

# Airlines

WESTJET'S INFLIGHT MAGAZINE



## Polar Bears

JASPER GROWS UP  
LUAN MITCHELL – ENTREPRENEUR  
CURLING SEASON

# O H



Hundreds of **Polar Bears** come to Manitoba's icy sub-Arctic each year to give birth and nurture their cubs. Dozens of onlookers arrive along with them for the only guaranteed opportunity in the world to watch these bears in their natural environment.

# BABY!

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JUDY WAYTIUK**

"Judy?" Morris's warning voice was low, but firm. I scuttled guiltily back across the wind-packed snow to re-join the line of photographers whose massive 600-millimetre lenses, fitted with stabilizers and mounted on tripods, were trained on the polar bear and her two three-month-old cubs. Tucked into a shallow, snowy dayden just 100 metres away, the cubs dozed, snug against their mother's warm flank.

The big female was wide-awake. Lying on her side in the snow, she lifted her massive head frequently, smelling for potential threats. Polar bears can catch scents with their tongues. When the tongue is in use, the bear is on alert. This one's tongue was busy. And since mother was nervous, Morris Spence was also a little tense.

Morris and his brother Michael operate War'chee Lodge, located some eight kilometres west of the 11,000 square-kilometre Wapusk (Cree for great white bear) National Park that protects one of the world's largest polar bear-denning areas.

Hundreds of females come to this icy, wind-scoured landscape every winter to dig dens, give birth, and nurture rat-sized twins or triplets. The small families survive the worst of winter sandwiched in dug-out snow caves between two layers of frigid-cold permafrost below the sub-Arctic's minus 40 degree celsius temperatures above. There are 20,000, perhaps 30,000, polar bears on the planet. An estimated 15,000 of them live in Canada's North.





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And we were likely the only dozen people in the world at that moment watching a wild polar bear family from a vantage point this close. With every move the mother made, motor drives on the expensive Nikons, Canons, one Leica, and my Minolta clicked and whirred, recording the ursine domestic moments. The Spence brothers have a permit from Wapusk National Park that allows them to bring visitors to see the bears – provided the group stays at least 100 metres away, and doesn't harass the animals.

In the few years the lodge has operated, opening for just three weeks in late February and early March, there hasn't been a single incident. Morris and Michael want to keep it that way. Their lodge offers the only virtually-guaranteed opportunity in North America to see tiny cubs in their natural environment

taking their earliest steps out of their birth dens. The little bears, shepherded by massive moms, begin their first treks to the Arctic ice packs.

Those ice packs sit some 40 kilometres north of the denning area, a long trek across flat, snow-scoured, bitterly-cold tundra. The park's protected area of more than 11,000 square kilometres stretches south and inland along Hudson Bay in Manitoba, surrounded by the Cape Churchill Wildlife Management Area. It's arguably the most inhospitable environment on the planet in which to raise babies – but the bears do it.

Very young polar bear cubs are among the sweetest of mammal infants - playful white teddy-bear-sized furballs with bright, dark eyes and noses, round little bodies, and clumsy, kittenish curiosity. Beginning in mid-February, these fresh-faced babies are herded through the vast, cold tundra to the ocean's pack ice by hungry moms eager for their first meals of seal since late autumn. That is when they return from the ice to go to ground in their earth and snow dens.

Cubs are born in winter. The sows, half-asleep though not in hibernation, nurse them with rich, high-fat milk. For all that time – from November until early March – the mothers do not eat. Perhaps 175 kilograms at their heaviest, they may lose 50 kilograms of body weight during the denning season. By spring, they badly need to break their long fasts, but will likely not feed until they have escorted their cubs to the ice where live seals await.

No wonder this skinny mom was edgy. Morris, fellow bear-tracker Amak, and Michael with helpers Tommy, Phillip, and James kept steady watch on the bears and the dozen human observers from Germany, France, Japan, and the United States. We had ridden out from the lodge in *Bombardiers* for fume-laced hours, following behind Morris and Amak, who'd gone ahead on snowmobiles to find bear tracks and locate a family for us to watch.

Morris knows the area dens because this was once his Cree father's trapline. He grew up working the trapline, and it was with his father's blessing that he and Michael began War'chee Lodge. They bought an abandoned World War II Navy communications base and refurbished it, building bunk beds and sprucing up the two main rooms – one a living room area now sprinkled with couches and armchairs, the other the kitchen/dining area.



OH BABY!

# OH BABY!

*Supplies and guests arrive from Churchill in the middle of the night at the edge of nowhere*

Wat'chee means high spot in Cree. The lodge sits on a ridge crusted with stunted spruce trees, a thin evergreen ribbon threading across the otherwise flat, empty sub-Arctic frontier. There is no running water. A generator supplies electricity; two wood-burning stoves provide heat. Supplies and guests arrive from Churchill on the regular VIA Rail passenger train that stops in the middle of night at the edge of nowhere to offload cargo and people into the lodge's *Bombardiers*, often while Northern Lights ripple overhead. The snow machines roar across the moonlit sub-Arctic landscape, headlights following their backtracks for an hour's bumpy ride to the lodge.

There, camp cook Barbara Gordon has tea and cookies ready for night arrivals. In the morning, she'll scramble dozens of eggs and lay out platters of bacon and toast and pitchers of juice and coffee before she packs up lunches of Arctic char or French pea soup, whole loaves of sandwiches, and entire cakes.

Winter temperatures here can plunge to minus 60 or worse with wind chill. Bare fingers can freeze solid. Photographers go through camera batteries like popcorn. But this was Churchill's spring; our first two days had been a balmy minus 15 with little wind. Only on the third day did the temperature plummet to a vicious cold and the wind rise, and on that day, we saw no bears. They had opted to hunker down in their dens. But on our first



day, we had watched a mother and triplets as they slept, ate, and played. On our second day, we watched a great white bear tending two babies; one experimented bending branches of low scrub brush where mom had scraped out the day den, the other wanted to piggyback on mama, and kept climbing up and sliding back.

The babies were utterly adorable, and I was instantly, hopelessly hooked on polar bears, which is just what Wapusk National Park and the Spence brothers want – to enable people to know and love these animals, and to encourage respect for the bears and the preservation of safe habitat.

Polar bear cubs may be eaten by adult males, may die if they are born weak, or may starve if a mother cannot produce enough milk. Adults have but one predator: man. Aboriginal people in the five northern nations where polar bears live may take these bears for food and fur, and recreational hunting is permitted using traditional methods. But human behaviour now poses a danger greater than hunting. Global warming is eroding the southern-most areas of their range. The bears' ice pack feeding habitat is shrinking northward, and bear families in future years will have far greater distances to travel in the spring to reach food.

In the snow day-den we were watching, the mother bear's tongue smelled danger. She stood on hind legs, scanned the horizon, then roused the little ones and took off across the hard white crust, cubs scrambling in her wake. Our cameras clattered frantically. A few minutes later, she returned, babies whuffing behind her, and settled back into the day-den. Whatever had alarmed her had apparently disappeared; her little ones were safe – for now – on this protected ground. ★



**IF YOU GO:** For polar bear watching in Manitoba, fly into Winnipeg on WestJet, then take VIA Rail (a two-night trip one-way) or a small, local airline up to Churchill. There are no roads. Tour operators include Wat'chee Lodge: the only chance to see very small cubs, open for only three weeks in February/March. Contact Michael or Morris Spence, Box 187, Churchill, Manitoba, R0B 0E0, phone 204-675-2114, fax 204-675-2185, website <http://www.watcheelodge.mb.ca>

International Wildlife Adventures giant "Tundra Buggies" carry visitors to bear migration areas in October and November to view older cubs and mothers. Half-day, full-day, overnight and eight-day camp-outs offered. Summer tundra-viewing also available. Phone 1-800-593-8881 website <http://www.wildlifeadventures.com/Canada/churchil3.htm>

Great White Bear Tours Inc.: summer (for tundra/wildlife viewing) and fall (bear-watching) tours. Box 91, Churchill, Manitoba, R0B 0E0, phone 204-675-2781, fax 204-675-2458 website <http://www.greatwhitebearstours.com>