



Our intrepid group!

Text and photos by Cam Gillies  
Eagle-Eye Tours  
1-800-373-5678  
[www.eagle-eye.com](http://www.eagle-eye.com)



2015 Baffin Island Floe Edge Tour  
with Eagle-Eye Tours



## **Baffin Island Floe Edge**

### Trip Report

### *Eagle-Eye Tours*

June 15 - 22, 2015

Guides: Cam Gillies & Adam Walley  
Words and photos by Cam Gillies

#### **Day 1 – Heading north to Pond Inlet**

This was it – the beginning of an incredible adventure! Most of us had met the night prior for dinner and at breakfast, we were happy to see everyone had arrived safely. We shuttled to the airport and began the process of checking in our eight(!) extra bags of food and equipment. We flew to Iqaluit and had some time to look around for a few birds. A creek near the airport held Semi-palmated Plover. We boarded our smaller plane for the last leg of the journey to Pond Inlet, which included a brief stop at the community of Clyde River on the eastern coast of Baffin Island.

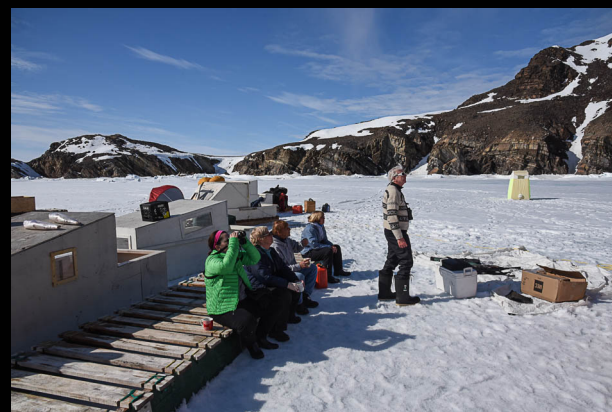
Upon arrival in this picturesque community at the northern end of Baffin Island, we were met by our local guide, Sheatie, and our cook, Elisha, at the airport, but they were soon off to work on arrangements for our departure. We checked in at the Sauniq Hotel, ate and most headed out for a

walk around town. Lapland Longspurs were common, but we also found our first Snow Buntings and Baird's Sandpipers. A pair of Red Phalaropes looked exceptional in full breeding plumage.

## **Day 2 – Around Pond Inlet then off to the Floe Edge**

We had breakfast in the hotel then met with Sheatie and Elisha to discuss the coming adventure. Adam took a group out birding around town with more great birds of the Arctic – Red-throated Loon, Long-tailed Duck and Common Ringed-Plover. Common Ringed-Plover is a European bird and this is the only area where it breeds in North America. More longspurs and buntings rounded out the morning. Meanwhile, I was working on repacking some food and finalizing details with Sheatie and Elisha. Afterward, there was time to check out the Co-op store to see that a 1 gallon jug milk was \$13! We ate lunch and our planned 1 pm departure was pushed back to 3 pm when one of the snowmobiles would not start.







We jumped a few cracks and assembled on the ice just off the beach. Komatiks loaded, we got in and headed north toward Bylot Island to get around a very large crack. Then we turned and traveled east. We started to get a sense of the skill of our Inuit guides as they deftly negotiated cracks and rough ice. Elisha and I had planned for dinner on the way. Unfortunately, our food was in the komatik with no passengers that had gone ahead... We made do with a few snacks, but one of Sheatie's classic lines of the trip came when we were already 3 hours into the journey and were still close to the Baffin side of the inlet. "Four more hours" was a blow, but we arrived safely at our camp of the southeast coast of Bylot Island after the 7 hour journey at 11 pm. At most latitudes setting up camp at 11 pm would be a very dark affair. Not so at 72° North! Plenty of midnight sunshine while we set up our camp and had a midnight dinner.



### Day 3 – Off to the Floe Edge

After a late breakfast we were off to see the famed edge of the sea ice. We went directly there and we could see whales surfacing as our komatiks slowed to a stop at the floe edge. There they were! Narwhal were everywhere and this would be our best viewing of the trip. There were plenty of small groups and we could see the odd tusk emerging from the water and we even saw some tusks coming straight out of the water.

We stayed to enjoy this all afternoon and enjoyed lunch and dinner at the floe edge. The whales thinned and we took turns squinting at our first Polar Bear sighting, which amounted to little more than a creamy blob.

While there we became familiar with the birds at the floe edge. Flocks of Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes were our most frequent sightings as they came and went from the nearby breeding colony. Intermingled with these were groups of Common and King Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, and Glaucous Gulls.

At one point Jill asked whether we were likely to see Pacific Loons. Both Adam and I gulped and said something along the lines of “no” without sounding too pessimistic. Not five minutes later, what should swim by? A Pacific Loon! We decided Jill better ask more questions like that!







#### **Day 4 – Thousands of murre**

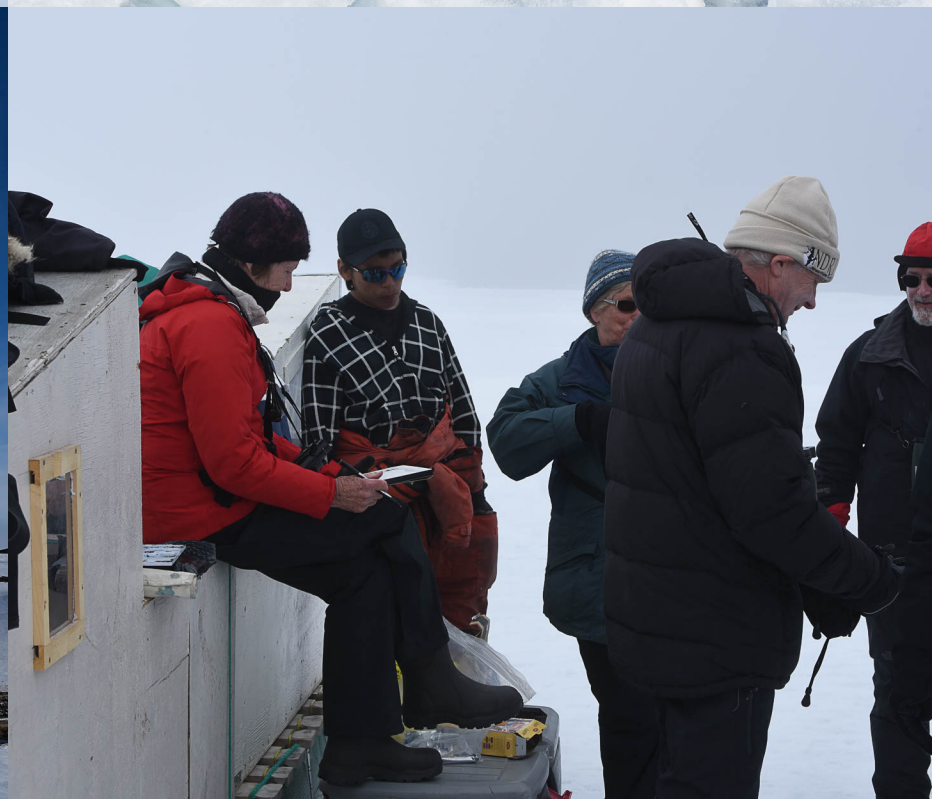
We were into a routine now. After breakfast we made our way to the floe edge, but our first stop was an impressive iceberg. It made for a great backdrop to a group photo and we explored the cracks around the iceberg. After a few tries we couldn't find a way to get on the monolith. We did, however, catch a few glimpses of a Ringed Seal as it came up to breathe in the cracks.



We moved a very modest 500 m south along the floe edge to an incredible congregation of murres in the fog. There were thousands of birds diving to forage under the ice. With them were fulmars, kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls diving after any murre that surfaced with a fish in their mouth. The gulls seemed very successful at stealing their lunch and were not the most popular birds among some of us!

We also enjoyed more of the parade of eiders, Long-tailed Ducks and all three species of jaegers plus our first Iceland Gull.

Back at the camp there were a few landbirds, notably Northern Wheater, a bird that winters in Africa, but migrates north and west to the Canadian Arctic. It was another delicious meal from Elisha – chicken coconut curry, yum!



## **Day 5 – More time at the floe and a walk on Bylot Island**

Our first stop was a small iceberg with a beautiful cave between our camp and the floe edge. It is fascinating to think that after spending the winter locked in sea ice all of these bergs would be free and drifting south in another month. Most of these icebergs calve from the Greenland icecap then drift with the current north along the coast of Greenland before swinging south along the coast of Baffin Island and Labrador.

We headed further south along the floe edge, which put us closer to Baffin Island. The most unusual bird sighting of the day was an albino Long-tailed Duck. A lone Narwhal was our only sign of these whales today. We returned to our camp early and some of us decided to go for a walk on Bylot Island in the beautiful sunshine.

Back on land it was much warmer and we were soon taking off layers as we walked through the still deep snow of winter. A short way up this valley we found the remains of several traditional Inuit sod houses.









## Day 6 – Polar Bears and a curious Walrus

Back to the floe edge with less fog and some Polar Bear tracks on the way. We worked our way south stopping and scanning along the way. We soon found what we were after. A distant bear was walking off in the direction of Bylot Island and hmm... our camp... After this bear was out of sight, we moved further south. We found a large Polar Bear was on top of a similarly enormous piece of ice. He wasn't too excited about our approach so he left his perch and went for a swim. Looking around, we soon found two more distant bears. The original bear emerged from his swim and put on a great show, rolling around on the ice. We enjoyed the opportunity to watch these incredible mammals for quite some time. It felt surreal to me to be standing on the frozen ocean watching them in their pure element.

We moved further south along the floe edge and got a good surprise when we stopped. A large walrus emerged very close to the ice edge. He popped up for long enough that we all got good looks at this amazing creature. They are very uncommon here and are typically found eating clams in much shallower water so this was another great find! After our pinniped friend moved along, all seemed quiet so we headed north again for some



more Polar Bear viewing.

Then it was back to camp. On the way, the huge congregation of murrelets was still at the same spot. And for dinner on our last night? Char! Sheatie had been worried all day that the bear headed toward Bylot Island in the morning had come by and eaten the char, but all was well! We got out of the weather and into the tents to enjoy this delicious meal and toast the day!



## **Day 7 – Last morning at the floe edge and a dramatic return**

We were up early and ready to start packing up to make the trip back to Pond Inlet. The weather, however, was not quite as cooperative. There were reports from other people on the radio of very high winds at the narrowest point between Baffin and Bylot Islands. We opted to delay our return to give the winds a chance to die down and travel back to the floe edge for the morning.

It was another enjoyable visit to the floe edge. Sheatie pulled out his hydrophone and we each took turns listening to the eerie sounds of bearded and ringed seals. We had almost simultaneous sightings of a Polar Bear and an Ivory Gull. We watched the bear walking across the ice between us and Bylot Island then walked closer to the gulls. There were four of this all white gull, which is now an endangered species in Canada. We had close views then were surprised by a group of Narwhal on our walk back to the snowmobiles. There were about 30 individuals feeding along the edge.

We returned to the camp for a lentil stew and began packing up. At some point during the afternoon a white phase Gyrfalcon was spotted flying over the camp. This was a target bird for Stewart



and it was great to finally see one even if it was at the 11th hour! We left about 3:45 pm and hoped for the best...

It was an incredible journey. Fresh snow on top of water made for very challenging travel conditions with slush spraying everywhere as the snowmobile tracks spun up, over and around the rough ice. Alas, conditions were too much for the snowmobile that Nicholas was driving and after some valiant attempts at repair that would make MacGyver proud, they abandoned it and drove off. The komatik that Nicholas was towing was now added to the train. Winds had abated slightly, but were still very strong! The high winds, however, created incredible lenticular clouds on the mountains over Bylot Island and we finished our 8-hour journey in a window of midnight sunlight with dark clouds ahead and behind us. It was a dramatic finish to an incredible time on the ice.

Day 8 – Flying south, but not quite as far as we hoped...

After an early morning arrival, we were up early for our 8 am flight, only to learn that the First Air flight had not arrived the day before so we had no aircraft to leave on. Adam took several people birding while I spent time on the phone trying to sort out our flight. Our aircraft arrived in the morning and we got on as soon as we could, but we still missed our connection to Ottawa by about an hour. We scrambled and got the last rooms at two hotels in Iqaluit for the extension to our tour.

Day 9 – Morning in Iqaluit then on to Ottawa

Most people spent a leisurely morning walking around Iqaluit, visiting some stores and looking at some of the incredible art for sale. We got on our flight shortly after lunch and all went smoothly from then on. We bid each other adieu on arrival in Ottawa.







