



BEAR NEWS

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Churchill 2009: Polar bears, foxes, & aurora

By Shannon Donahue

We have recently returned from our 25th annual Arctic Ecology Field Course in Churchill, Manitoba. Each year, the Great Bear Foundation travels overland from Montana to Hudson Bay with 30-40 participants. The 1600 mile journey follows rivers from Montana's Continental Divide up through Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba all the way to Hudson Bay. By traveling overland, we establish firm connections with our continent, as we move from the Rockies across

the expansive prairies to the northern boreal forest, the



Polar bears wrestling near Churchill. Photo by Frank Tyro

taiga, and the tundra forging bonds among the group as we travel. Along the way, Dr. Chuck Jonkel shares his views on natural history, jokes, and

stories, and feeding us the spoils of his hunting and gathering.

Our trip this year was chock full of polar bears, aurora borealis, and arctic, red, and cross foxes. Tracks were everywhere. The weather was on our side for both travel and bear-viewing. It was cold enough that the bears were active and ice was starting to freeze at Cape Churchill, but not so cold to keep us from

exploring the outdoors. The visibility was great, making the bears easy to spot. It was a big change from 2008, when constant white-out conditions kept

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President's Letter

By Charles Jonkel

What happened to Bear News? Well, it is a long, short story. Mary Hawver, our loyal and excellent Editor for many years, just plain had to quit, and be a mom to her mom. That it still the case. We NEED a new editor. We have a functional Editorial Board, but we need another dedicated, long-term Editor. First off, we are going to do "catch up"—get our numbers and volumes back on track (librarians don't know how to file you otherwise), and cover some new and old topics. We have a great backlog of bear information, corrections to

stories and newspaper accounts, and current bear management/research data and information. There have been as many distortions and misinformation in "the press" as ever, and there is no end of people writing on bears just for the money. As always, GBF takes great issue with such endeavors.

A current great concern for GBF continues to be the Arctic, the fate of the polar bears, and the world not understanding the terrible things happening to both the bears and the people. The Arctic hurts, the polar bear's incredibly short "food chain" hurts, the entire Arctic

Basin is falling apart before our very eyes.

Right from the start, get this right—Global warming IS happening, this is an extremely dangerous and devastating event, caused partially by US—as Pogo used to say, "we have met the enemy, and he is us." You can argue about which is worse—Mom Nautre or Mankind, but DO NOT IGNORE GLOBAL WARMING. The scope and impacts are already overwhelming; the situation is worsening daily; the polar bears are extremely in danger because they have almost no alternatives to feeding on the ringed seals. It is plankton,

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Bears and Apples

By Tucker Seitz

Once again, the Great Bear Foundation's 2009 Bear and Apples Project was in full swing this September as the fruit trees around Missoula continued to yield large numbers of fruit. With hibernation just around the corner, the bears were looking to fatten up for the winter and the abundance of apples, and other ripe fruit provide a great source of vital nutrients needed to sustain their long winter sleep.

This year, an unexpected cold



snap brought our apple season to an early end with sub-zero temperatures in October that froze all the fruit on the trees.

By gleaning trees each fall, the Great Bear Foundation (GBF) mitigates conflicts between humans and bears. As global climate change continues to alter ecosystems,

bears may be forced into valleys to escape conditions such as heat and drought. Bears very quickly learn to eat unnatural foods and properly

storing attractants, like garbage or even bird feeders, will help prevent bears from learning fatal habits. A fed bear is a dead bear.

You can help GBF save bears' lives by picking any fruit that has fallen from your trees or call the GBF office and have your trees gleaned free of charge. We are always looking for volunteers to help pick fruit and press cider, too. Do the right things for our safety and theirs. All the fruit goes to the Missoula Food Bank or to volunteers.



Bear Basics: teaching kids to co-exist with wildlife

For many years, the Great Bear Foundation has been providing "Bear Basics" educational programs to schools, summer camps, and the public free of cost.

Bear Basics programs teach kids about the wildlife in their back yards and around the world, providing much-needed information about how humans can co-exist with bears and other wildlife.

Programs involve teaching kids to recognize the tracks and other signs of the wildlife we share habitat with, basic bear biology, evolution, and ecology. We also stress the need for eliminating attractants that encourage bears, deer, and other wildlife to come in close contact with humans. Kids leave the programs equipped to handle wildlife encounters in a safe, respectful manner.



GBF recognizes the importance of instilling a sense of stewardship and respect for wildlife in the next generation, and we hope the children will bring these messages home to their parents. Kids are often the best teachers.

In recent years, our programs have focused more on climate change and how it is affecting the bears and other wildlife here at home in Montana, as well as the polar bears of the far north. Since so few people live in the Arctic, it's up to everyone to help protect it. We encourage students to learn about the Arctic and to become ambassadors for the region, its wildlife, and cultures.

This year we have delivered programs to numerous

schools in and around Missoula, Flagship after-school programs, Job Corps, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and the Missoula Children and Nature Network. When weather permits, we also offer track-making workshops, where kids learn to identify the tracks of various native species and get to make their own plaster casts of these tracks. GBF provides complete sets of tracks to local schools to help students and teachers learn to identify the various species that live in the area.

Bear Basics programs have always been free of charge, because we recognize that school budgets are tight, and children need to know how to live with and respect wildlife. These programs are only possible thanks to the generous contributions of our loyal members.

"Kids leave the programs equipped to handle wildlife encounters in a safe, respectful manner."

Filming Underway for Chuck Jonkel Documentary

In early 2009, filmmakers Frank Tyro, Matt Anderson, and Shannon Donahue began work on a documentary celebrating the life and work of Dr. Charles Jonkel, President, Scientific Advisor, and co-founder of the Great Bear Foundation.

The one-hour documentary will examine the vital role Jonkel has played in modern bear biology, from his early work as one of the first scientists to capture and handle bears, to his groundbreaking work on polar bears for the Canadian Wildlife Service, to his comprehensive Border Grizzly Project in north-west Montana. The film also delves into Jonkel's work to promote ethics and accuracy in wildlife media through the International Wildlife

Film Festival and his role as educator and activist with the Great Bear Foundation. At the same time, the filmmakers aim to capture Jonkel's unique, iconic character and his integral role in the communities where he has lived and worked.

Throughout 2009, the filmmakers have traveled around North America interviewing Jonkel's colleagues, friends, and family and filming Jonkel as he teaches field courses and reunites with old friends.

The film will also utilize historic 16mm and Super 8 film footage of Jonkel's work in the Arctic in the 1960's and '70's, both preserving that footage and making it accessible to the public.

As of the end of 2009, most of the filming is complete, and the filmmakers are editing and completing the script. The documentary will premiere in Missoula, MT in 2010 and will be available by donation through the Great Bear Foundation and Salish Kootenai College Media.

This film would not be possible without the generous contributions of Salish Kootenai College, the Cinabar Foundation, Humanities Montana, and countless private donors. For more information about the film, or to make a contribution to the film project, please visit our website at www.greatbear.org, or contact Shannon Donahue at the GBF office.



ESA Protection Restored for Yellowstone Grizzly

On September 21, 2009, Federal District Court Judge Donald Molloy ruled in favor of protecting grizzly bears in the case, *Greater Yellowstone Coalition v. Servheen*.

Molloy's decision restored federal protection to the grizzly bears of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), ruling that the USFWS's removal of this population from the threatened species list violates the Endangered Species Act.

Molloy ruled that existing state laws failed to provide the bears ade-

quate protection after de-listing. While the states have conservation strategies in place, they do not meet ESA requirements because they lack the required enforcement mechanisms.

The judgment also ruled that the USFWS failed to adequately consider the loss of the bears' most important food source, whitebark pine, due to an increase in mountain pine beetles associated with climate change. In recent years, the mountain pine beetle has survived

at higher elevations, devastating whitebark pine forests in the GYE and elsewhere.

The Great Bear Foundation opposes delisting because grizzly habitat is declining, and the states have not committed long-term funding guarantees.

Thanks to Judge Molloy, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Earthjustice, and everyone else involved in restoring protection to this grizzly bear population.

USFWS Proposes Critical Habitat for Polar Bears

After the USFWS's 2008 decision to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the next step is to designate Critical Habitat, or, in a very small nutshell, specific areas essential for conservation of the species.

The ESA requires the USFWS to designate critical habitat for all

listed species, but many of these species still lack federally designated Critical Habitat years after their listing.

Alaska's polar bear population is incredibly vulnerable to offshore oil exploration and the loss of sea ice. Their habitat has already been threatened by oil and gas leases that then Gov. Palin issued in early

2008 while USFWS was stalling their decision to list the polar bear.

The public comment period on this proposal closed on December 28, and we will update members on the decision. For more information on the Critical Habitat proposal, visit the USFWS webpage at <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/polarbear/criticalhabitat.htm>.

Churchill, continued

the bears hunkered down in the cover. In 2008, we still had a lot of fun, learned a lot about northern ecology and culture, and made great friends, but we saw only eight bears.

In 2009, polar bears abounded. Spring break-up was later, more in line with the “old days,” which meant that the bears had three more weeks on the ice to hunt their staple food, ringed seals. The bears apparently came off the ice in better shape than they have in recent years. It was a great year for cubs, too, since mothers were able to sustain a healthy enough weight to nurse their young, ensuring better cub survival. With less ice, bears cannot hunt sufficiently, and fewer cubs may be born and survive.

This year we spent so much time observing bears in their habitat that we barely had time for the Eskimo Museum, the Parks Canada Visitor Centre, the Dene Village site, and of course, the world famous Gypsy’s Bakery.

One day we parked the bus and watched a pair of subadult polar bears wrestling on the side of the road, chewing on each other’s ears, and “playing tag” for perhaps a half hour. We also watched bears on the ice that was forming on the shoreline, bears walking on the road, bears napping in the snow, a bear swimming in the Bay, and bears ambling over the tundra, just being bears. More than once, bears approached our bus out of curiosity, and we had to scramble to close the windows! We even had bears visiting the Churchill Northern Studies Centre, where we stay, and we were delayed leaving for the train station because of a bear on the roof of the Centre! It would have been quite the story if we’d missed our train due to a bear on the roof—try that for an excuse to miss two more days of work!

Cape Merry was thick with foxes. We saw all three color phases there: arctic, red, and cross fox. We parked the bus to watch a red fox scrambling on the rocks and snow, started the bus up again, and as soon as we started moving we saw an arctic fox! This continued until we had our fill of

foxes, and drove on to see what else the tundra had in store for us.

The clear nights made for great opportunities to see the aurora borealis. Course instructor Frank Tyro was kind enough to drive us out beyond the lights of the Studies Centre to watch the aurora in the middle of the night. The northern lights bled green across the sky, dancing and changing forms, and every so often a meteor streaked the sky. The tundra was quiet, and we took turns looking out for the shapes of bears in the night.

The Churchill area provides a unique opportunity to view polar bears in the wild because Cape Churchill is the first place the sea ice forms in Hudson Bay. Hudson Bay/James Bay is the only place in the world where polar bears spend a significant amount of time on land, not related to maternity denning. As freeze-up approaches, the bears aggregate, waiting to move onto the ice to spend the season hunting seals.

We try to time our class just before freeze-up, because that is when the concentration is largest. In the “old days” this was a Halloween trip—now it is closer to American Thanksgiving.

Although we were fortunate enough to observe many bears displaying a wide variety of behaviors, we must remember that this large concentration of bears was due to a late freeze-up—the longer the ice is delayed, the more bears are around Churchill in November. The ice was starting to form, but as of early December, the ice shelf had still not formed. When bears cannot hunt, they come into more conflict with people and are at risk of poor nutrition. Poor nutrition means fewer cubs born, and those born are less likely to survive.

Climate change is not the only problem facing polar bears. Pesticides and other pollutants from thousands of miles away have been documented at alarming levels in polar bear tissue for the last thirty years. Polar bears and native people in the Arctic share

the top of a very short food chain—native people eating a traditional diet are at just as much risk from these contaminants as the bears are.

In the Churchill area, tourism surrounding the polar bears is growing quickly, as people clamor to see the bears “before it is too late.” The demand for bear-viewing, coupled with a lack of guidelines, regulations, and enforcement, results in some tour operators illegally baiting bears with fryer grease, dog food, and animal carcasses, some helicopter pilots and Tundra Buggy drivers failing to respect the animals’ space, and Yellowstone-style “bear jams” forming along the road. Even some of the bear-viewing opportunities we had resulted from bears becoming habituated to humans due to inappropriate tourism practices.

The Great Bear Foundation strives to provide low-impact opportunities to observe and learn about bears in their natural habitats. We try to set an example for less obtrusive, ecologically and culturally sensitive bear-viewing, keeping our footprint as light as we can.

On the bright side, we had another terrific group this year—the class was dynamic, energetic, and a fun. Something about three days of overland travel combined with the dramatic, wintery tundra, and the excitement of seeing polar bears in the wild forges a strong bond in these classes. We are always glad to welcome the course participants into the Great Bear community. We hope those of you who haven’t experienced the course will join us in 2010, and those who have traveled to Churchill with us will join us again. The 2010 course will run from Nov 6-16, including travel, and the course is filling up already! We are also planning a Kids’ Trip to the Arctic in August 2010.

For more information, or to register for the course, visit our website at www.greatbear.org or contact the office at (406) 829-9378.



President's Letter, Continued

copepods/amphipods, shrimp, cod, ringed seal, polar bears—that is a very short food chain, with the seals as the weakest link, for the bears, and they have no alternatives. They NEED the sea ice on which to produce and feed their young, each bear needs the same ice platform as the seals to hunt their daily meal, and to nourish their young. If the seals are gone (or greatly reduced), there go the polar bears. They have no other viable food sources—a few berries and bunch grasses in some areas, the occasional dead whale, kelp and bivalves, or a dumb seal now and then in the water. At best, we may see only a few hundreds of polar bears survive, some could adapt—compete with the black bears for tundra fruits, catching flightless geese, and exploiting seals on sea ice of the fjords and bays, and going for the whales in river mouths.

Equally pertinent, is an entirely “man-caused” problem for the polar bears. The former governor of Alaska delayed listing the critical habitat for polar bears for about four months, while she was busy granting offshore drilling leases. Oil camps will now become serious attractants for the bears; oil spills, shipping accidents, broken pipes, the lack of surveillance and environmental regulations, will all take an enormous toll.

Industrial eco-tourism is also a serious problem for the polar bears, in certain crucial areas. At Cape Churchill in Hudson Bay, an enormous tourism impact has been building for several decades. “The Polar Bear Season” has become dominated by enormous crowds of people, tundra buggies all over the landscape, helicopters churning

overhead all day long, and tundra buggies even allowed to camp out on the tundra near Cape Churchill, where literally hundreds of bears become stressed out, learn bad habits, and become overly conditioned to people. All of this commercial exploitation is having a drastic impact on the polar bears of Western Hudson Bay.

...If in fact more bears were killed by other bears, it is a function of the massive tourism disturbances that have de-stabilized the Cape Churchill bears.

A possible increase in polar bears killing polar bears seems to have occurred in the Churchill area this past fall. As many as eight polar bears may have been killed by other bears, and at least some were eaten by the bears. Commercial interests have called it an increase in cannibalism, but this is a dodge. Polar bears normally do not prey on other bears. They may eat a carcass after about 2-3 days, just as carrion, but they are not cannibalistic. I watched two black bear cubs sit by their mom for two days, crying for her help, but on the third day they ate her as carrion. In my view, if in fact more bears were killed by other bears, it is a function of the massive tourism disturbances, that have de-stabilized the Cape Churchill bears. Food was not in short supply for the bears in 2009, in the Churchill area, but the air and tundra invasions by thousands of visitors were worse than ever.

In a similar way, a mom grizzly and her two cubs were taken from Glacier National Park in Montana, during 2009. She had done nothing more than “use” her habitat area to feed and raise her young, but excessive human use of the same area created a concern for the Park wardens/rangers. Instead of removing the people, they killed her and one of the young, and the other young bear was sent to a zoo in New York. We can do better than all of that—we need massive pressures imposed

on the eco-tourist industry of Churchill; we need more understanding and tolerance for the bears in places like GNP. If bears in Alaska were treated in the same way as the GNP grizzly female was treated, Alaska Fish and Game people would have to kill hundreds of bears each year.



BEAR NEWS is an educational publication of the Great Bear Foundation, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization devoted to conservation of the world's eight species of bear and their habi-

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