



Polar Bear Ecology Field Course

Churchill, Manitoba • Autumn 2025

www.greatbear.org

Fall Session: Polar Bear Ecology, Oct 28-Nov 1 (five days and four nights in Churchill)

Course Tuition: starts at \$3,950, including meals, economy train fare and accommodations in Churchill.

Optional university course credit available (with additional coursework).

Dates subject to change.

The Field Course

Join the Great Bear Foundation to see and learn about polar bears in their natural habitat. Our field courses are open to all ages and abilities. We provide a high quality learning experience as we witness the annual polar bear migration to Cape Churchill. We will spend 5 full days in the Churchill area.

We offer a unique opportunity to experience polar bears in the wild, while minimizing our impact on the bears and their habitat. You will learn about arctic ecology, polar bear behavior, conservation issues, and Hudson Bay's rich cultural history, and explore the tundra, beaches, and boreal forest.

Photo by Shannon Donahue



The Journey

Most participants travel by rail from Winnipeg, which reduces the carbon footprint and gives a real sense of the changing landscape as you travel north from prairie grasslands through stages of boreal forest to the tundra on the shores of Hudson Bay.

The overland journey gives you a chance to slow down and look for wildlife, and to experience northern culture. Travel usually starts from Winnipeg, or you can board the train further up the line. If you prefer to fly, you can book flights from Winnipeg through Calm Air.



Photo by Frank Tyro

The Polar Bears

Each fall, polar bears migrate from all over the western shores of Hudson Bay to Cape Churchill, where fresh water from the Churchill River forms Western Hudson Bay's first ice. The bears have mostly been fasting since they came ashore when the ice broke up in July, and they wait here for the first ice to form.

We time our trip in late fall, at the end of the ice-free season, when the aggregation of bears is at its peak. We may also see several other wildlife species, including red and arctic fox, arctic and snowshoe hare, caribou, gyrfalcon, owls, ptarmigan and snow bunting. If the nights are clear, we could see the northern lights!

Photo by Jeremy Patrick



The Great Bear Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. All proceeds directly fund bear conservation projects.

P.O. Box 9383 • Missoula, MT 59807 • Tel: (406)829-9378 * P.O. Box 1616 • Haines, AK 99827 • Tel: (907)766-2024

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Polar Bear Ecology Field Courses, Autumn 2025

About the Field Course

Each year, in mid to late October, polar bears move to the Cape Churchill area on the west coast of Hudson Bay. Some of the bears walk northward along the Manitoba Coast, some head northeast from the Owl River Denning Area, and some even move south and cross the Churchill River to get to the Cape. The bears somehow know that fresh water ice floes will be coming down the large rivers to be packed against Cape Churchill, forming the sea ice shelf that will allow them to return out onto Hudson Bay to hunt their staple food, the ringed seal. And so the bears come and they wait, walking up and down the coast, watching the sea, and sniffing the winds, sleeping in kelp beds, or play-fighting until they can go out onto this ice.

Similarly, each year, the Great Bear Foundation assembles a group of enthusiastic travelers from all over, timing our own migration to coincide with that of the great white bears. We invite you to join us.

Autumn 2025 Field Course

Fall Session-Polar Bear Ecology 101: Oct 28-Nov 1: An introduction to polar bears, their biology, ecology, behavior, and conservation status, aimed at people of all ages, interests, and abilities. This course offers an overview of polar bears, climate change, the Churchill area, Hudson Bay and arctic ecology, plus lessons on northern cultures, and the impacts of human activities on wildlife and habitat. This is a great entry-point to the world of the polar bear for people interested in a broad overview.

We'll also look at community responses to living with bears, the history of polar bear biology and management in Canada and internationally, changing perceptions of polar bears as they have become a tourist attraction and a living symbol of climate change, how people and polar bears have shared habitat in the Arctic over tens of thousands of years, and how we as global citizens share a rapidly changing planet with polar bears

The train departs Winnipeg at noon on Oct 26, and is scheduled to arrive in Churchill early in the morning on Oct 28. If you prefer to fly, try to book an early flight on the 28th to maximize your time in Churchill. We'll spend 5 full days in Churchill, watching wildlife by day, learning in the classroom at night. The train departs after supper on November 1, and it's scheduled to arrive in Winnipeg in late afternoon on Nov 3 (build in time for travel delays). If you fly, try to book a late flight to maximize your time in Churchill.

University of Montana credit in Environmental Studies is available with additional course work.



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Polar Bear Ecology Field Courses, Autumn 2024

In Churchill, we'll maximize the daylight hours to spend as much time as possible observing wildlife and exploring taiga and tundra by bus. We'll walk in the forest, look for berries under the snow, visit historic sites and geological features. In the evenings, we offer lectures on polar bear ecology, northern cultures, climate change, and conservation concerns. We will visit with guest speakers and local experts.

Accommodations are at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre, a research and education facility 16 miles from the city centre, in the heart of polar bear country. The Centre is housed in a new, state-of-the-art, LEED certified building, with large windows, an aurora dome, and an elevated open air observation deck. Rooms are dormitory-style, with four to a room. We will eat in a dining hall, getting a chance to talk with researchers and other groups, and we will help out with washing up. The Centre provides delicious meals with a variety of options and fresh salad bars with greens grown on site year-round. Each night, we will pack a lunch for the following day to maximize our time in the field.



Photo by Jeremy Patrick

Past field courses have seen:

- Arctic fox
- Red Fox
- Arctic hare
- Snowshoe hare
- Gyr Falcon
- Ptarmigan
- Snow bunting
- Harbor seal
- Wolf
- Caribou
- Ermine
- Owls—snowy, gray, great horned, short eared, and northern hawk owl

Treading Lightly to Keep Our Impact Low

The Great Bear Foundation has been at the forefront of low-impact, ethical wildlife-viewing for over thirty years. We have worked for decades to promote best practices in wildlife tourism, and to monitor high-impact, industrial wildlife tourism that exploits animals and destroys habitat.

We lead by example, offering the lowest-impact Churchill polar bear experience available.

Traveling with the Great Bear Foundation means traveling with instructors who put the well-being of the wildlife and its habitat, as well as the safety of our clients, first. Our staff has decades of combined experience interpreting bear behavior to avoid causing the animals any undue stress, or encouraging bad habits that may lead to future conflict with humans.

Our course does not include the use of tundra vehicles, due to their impact on bears and their habitat. We explore Churchill's extensive back road system, keeping a respectful distance from animals, and allowing them to decide how close they wish to be to us. We find that when our groups present quiet, consistent behavior, minimizing disruption, we are rewarded with incredible wildlife-viewing experiences.

Day Excursions: We are happy to help participants make arrangements for outside tours or excursions, such as dogsled tours. Please let us know in advance, as it can be difficult to make reservations in Churchill.



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About the Great Bear Foundation

The Great Bear Foundation was founded in 1982 to give voice to the bears. We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit devoted to the conservation of the world's eight bear species and their habitats, through education and action. We are a member-supported, volunteer driven organization, and all proceeds from our field courses directly fund our projects. Learn more about the Great Bear Foundation at www.greatbear.org.



GBF's co-founder, the late Dr. Charles Jonkel, first brought travelers to Churchill from Montana to learn about polar bears in 1984, after spending a decade in the Arctic conducting the first serious field research on polar bears. This became an annual pilgrimage. Dr. Jonkel passed away in 2016, but today, Dr. Frank Tyro and Shannon Donahue lead the field courses in his spirit and tradition.

Dr. Frank Tyro has been involved in the Polar Bear Ecology Field Course for over 30 years, and now serves as President of the Board of Directors. His background includes 40 plus years in broadcast media and he brought local public television to the Flathead Reservation in 1988. He teaches photography, tv production, and mass communication at Salish Kootenai College, and founded and directs KSKC Public-TV. He co-directed *Walking Bear Comes Home: the life and work of Chuck Jonkel* with Shannon Donahue. Frank has a B.S. in TV Production from MSU, Bozeman, an M.A. from Temple University, Philadelphia in Mass Communications and PhD from the Union Institute and University, Cincinnati in e-learning.

Frank lives in Pablo, MT with his wife, Dr. Lori Lambert, whom he met on this trip, and their sled dogs.



Shannon Donahue is the executive director of the Great Bear Foundation, and works out of our Northern Office in Haines, Alaska. She has been involved in the Polar Bear Ecology field course since 2007, when she began volunteering for GBF. Shannon's main areas of interest include reducing the impacts of wildlife tourism, and managing human-bear interactions on sportfishing streams. Shannon has been working in bear conservation and education since 2005, for the Tongass and Chugach National Forests, Alaska State Parks, and the Great Bear Foundation. She collaborated with Dr. Tyro on the film, *Walking Bear Comes Home: the life and work of Chuck Jonkel*. Shannon has an M.S. from the University of Montana in Environmental Studies.

Shannon lives in the coastal salmon forest of Haines, Alaska with her two dogs.