

# The **POLAR EFFECT**

We steer out of the green of the jungles and into the white of the Artic Tundra for a rare wildlife experience with animals of the snow

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## WALK INTO THE WILD THE ARCTIC TUNDRA

This 'star' shaped fort in Churchill goes back over 4,000 years when man turned his attention northwards in search of huge animal migrations. Now called **The Prince of Wales Fort of Archaeology**, the structure, with its four protruding bastions, took all of 40 years to complete. On the remote Hudson Bay, today the fort is proof of the English-French rivalry for the dominance of the fur trade, once a thriving business in the region.



### An Arctic sunrise.

The sun is closer to the magnetic poles and so is permanently below the horizon during winter. Just after the autumn equinox (September 24), the sun appears to move in clockwise circles above the horizon in the polar sky.



**Huskies** weigh around 16-22kg and are incredible winter athletes. "It's easy to make these dogs run, but extremely difficult to get them to stop, they enjoy it that much," says Dave Daley of Wapusk Adventures. Mushing is not so much

about steering as about learning to adjust body weight according to the huskies' movements. Huskies participate in the annual 400-mile Hudson Bay Quest and I were awestruck at their amazing power and energy. ▶



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The **polar bear males** frequently play-fight. During the mating season, the actual fighting is intense and often leaves scars or broken teeth. The bears fight for dominance to impress the opposite sex. They're solitary in nature and young cubs usually become independent after spending two years with the mother. Unlike grizzly bears, polar bears are not territorial. Contrary to popular belief, instead of being aggressive, they are cautious in confrontations, and often choose to escape rather than fight.



The **polar bear** is an extremely powerful predator. It can kill an adult walrus (which weighs twice as much as an adult polar bear), although they rarely attempt it. This is the most carnivorous member of the bear family, and its diet largely consists of ringed and bearded seals. The Arctic is home to millions of seals, which become prey when they surface from below the ice to breathe, or when they haul themselves out on the ice to rest. Polar bears rarely catch seals on land or in open water. Still-hunting is the most common hunting method: a bear will use its excellent sense of smell to locate a seal's breathing hole, and crouch nearby in silence for its prey to appear ►





**SIZE MATTERS**

It's a bit tough to gauge the size of polar bears – with few reference points in most photos, there's no way to tell. If you look at the photo on the far left, the polar bear looks small, next to what seems a regular tyre. But in the photo on the right, you'll see the actual size of the tyre. So, on its hind legs, the bear's over seven feet tall, and easily four feet tall when on all fours. That's the size of a cow – but a cow with claws.

Watching these amazing creatures is thrilling. You've crossed ice and sat through freezing temperatures to see them and they're completely worth it. **Above:** A traveller captures the beauty of this bear for posterity. And if you're lucky, you'll be witness to a lot of moments like this one of the bear and its curious little cub. This tour provides much perspective: the contrast of the brown and white with the bear walking along, it's pretty perfect. ▶

**Ptarmigans** are small birds, sedentary by nature, that live year-round in the Arctic. The ptarmigan has seasonal camouflage, and changes its plumage according to the season. Feathers moult from white in winter to brown in spring or summer. Because of its remote habitat, it has very few predators except golden eagles. The ptarmigan's diet includes birch, willow buds, seeds and berries. Rock ptarmigan meat is a popular part of festive meals in Icelandic cuisine, but selling it other than for personal consumption is illegal. The name comes from the Scottish Gaelic *tàrmachan*, literally croaker. Its coat and thick down cover the feet providing a 'snowshoe' effect. Ptarmigans have the best insulation of any northerly bird.

The **red fox** is diversely distributed – from the Arctic to North America. Foxes are fun to observe because they appear playful, curious, even mischievous. Though they are not originally native to the Tundra, they have moved to the Arctic region due to changing climatic conditions, and are now competing with the sensitive Arctic fox for food and territory. The red fox has a long, bitter history with humans over the trade of its fur. Northern foxes have long, dense and fluffy fur, while it is shorter, sparser and coarser in the southern ones. They primarily feed on small rodent-like voles, mice and ground squirrels. This particular fox dodged us for over 45 minutes before appearing, posing for the shutter and giving us this perfect shot. ▶



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A well-adapted predator that enjoys the frigid Arctic temperatures (-50°C), the **Arctic fox** has a grey, or bluish coat in the summer, which turns a thick, warm white in the winter. They live in burrows and thrive on the leftover scraps of seals that their carnivore brothers, the polar bears, discard. It is extremely difficult to sight this fox in the snow when it curls into a ball and hides its head with its tail. What helps it adapt to the cold are its furry soles, short muzzle and short ears. The red fox is depleting a lot of this fox's resources and it has to now to fight for survival. ▶



*'Incredibly rare to spot, and almost ethereal in its appearance, the Arctic Fox is arguably one of the most beautiful animals of the snow'*

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Three hundred kilometers above the earth, air molecules collide in electrically-charged solar winds across the earth's magnetic field. Depending on the type of gas the particles let out, the lights glow and ripple in various colours. For us, the first glow came at 15 minutes to midnight. Another 30 minutes and it started to dance. The beauty of this magnificent **aurora borealis** (Northern Lights) made us forget the freezing temperature. [LP](#)



