing, commercial flights between Winnipeg and Churchill, and floatplane flights to and from Churchill and Seal River Heritage Lodge. 866-846-9453; [www.churchillwild.com](http://www.churchillwild.com).



Even when not frozen—which it is for most of the year—relatively shallow Hudson Bay is littered with chunks of ice. The arctic hare (right) weighs in at about ten pounds.

MIKE GRANDMANN/CORBIS (BELOW); TIMOTHY PATRICK FURBER (RIGHT)



**"BEARS WILL TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ANYTHING THEY CAN LAY THEIR TEETH ON."**

# beyond BELUGAS

## A Dozen Animal Experiences of a Lifetime

### CARIBOU ON THE MOVE

Few landscapes are as vast and empty as the coastal plains at the foot of the Brooks Range in northern Alaska—until some 150,000 caribou (wild reindeer) come thundering through in an annual procession that can last for days. The famous Porcupine herd migrates to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in June to take advantage of cool breezes that help them ward off the population of biting bugs. The migration generates riveting side-shows, too. There's frenzied river crossings and ruthless predation as grizzlies,

wolves, and even bald eagles try to pick off hapless calves. Float trips provide the most convenient viewing. ■ **Arctic Wild**, 11-day trips, \$4,200; [www.arcticwild.com](http://www.arcticwild.com). ■ **ABEC Alaska Adventures**, nine-day trips, \$3,950; [www.abecalaska.com](http://www.abecalaska.com).

### SAVE THE SEALS

When word spread several years ago that white, fuzzy, utterly adorable baby harp seals were being slaughtered for their pure white pelts, outrage spread quickly—and **Natural Habitat Adventures** stepped in with an irresistible alternative: a love-

fest rather than a bloodbath, which saves some seals and is proving to be more profitable for the locals than selling fur. Nat Hab brings groups to ice floes off Quebec's Magdalen Islands every March, where the seals migrate from Greenland to bear their pups. ■ Seven-day trips, \$4,895; [www.nathab.com/north/seal-watch](http://www.nathab.com/north/seal-watch).

### GORILLAS NOT TO BE MISSED

Despite poachers and war, some 700 mountain gorillas survive in the mountains of Uganda and Rwanda. The gorillas were the life work of scientist Dian Fossey, who was killed here in 1985. Participants can trek to the rugged rain forests of Uganda, where local trackers and guides lead them to thrilling encounters with our massive primate cousins. ■ \$8,995 for a 12-day lodge-based tour with **Natural Habitat Adventures**; [www.nathab.com/africa/primate-watch](http://www.nathab.com/africa/primate-watch).

### BIG FIVE DRIVE-BY

The Big Five of African wildlife were so-named by hunters because they are elusive and difficult quarry—not necessarily because of their physical size. And what a



Here's looking at you, kid: On an Alaskan diet of primarily lichen, leaves, and grasses, the caribou can run as fast as 50 miles an hour. Synchronized swimming in the wild: Seals—perennially popular at zoos—are even better to watch in their natural habitats, from Quebec to the Galápagos (right).



MICHAEL MELFORD/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT), DALLIC/CORBIS (RIGHT)

formidable quintet to encounter in the wild: lion, African elephant, Cape buffalo, leopard, and rhinoceros. They're all readily spotted (though not, of course, hunted) in South Africa's huge Kruger National Park, where hippos, cheetahs, and giraffes are also born free as the wind blows. The southern part of the park is superb for game-viewing and birding; where else are you going to see a yellow-rumped tinkerbird? ■ For a DIY trip, enter through the Crocodile Bridge Gate, a five-hour drive from Johannesburg, and stay in the **Lower Sabie Main Rest Camp** inside the park—from \$73 for a bungalow; [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org). Or go guided with a safari operator, e.g., **Eco Africa's three-day southern Kruger safari**: \$635; [www.ecoafrika.com](http://www.ecoafrika.com).

#### WHERE THE WILDEBEEST ARE

The spectacle of 1.5 million wildebeest plus hundreds of thousands of zebras and gazelles storming the plains of East Africa—the Great Migration—has been called “the biggest buffet on Earth” by Africa Adventure Consultants founder Kent Redding. That much meat on the hoof attracts hordes of predators, primarily lions and crocodiles, adding life-and-death drama to the display. The animals follow annual rains (i.e., greener pastures) from Tanzania's southern Serengeti in January to northern Tanzania and Kenya's Masai Mara in August, where they remain through November before funneling south again in their 1,000-mile cycle. Best bet for viewing: a safari with comfortable, movable camps.

■ **Africa Adventure Consultants Serengeti Classic Private Camps**, \$1,950 per person for four nights; [www.adventuresinafrica.com](http://www.adventuresinafrica.com). ■ **CC Africa's Serengeti Under Canvas** luxury camps from \$595 per person per night; [www.ccafrica.com/reserve\\_camp-1-id-2-22](http://www.ccafrica.com/reserve_camp-1-id-2-22).

#### GRIZZLIES OFF YOUR PORT BOW

The grizzly bears of Knight Inlet in British Columbia have a single obsession during their waking months: to fatten up for their long winter's nap. In the spring and early summer, that entails grazing on sweet grasses along the shore of the inlet and, later in the summer, feasting on salmon that run in feeder streams. Either way, they're indifferent to respectful human presence, which is what **Knight Inlet Lodge** provides. Visitors can hover 50 yards offshore in a kayak or watch the big bears from a small boat, and motor over to nearby Johnstone Strait to watch active pods of orcas ply the waters. ■ Three-day package starts at \$2,265; [www.grizzlytours.com](http://www.grizzlytours.com).

#### MARCH OF THE PENGUIN-WATCHERS

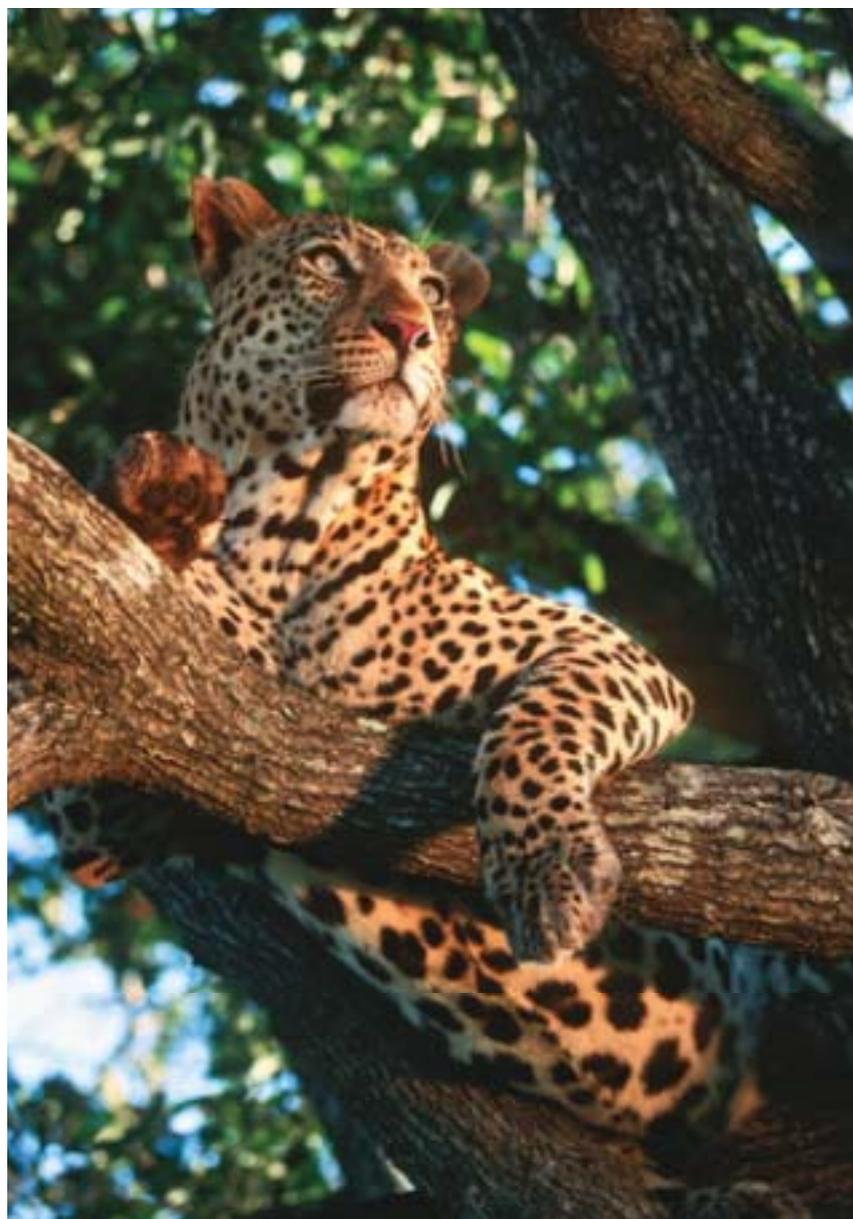
For sheer cuteness, not to mention box-office gold, nothing matches the sight of hundreds of thousands of Adelie penguins gathered on the Antarctic Peninsula during the austral summer—unless it's tens of thousands of chinstrap penguins nestled in a natural amphitheater. An Antarctic wildlife cruise puts you close to these animals as well as fur seals and cavorting orcas, humpbacks, and minke, and lollygagging fur seals—plus gazillions of albatrosses, shearwaters, petrels, prions, and skuas. Trips with stops in the Falklands and South Georgia Island can include encounters with up to nine varieties of penguins. ■ **International Wildlife Expeditions**, 19-day trips from about \$9,990; [www.wildlifeadventures.com](http://www.wildlifeadventures.com).

#### RAINING MONARCHS

When hundreds of millions of monarch butterflies muster in the fir forests of Mexico's central highlands, they can bend branches with their mass or carpet the forest floor in an unbroken tapestry of orange and black. And you can hear the delicate sonata of flapping butterfly wings. Peak season is January to early March, before they flutter off 2,000 miles northward to the central United States and Canada. The El Rosario sanctuary in Michoacan is the most popular butterfly reserve. ■ **Natural Habitat Adventures**, six-day trips, \$2,895; [www.nathab.com/latin-america/monarchs-of-mexico](http://www.nathab.com/latin-america/monarchs-of-mexico).



Chinstrap penguins dominate the Antarctic landscape on Half Moon Island and don't seem to mind the attention of red-jacketed humans. The leopard (opposite) is the smallest of Africa's three big cats (including the lion and cheetah). In East Africa, wildebeest (below) display stunning determination.



KIM VOLKUTER/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT), WOLFGANG KAETHER/ORBIS (TOP RIGHT), ANDY HOUSE/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM RIGHT)



### BIG-WINGED MIGRATION

When some 12,000 sandhill cranes rise as one from roosts beside the Rio Grande River in central New Mexico, their wings extended the length of a grown man, the sight is magisterial. "And the sound is otherworldly," says the guru of birding guides, Victor Emmanuel. "It reverberates and dominates the landscape." The cranes are joined by 30,000 snow geese and 80,000 ducks, mid-November to mid-February, in the **Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge**, where a loop road puts you as close as 15 yards to the avian convention.

■ Bosque del Apache NWR, [www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/newmex/bosque](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/newmex/bosque). **Vent-Bird Tours** offers seven-day trips from \$1,800; [www.ventbird.com](http://www.ventbird.com).

### WILD, WILD HORSES...

Contrary to expectation, wild horses have not ridden off into the sunset with most other symbols of western wilderness. In fact, thousands of the free-roaming creatures, descendants of cavalry and ranch

horses, still thrive on vast open ranges in the West. The White Mountain herd of southwestern Wyoming, about 200 strong, is probably the most easily seen, via a loop driving tour of the **Bureau of Land Management's White Mountain Herd Management Area** near Rock Springs. If you fall in love, you can adopt an animal through the BLM: [www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov](http://www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov).

■ **High Wild & Lonesome Adventure Horseback Vacations** offers 7seven-day mounted trips in the area: \$2,500; [www.hwl.net](http://www.hwl.net).

### WEIRD SCIENCE IN THE GALÁPAGOS

The notorious oddities of the Galápagos Islands are born of sheer isolation. About 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, a unique convergence of sea currents and protection from the hand of man (97 percent of their land surface is national park) makes for wonders that never cease: Giant tortoises can weigh in at well over 500 pounds, marine iguanas dive with seals, and the world's northernmost penguins share their turf with flamingos. Just when

you think you've seen it all, you meet flightless cormorants, absurdly tame blue-footed boobies, or scads of seals snorkeling with you. Small-boat cruises à la Lindblad Expeditions' *National Geographic Islander* offer a sensible way to journey in Darwin's wake. ■ **Lindblad Expeditions**, 10-day trips from \$5,120; [www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com).

### BRIGHTLY FEATHERED FRIENDS

**Manu Biosphere Reserve** in the Amazon Basin of southeastern Peru is richer in bird species than any region on Earth. Some 600 types have been ID'd at Manu Wildlife Center, the comfortable lodge that's a Valhalla for birders, who pad their life lists with extreme rarities like the elusive antpitta, fun finds like toucans, and showy ones like red-and-green macaw and blue-and-gold macaw that congregate on nearby clay riverbanks. And when the birds aren't singing, the monkeys are swinging. ■ [www.manu-wildlife-center.com](http://www.manu-wildlife-center.com); 13-day tours \$4,150 with **Field Guides Birding Tours**; [www.fieldguides.com](http://www.fieldguides.com).



With little to fear from predators (the occasional mountain lion notwithstanding), the wild horse population in Wyoming increases 20 percent a year on average. The natural clay licks in Peru's Manu Biosphere Reserve (right) serve as magnets for highly vocal, fabulously feathered red-and-green macaws.



JEFF VANUGA/CORBIS (LEFT), FRANS LANTING (RIGHT)