

# In Search Of Polar Bears In Subarctic Canada!

Text & Images **Stuart Forster**



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*Stuart Forster is a professional photographer with more than a decade's experience. Stuart is a director of [whyeyephoto.com](http://whyeyephoto.com) and regularly posts travel-related content to his award-winning blog, [go-eat-do.com](http://go-eat-do.com).*



Nestled in the heart of subarctic region of Manitoba province in Central Canada, is this remote yet rugged country which is better known as the polar bear country and also a popular migration point where the bears remain restricted to the coastline patiently waiting for the first winter ice to appear on the horizon. The polar bears are a spectacular animals, with each male polar bear can grow to more than 600 kg and also stands tall by 3.05 metres.

The best viewing time to see the polar bears in the wild is between October and November, when the bears begin their move from their summer habitat on the tundra back to the seal hunting territory – on the pack ice that forms every winter over the Hudson Bay. This is an incredible life time experience to savour that enables the visitor to shoot wildlife and polar bears in particular in the wild in the subarctic Canada regions.



close to the shore of the Hudson Bay. The area provides habitat for approximately 850 polar bears. The creatures congregate by the coast in October and November, waiting for the water of the Hudson Bay to freeze so that they can hunt seals on the ice. For wildlife lovers and photographers that brings unparalleled opportunities for proximity to the world's largest land-dwelling carnivores.

Upon arrival Derek, our guide and resident bear expert, explained that, for our safety, it was essential for everyone to move together as a group while walking outside of the lodge's fenced compound. If a bear approached us we were warned that we had to pull together and stand tall — a low angle might well result in eye-level photos of the approaching bear but the safety of the group took priority.

Temperatures in northern Manitoba

Mention that you are going on safari and most people imagine a tropical or sub-tropical game drive with opportunities to view big cats, elephants and other mammals. Safaris are expeditions to view or hunt animals (hopefully armed only with a camera) in their natural habitat. It's also possible to experience safaris in other parts of the world, including the subarctic, where the challenges posed to photographers are markedly different to those of the savannah and jungle.

I travelled to northern Manitoba, Canada, with the expectation of observing arctic wildlife during a group Polar Bear Photo Safari. Our base was Churchill Wild's Seal River Heritage Lodge, one of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, 60 kilometres north of the nearest town and



plummet well below zero during autumn and winter, meaning













specialist clothing is required while outdoors. The lodge is on the tundra, close to where the treeline ends, meaning no shelter from the chilling wind. Rather than buying windproof, heavily insulated clothing and knee-length waterproofed boots that I would rarely use, I hired kit from Churchill Wild. Without specialist clothing I would not have been able to concentrate on photography. The temperature fell to  $-17^{\circ}\text{C}$  while I was at the lodge and the windchill factor made it feel even colder. Ahead of thinking about photography, it is essential to ensure you have clothing that will help you survive and



feel comfortable in sub-zero temperatures.

Cold sapped my batteries even quicker than I anticipated as being likely. To combat that, I carried

pockets, close to my body. Those that I carried beneath the insulation of my coat retained their charge for longest. I had to change the batteries frequently during each two- to three-hour walk on the tundra. I took a couple of chargers to the lodge, to ensure I could recharge two batteries simultaneously and never be without power.

Have you ever tried operating a camera wearing gloves? Turning dials and pressing buttons proves way trickier than without them! When changing ISO and exposure settings I was forced to remove





them. As an alternative, one of the group members cut away a section of material from the index finger of his glove, so he didn't need to keep removing it.

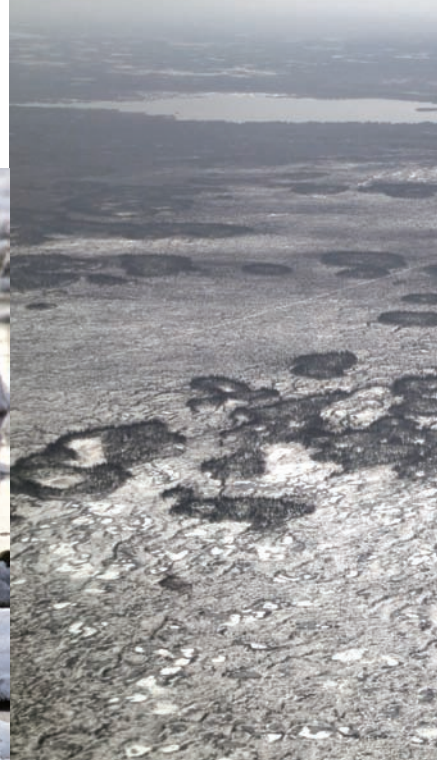
Derek was proficient with a camera and understood the challenges of photographing in a harsh environment with relatively short days and changeable weather. He recommended that photographers participating in the photo safari have at least a 300mm lens to capture details of animals. I used a 100-400mm zoom most of the

time, because of its flexible range and because it is relatively light. From time to time I also applied a 1.4x converter to photograph distant bears.

Ultimately, I wanted to capture a portfolio of images that depicted the experience of staying at the lodge. I also carried a 24-105mm lens, mounted on a second body, to photograph the landscape of the tundra and document my participation in the photo safari. The lens proved flexible, meaning I didn't need to keep switching in changeable, windy weather conditions that saw flurries of snow falling on a couple of occasions. Even though wildlife was the







main attraction in the region, I also found it rewarding to keep an eye open for tracks left in the mud of the shoreline. The landscape also proved fascinating banded clouds above the open countryside provided interesting subject matter. So too did the icy residue left on rocks, caused by the ebb and flow of the tide.



Just as stepping outside of a cool, air-conditioned room into the warmth can cause a lens to fog, moving between sub-zero outdoor temperatures and warm accommodation can result in condensation. During our first lunch break, Derek suggested that we should remove the batteries from our cameras and bring them indoors while leaving our kit in the cool of the lodge's ante-room, next





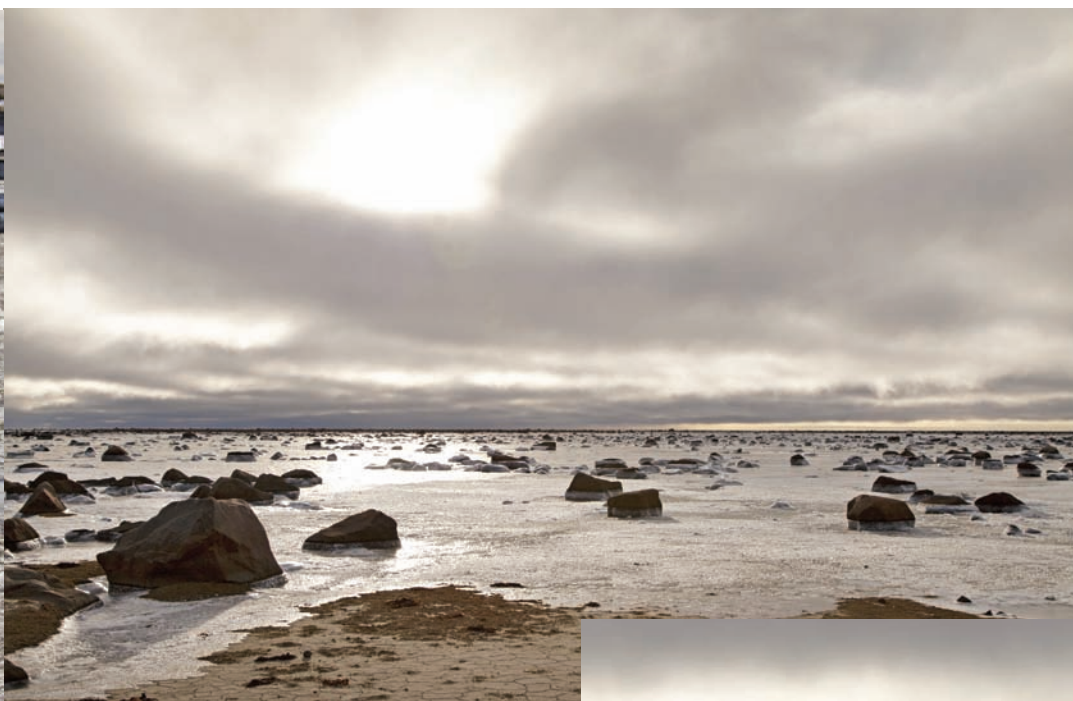
opening them. That proved successful to circumvent problems.

Some of my favourite photos of the polar bears were taken when the sun was low at the end of the day. I moved into a position where I could capture a backlit bear sitting on rocks. I was also fortunate

enough to get very close to a sub adult bear as she strolled by the wire fence of the lodge. By remaining almost motionless while the polar bear approached me, on the other side of the fence, I could acquire close-up images using my 24-105mm lens (which the bear attempted to lick while I was doing so).

Visitors to the lodge fly in on a light aircraft from Churchill. The 30-minute flight provides opportunities to photograph the coastline, arboreal forest and tundra. To do so means being prepared with camera in hand when boarding the aircraft. I noticed that the curved glass of the windscreen introduced some aberrations into my photos. The photographers who pressed their lenses flat against the glass of the windows in the side of the plane were able to capture impressive landscapes.

All of the participants of the Polar Bear Photo Safari that I attended acquired images that we were happy with and learnt a lot about the behaviour of the bears, thanks to the expertise of guides at the lodge.



to our coats and boots. We slipped the batteries back into the bodies after eating and had no problems during the afternoon sessions. To prevent fogging upon returning to the lodge, later in the day, he recommended that we place our cameras in large zip-lock plastic bags — the type normally used to store food in freezers — and leave the bags sealed for at least 30 minutes before







### A CHECKLIST FOR PHOTOGRAPHING IN THE SUBARCTIC:

- Be prepared. You'll be photographing in a remote part of the world. Create a list of the photography equipment and clothing that you require and tick it off as you pack.
- Ensure you feel comfortable while outdoors, so you can concentrate on photography. Pack layered clothing, to provide





insulation and warmth, along with a woolly hat, gloves and a scarf.

- Carry at least two or three spare batteries. The cold drains batteries far quicker than is normally the case.

- Plan well in advance. Polar Bear Photo Safaris are in high demand. Booking early maximises opportunities to acquire reasonably priced air fares to the north of Canada and ensures you have

plenty of time to obtain a visa.

- A monopod proves handy for photographing distant bears and can double as a useful walking aid when navigating rocks along the coastline of the Hudson Bay.

- Take a tripod. The Northern Lights are a frequent occurrence in Churchill and Manitoba's north. Clear skies mean you may have an opportunity to photograph the aurora borealis.

## CANADA TRAVEL INFORMATION

Learn more about locations in Manitoba and Canada suitable for wildlife photography, via the [www.travelmanitoba.com](http://www.travelmanitoba.com) and [www.destinationcanada.com/en](http://www.destinationcanada.com/en) websites.

Churchill Wild ([www.churchillwild.com](http://www.churchillwild.com)) operates a series of Polar Bear Photo Safaris each October and November at its Seal River Heritage Lodge. 