

MANITOBA

Including Churchill

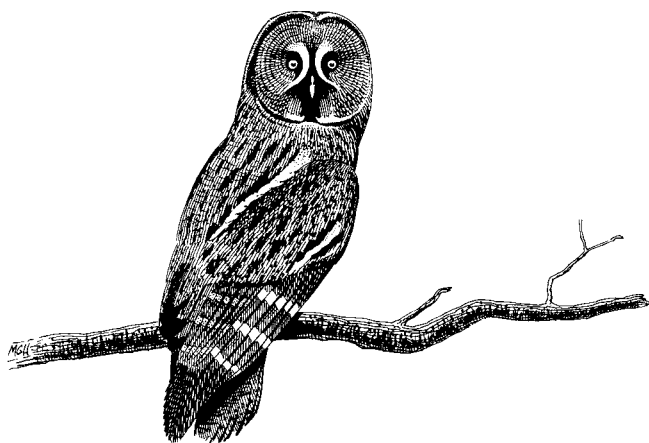
The Best of Canada

Saturday 2nd June – Thursday 14th June 2012 (13 days)

Leaders: Cal Cuthbert and assistant

Group Size Limit: 12

Tour Category: Easy for the most part, occasionally Moderate



Great Grey Owl (Michael Hodgson)

The cracking and grinding of the pack ice is the sound that heralds the coming of spring to the remote communities on the shores of Hudson Bay. As the ice breaks up myriads of sculptured ice floes float out to sea or become beached on the miles of deserted shoreline, Belugas arrive to feed in the rich waters and a host of birds return to the harsh but beautiful tundra landscapes of their birth to take advantage of the short arctic summer, or stop by on their way to the still frozen lands even further north.

Churchill, a small port town on Hudson Bay, has become famous amongst birdwatchers for its spectacular arctic migration and rich assemblage of northern breeding species. A chance to explore this wonderful place will be a highlight of our visit to Manitoba, but this immense province has much more to offer the visitor, for here too are seemingly unending prairies and a vast wilderness of forests and lakes. Manitoba, including Churchill, is a classic North

American birding destination, with great and mostly easy birding, pleasant travelling conditions and comfortable accommodations. We will be visiting the province at the very best time of year, when summer visitors have already arrived yet migration at Churchill is still in full swing. Not only does Manitoba offer very enjoyable birding, but there are plenty of mega-specialities, including Spruce Grouse, Yellow Rail, Thayer's Gull, Boreal Chickadee, Sprague's Pipit, Connecticut Warbler, Smith's Longspur, and Baird's, Le Conte's, Nelson's Sharp-tailed and Harris's Sparrows.

Our journey starts in Winnipeg, from where we will travel to a large bird-rich wetland beside Lake Manitoba before heading westwards into the wide open prairies of southwestern Manitoba. Here, islands of native grassland can still be found amongst an ocean of cultivation and in spring carpets of wildflowers burst into bloom and the songs of prairie birds fill the air. Highlights of this part of the province include Sharp-

tailed Grouse, Yellow Rail, Upland Sandpiper, Sprague's Pipit, Le Conte's and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows, the rare and declining Baird's Sparrow, and Bobolink and Chestnut-collared Longspurs in their striking summer dress.

Next we will explore Riding Mountain National Park, a raised plateau that harbours a southern outpost of the great boreal forest that stretches right across North America from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Here we will be exposed to one of the richest avifaunas in all Canada, with a host of colourful American wood warblers (including the restricted-range Connecticut Warbler) and an extraordinary variety of other forest species including Hooded Merganser, both Spruce and Ruffed Grouse, the wonderful Great Gray Owl, American Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers, Boreal Chickadee and the huge Evening Grosbeak. Mammal watching is also enjoyable, with Moose, Elk and American Beaver often to be seen.

From Riding Mountain we will return to Winnipeg and catch a flight to Churchill. As we fly northwards, the boreal forest gives way to the tundra and the pack ice of Hudson Bay, the largest enclosed bay in the world that scoops a

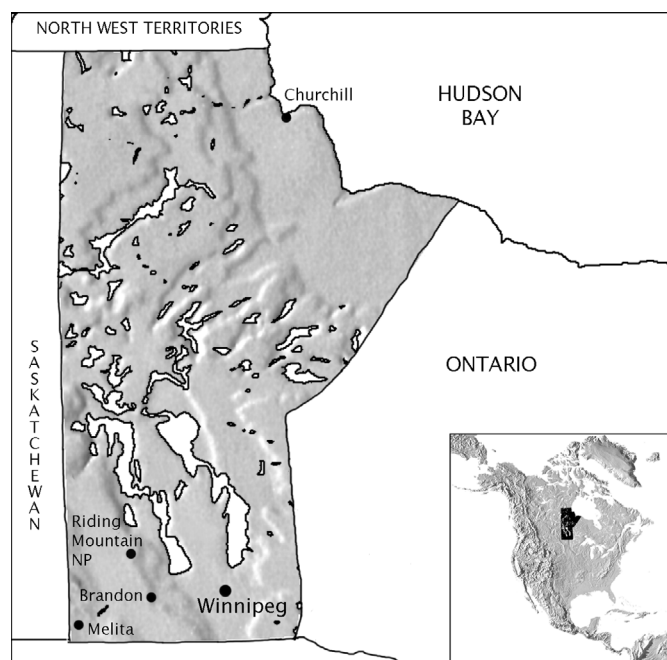
huge hole out of northern Canada. We have timed our visit to coincide with the end of the migration and the start of the breeding season, a time when birding at Churchill is truly unforgettable. As we wander across the bleak but beautiful tundra, enjoying the remarkable tameness of so many arctic birds, we will be wondering how the native Inuit people ever managed to survive in such a hostile environment. Here we will be looking in particular for Long-tailed Jaeger, Sabine's and Thayer's Gulls (and if we are in luck, the beautiful Ross's Gull), Gray Jay, American Tree and Harris's Sparrows, Smith's Longspur, Hoary (or Arctic) Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak and Rusty Blackbird, as well as a host of breeding-plumaged shorebirds and many other migrants and summer visitors.

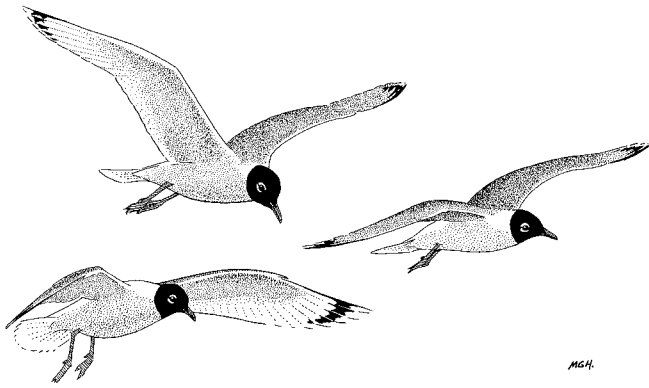
Birdquest has operated tours to Manitoba since 1991.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins in the early evening at Winnipeg, where we will stay overnight.

Day 2 We will spend the morning at St Ambrose Provincial Park, part of the Delta Marsh wetland complex on Lake Manitoba situated not far from Winnipeg. As





Franklin's Gulls (Michael Hodgson)

we approach the edge of the marsh the clamour of bird songs and calls reaches fever pitch. Large numbers of elegant Franklin's Gulls call raucously as they pass overhead en route to their colonies and noisy but brilliantly-hued Yellow-headed Blackbirds rush about the reeds, rival males constantly chasing one another as they squabble over territory. The open waters are dotted with Blue-winged Teals, American Wigeons, Canvasbacks, Redheads, Lesser Scaups, Ruddy Ducks and other wildfowl, Eared (or Black-necked) Grebes and American Coots. Strikingly-plumaged American Avocets sift the shallows whilst delicate Wilson's Phalaropes bob about like toy boats on a pond. Other species we should see here include Double-crested Cormorant, American White Pelican, American Bittern, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Killdeer, Willet, Marbled Godwit, California Gull, Forster's and Black Terns, House, Sedge and Marsh Wrens, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Savannah Sparrow and Brewer's Blackbird.

Later we will drive westwards to Brandon for a three nights stay. Most of the journey takes us through agricultural land interspersed with riverine woodland and scrub. As we progress westwards Swainson's Hawks become more frequent and we will notice American Kestrels perched on the

roadside wires. Conservation-minded landowners often place nest boxes at intervals along the fences enclosing the large fields. Tree Swallows are the most frequent beneficiaries but we should also come across boxes occupied by the beautiful Eastern Bluebird and the equally splendid Mountain Bluebird. Other species we may encounter during the journey are Turkey Vulture, Red-tailed Hawk, Mourning Dove, Common Nighthawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Cliff Swallow, House Finch, American Crow and Common Grackle. In the evening we shall go out to look for one of North America's more elusive species, the secretive Yellow Rail. As well as hearing its distinctive call (not unlike the sound of two small pebbles being tapped together) we have a fair chance of seeing one in the spotlight beam. As we wait for the sun to go down we will have ample opportunity to appreciate the many noisy Red-winged Blackbirds whilst other inhabitants of the marshes include Virginia Rail and the rather localized Le Conte's and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows.

Days 3-4 The surroundings of Melita in far southwestern Manitoba offer some of the best prairie birding in Canada. Out in the grasslands, Upland Sandpipers flutter over their territories, obligingly perching on fence posts from time

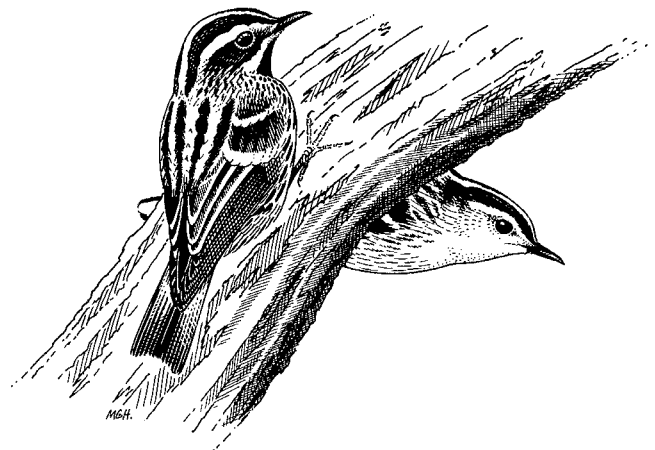
to time, and Richardson's Ground Squirrels peer out from their burrows, sniffing the air and whistling to each other. Western Meadowlarks are singing on all sides, beautifully patterned Chestnut-collared Longspurs rise and fall in display flight over the mauve and yellow prairie flowers, Bobolinks in their smart breeding plumage perch on the fence wires and Sprague's Pipits sing high in the air before descending rapidly to the ground. A speciality of the area is the rather sombrely plumaged Baird's Sparrow, a localized species which spends most of its time creeping about amongst the grass, while the localized Sharp-tailed Grouse should be seen strutting about early in the morning. Other species we may encounter in this superb part of Manitoba include Pied-billed and Western Grebes, Wood Duck, Ferruginous Hawk, Northern Flicker, Eastern and Say's Phoebes, Willow Flycatcher, Brown Thrasher, Loggerhead Shrike, Chipping, Clay-colored, Vesper, Grasshopper, Lark and Song Sparrows, Brown-headed Cowbird and the superb Baltimore and Orchard Orioles.

During our explorations the Brandon region, we will also visit the Brandon Hills, searching for such species as the easily-overlooked Broad-winged Hawk and the stunning Scarlet Tanager,

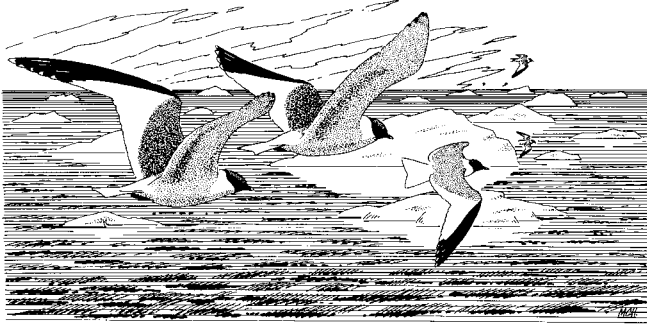
and the truly fascinating Whitewater Lake, which often holds impressive numbers of shorebirds and other waterbirds (including a number of more southerly-distributed herons and egrets).

Day 5 We will spend the early morning birding in the prairies and then drive northwards to Wasagaming in Riding Mountain National Park for a three nights stay. As we approach Riding Mountain we will pass through an area with many ponds and small marshes. This habitat, which extends over a wide area of the Canadian prairies and down into the northern United States, is known as pothole country and has earned the soubriquet 'the Duck Factory of North America' due to the huge numbers of wildfowl that breed here. We will arrive in time for some initial exploration at Riding Mountain.

Days 6-7 Riding Mountain National Park is a large island of forested uplands rising over 300m above the surrounding lowlands and is still a true wilderness. Boreal forest flourishes in the higher part of the park, well to the south of its usual distribution in Manitoba, yet at the same time the sheltered lower slopes support hardwood forest more typical of eastern Canada. Add to this wide range of forest types a series of beautiful lakes and marshy



Black-and-white Warblers (Michael Hodgson)

*Sabine's Gulls (Michael Hodgson)*

wetlands and you have the reason for Riding Mountain's status as one of the richest places in Canada for birds.

Pride of place amongst the specialities must go to that monarch of the boreal forests, the magnificent Great Gray Owl. The piercing yellow eyes surrounded by a series of concentric dark rings give this huge bird an aloof but at the same time rather malevolent look and we are sure to come away deeply impressed by the sight of one of nature's supreme creations. Another sought-after bird which can be difficult to see, even when close, is the Spruce Grouse, for when disturbed it will 'freeze' on its perch rather than fly. The rather localized American Three-toed (split from Eurasian Three-toed) and Black-backed Woodpeckers are both found in these forests, favouring burnt areas, whilst a sound that seems to be a distant engine revving up will prove to be a displaying Ruffed Grouse, clutching onto a dead log with its feet to stop itself falling off during its energetic wing-flapping display.

As we stand by the mirror-like waters of a pine-fringed lake we may be treated to the sight of a majestic Bald Eagle flying overhead or hear the mournful call of a Common Loon (or Great Northern Diver). One of the most pleasant features of birding in a Canadian forest in late spring is the presence of so many colourful American wood warblers and likely species include the restricted-

range Connecticut Warbler as well as Golden-winged, Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Nashville, Chestnut-sided, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Cape May, Blackburnian, Black-and-white, Mourning, Canada, Magnolia (and perhaps Bay-breasted) Warblers, American Redstart, Ovenbird and Northern Waterthrush.

Amongst the other birds we should see during our visit are Red-necked Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Osprey, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Merlin, Ring-billed Gull, Black-billed Cuckoo, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, the magnificent Pileated Woodpecker, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Olive-sided, Great Crested, Alder and Least Flycatchers, Purple Martin, Black-capped and Boreal Chickadees, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creeper, Blue Jay, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Cedar Waxwing, American Robin, Veery, Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, Gray Catbird, Warbling, Red-eyed, Philadelphia and Blue-headed Vireos, Lincoln's, Swamp and White-throated Sparrows, Dark-eyed Junco, Eastern Towhee, Indigo Bunting, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, the enormous Evening Grosbeak, Purple Finch, Pine Siskin and American Goldfinch.

Riding Mountain is rich in

mammals as well as birds and we should encounter White-tailed Deer, Elk, Moose and American Beaver. The dams and lodges of the latter are very much a part of the landscape here and we should be able to watch these fascinating creatures busily repairing the dam walls. If we are lucky we will even chance upon a Black Bear quietly foraging amongst the whispering aspens.

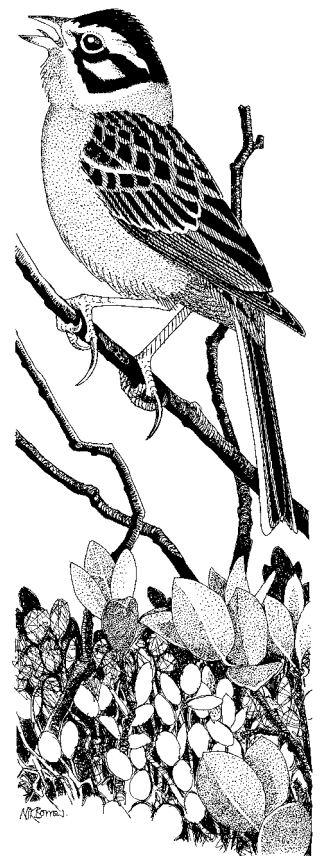
Day 8 After some final birding at Riding Mountain we will head back to Winnipeg for an overnight stay.

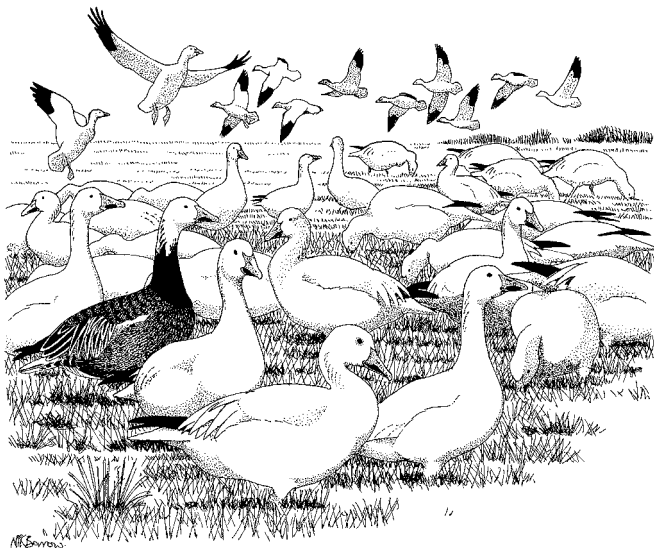
Day 9 We will drive to Winnipeg airport and take a flight north to Churchill for a four nights stay. As our flight approaches Hudson Bay, the last stunted spruces give way to open tundra speckled with still partly-frozen lakes and snow patches. This afternoon we will commence our exploration of the Churchill area.

Days 10-12 Churchill, situated in the far north of Manitoba on the shores of Hudson Bay, came into being as a trading post and trapping community of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1717, but grew into a small port town with the arrival, in 1929, of the railway from the prairie wheat belt. Churchill has become famous amongst those interested in birds due to its position astride the major migration flyway into the high arctic, a position which provides observers with an endlessly changing spectacle for several weeks each spring. Situated only as far north as the northernmost tip of Scotland, it has a truly arctic climate untempered by the ameliorating effects of the Gulf Stream. At this time of year, before the pack ice has melted and ships can use the port, Churchill has an atmosphere all of its own. The huge grain terminal stands eerily silent and empty whilst the town itself seems yet to awake from its long

winter sleep. The weather has still not settled into its summer pattern and a sudden snowstorm in the morning can be transformed into warm sunshine only hours later.

The ice of Hudson Bay is just beginning to break up and the strange noises of cracking and grinding ice can often be heard as we scan the cold expanses. Ringed and Harbour Seals will be hauled out on the floes whilst from time to time elegant Sabine's Gulls, on their way to the far north, hover and dip above the cobalt-blue waters. Large flocks of Black, Velvet (or White-winged) and Surf Scoters and Common Eiders bob about on the surface and with careful scanning we may discover a King Eider. Arctic Terns fly past continuously, occasionally being harried by Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers (Or Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas). Around the mouth of the Churchill River, where large ice floes are alternately stranded and then

*Smith's Longspur (Nik Borrow)*

*Snow Geese (Nik Borrow)*

refloated by the tide, Red-throated and Pacific Loons (or Red-throated and Pacific Divers), Common Goldeneyes, Common Mergansers (or Goosanders) and Red-breasted Mergansers gather. If the ice has opened up sufficiently we should be able to watch Belugas, or White Whales, listening to their noisy exhalations and watching the steam rising from their blowholes in the frosty air. On the rocky shoreline American (or Buff-bellied) Pipits, Lapland Longspurs and strikingly-plumaged Snow Buntings pick over the flotsam and jetsam, White-crowned Sparrows sing from small bushes amongst rocks encrusted with red, orange and pale green lichens, and Horned Larks twitter as they fly overhead.

All around Churchill and even within the town limits are ponds and small lakes. Every little body of water seems to have its own pair of Long-tailed Ducks, their yodelling calls carrying far across the tundra, and as well as many species of wildfowl already encountered further south we can expect to find American Black Duck and Greater Scaup. Large groups of Red-necked Phalaropes in their attractive breeding dress pirouette on the water, whilst around the margins of the wetlands are Semipalmated Plovers,

Semipalmated, Least, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers and migrant White-rumped, Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers heading for breeding grounds even further north. We may well hear the whinnying call of a Sora and perhaps catch a glimpse of it scuttling about the edges of a reed-fringed pool. Horned Grebes are building their floating nests and noisy colonies of Bonaparte's Gulls are settling in. Amongst the loafing flocks of Herring Gulls we shall keep a sharp lookout for Thayer's and Glaucous Gulls. Churchill hit the birding headlines in 1980 when Ross's Gull was discovered breeding here: it was hoped that these pioneers would found the New World's first regular colony, but sadly after a few years they abandoned the attempt. Individuals still turn up most years, so we will be hoping for a lucky encounter during our visit.

Out on the tundra itself there will probably be some snow patches remaining, but much of the terrain will be clear. Lesser Yellowlegs and Hudsonian Godwits perch on low hummocks or stunted bushes, noisily proclaiming the presence of intruders, whilst Wilson's Snipe (split from Common) drum overhead and Stilt Sandpipers utter

their strange, almost donkey-like, braying calls. Canada Geese watch us warily from a distance, sometimes joined by groups of Snow Geese, or rarely even a few Ross's Geese, that have paused on migration for a rest. At times Sandhill Cranes are present, and in drier areas we should find American Golden Plovers and Hudsonian Whimbrels standing sentinel whilst Smith's Longspurs hurry across the ground.

In the willow thickets we will look for Willow Ptarmigan, Blackpoll and Wilson's Warblers, American Tree and Harris's Sparrows, and Common and Arctic (or Hoary) Redpolls, whilst amongst the northernmost outliers of the spruce and larch forests, where our feet will sink deep into a thick carpet of lichens, we may well find Northern Goshawk, the confiding Gray Jay, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Bohemian Waxwing, Northern (or Great Grey) Shrike, Palm Warbler, Red Fox Sparrow, Pine Grosbeak and Rusty Blackbird. If we are really in luck we will also encounter White-winged (or Two-barred) Crossbill.

There is never a dull moment at Churchill during migration time, for there is always something new to see, whether a flock of Whistling Swans (sometimes lumped with Bewick's Swan under the name Tundra Swan) flying high overhead on their way up to the Northwest Territories or a colourful group of breeding-plumaged Ruddy

Turnstones and Sanderlings scurrying along the shoreline. The tameness of so many of the birds greatly adds to the pleasure of birding in this wonderful part of the world where the long summer days invariably seem too short.

Day 13 After some final birding at Churchill we will catch a flight to Winnipeg, where the tour ends in the early afternoon.

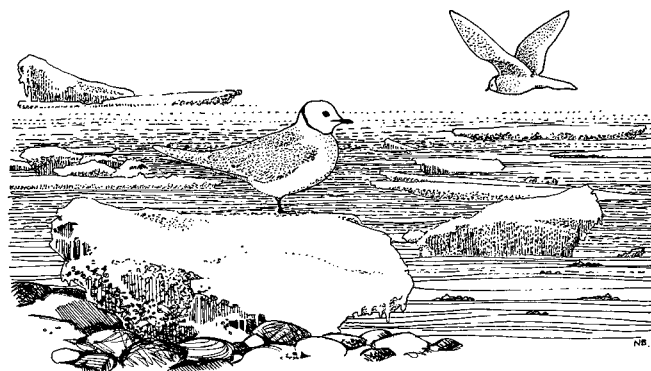
Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels/motels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus and roads are mostly good.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy, but there are a few moderate grade walks.

Climate: Rather variable. In southern Manitoba it is generally warm (or even hot), dry and sunny but sometimes cool, overcast and rainy. In northern Manitoba conditions will range from cool to distinctly cold at times at Churchill, and dry and sunny periods will be interspersed with overcast and rainy weather (or even some snow or fog).

Bird Photography: Opportunities are good.

Part-Tour Option: Subject to space being available, you can opt to take the Southern Manitoba section only or the Churchill section only. Please contact us for further information.

*Ross's Gulls (Nik Borrow)*