



PHOTO STORY | CANADIAN HIGH ARCTIC AND GREENLAND

Meet the Arctic's Five Most Charming Creatures

By **Aaron Spitzer** | February 05, 2021

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Polar bears, narwhal, beluga whales, walrus, and muskox are just five of the amazing animals you can see on a small-ship Arctic expedition cruise. Here's an introduction to Adventure Canada's most popular wildlife sightings and where you can find them alongside our expert guides.

Wildlife spotting is one of Adventure Canada's favourite team sports. A few of our guests join our expeditions to add to their life-long lists of coveted sightings—after all, where else might you spot a prized ivory gull? Others are self-proclaimed “whale-heads,” keen to commune with [bowheads](#) and [other leviathans](#) of the polar deep. Some hope to see ghostly white wolves, mischievous Arctic foxes, and huge Arctic hares. Once, we even had a lady who was wild about lemmings: “Do they really stampede to the sea?”

To enrich your encounters in this Eden of fauna, you'll be guided by our team of top naturalists, renowned experts in their fields. Throughout our voyages, ornithologists like [Dr. Mark Mallory](#), marine biologists like [Deanna Leonard-Spitzer](#), and conservation specialists like [Victoria Buschman](#) will teach you about these diverse topics. You'll have the chance to attend compelling and fun presentations and workshops like “Why Whales Are Really Superheroes” or “Tips and Tricks for Spotting Tundra Critters.”

These specialists will be at your side, too, on the top deck of the ship, as you peer through the scopes at rare Peary's caribou; or when you trek along the shore, trying to discern whether the flipped critter spy-hopping nearby is a ringed seal or a bearded seal; or on [Zodiac cruises](#) alongside cliffs thronging with thick-billed murres.

The Big Five

So, what are the prime sightings you can expect on an Arctic expedition? Let's talk about the Big Five—the quintet of our most coveted polar species. On any given trip, seeing a couple of these is par for the course. If you spot all five, you've won the polar jackpot.



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Muskox (*Ovibos moschatus*):

The only true land mammal on this Big Five list, these shaggy beasts—genetically more like sheep than oxen—are ice age relics, having roamed the extreme north for countless millennia. Nearly the entire world population (around 100,000) lives in the North American Arctic. We usually observe them solo or in small herds, browsing on the green isles of the Ungava Peninsula, traversing the chasm of Bellot Strait, galloping beside glaciers on Devon Island, or even hanging out alongside the airport runway at Kangerlussuaq, Greenland.

Male muskoxen stand about 1.5 metres at the shoulder and weigh around 340 kilograms; females are about 150 kilos. Their guard hair can dangle sixty centimetres, while their under-fur (called [qiviut](#)) is so famously insulative that during blizzards, muskoxen simply shelter in place. Their horns can span almost a metre between the tips. Often, when we visit in late summer, the males are using those horns to go head-to-head during the rut. The winner gets to mate with the harem, usually ten to fifteen cows, and the adorable calves are born in April.

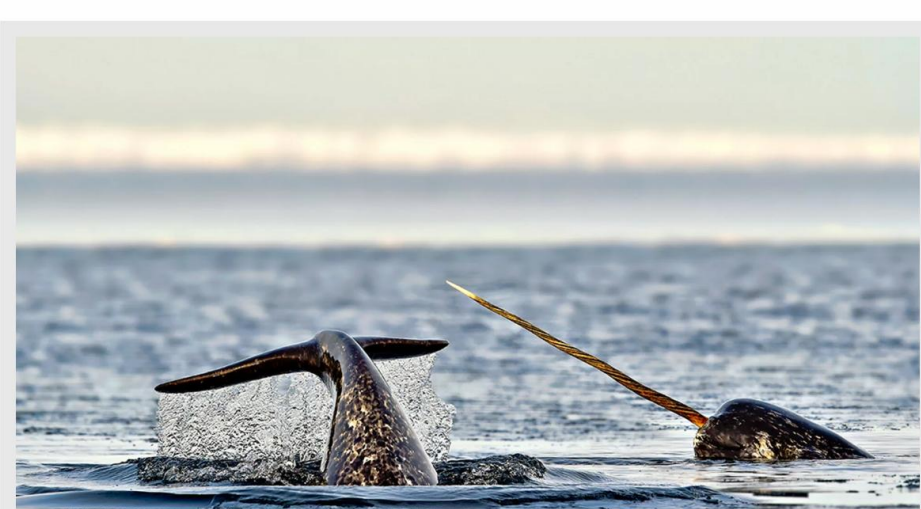


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Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*):

The biggest Arctic pinniped, walrus are, of course, famous for their gleaming tusks, cartoonish moustaches, and grumpy demeanour. Around 20,000 of them ply the coasts of Arctic Canada and Greenland. We frequently sight them feeding at the south tip of Baffin Island, basking on gravel bars in the fjords of the High Arctic Archipelago, or drifting along on ice floes in the middle of [Tallurutiup Imanga](#).

Male walrus can weigh almost 1.5 tonnes and reach three metres long. Females are about half as heavy and 2.5 metres long. Both genders are cinnamon-coloured and blubbery, giving them a sausage-like appearance. In the water, they are dextrous, scouring the seabed for molluscs or even killing and eating seals. Out of the water, they cluster together in groaning, clumsy, ripe-smelling, skittish herds. When in view of them we move with extreme stealth, so as not to spook them.

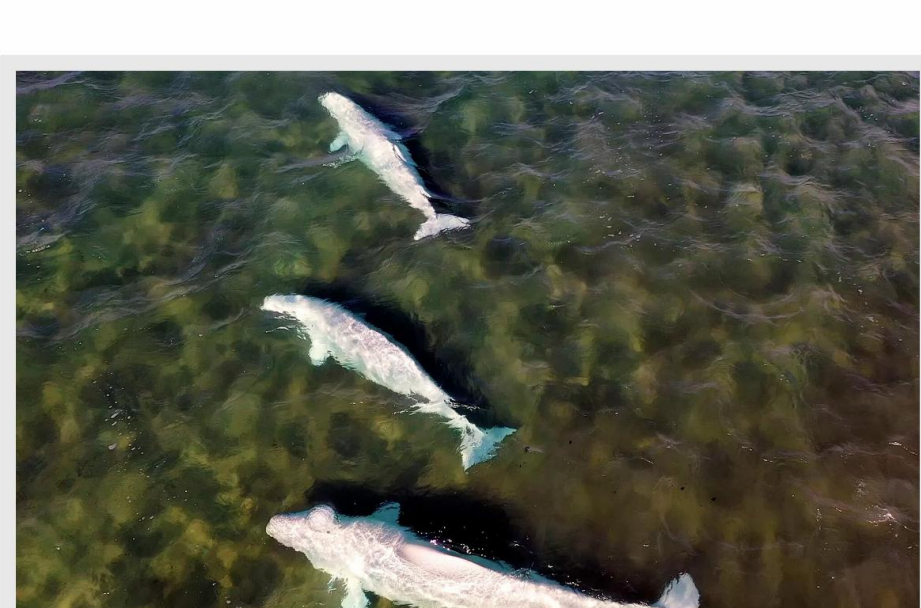


© Michelle Valberg

Narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*):

The fabled *unicorn of the sea*, narwhal males (and the rare female) bear a spiral, swordlike tusk. The species is unique to the High Arctic, and, with only 80,000 narwhals in existence, any sighting is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. If we're lucky, we could encounter them in the vicinity of Sirmilik National Park, Nunavut, in the fjords of Devon Island, or in the vicinity of Qaanaaq, Greenland.

[Narwhals](#) grow up to six metres in length. Babies are a blue-grey, adults are mottled grey, and seniors are almost completely white. Though often seen in groups of around fifteen, they can flock together by the hundreds. Their diet? Greenland halibut, cod, squid, and shrimp. The purpose of their tusk has long been a mystery—most scientists believe it is for sexual display, though some suggest it plays a role in detecting prey. Narwhals tend to be shy and elusive, especially in summer.

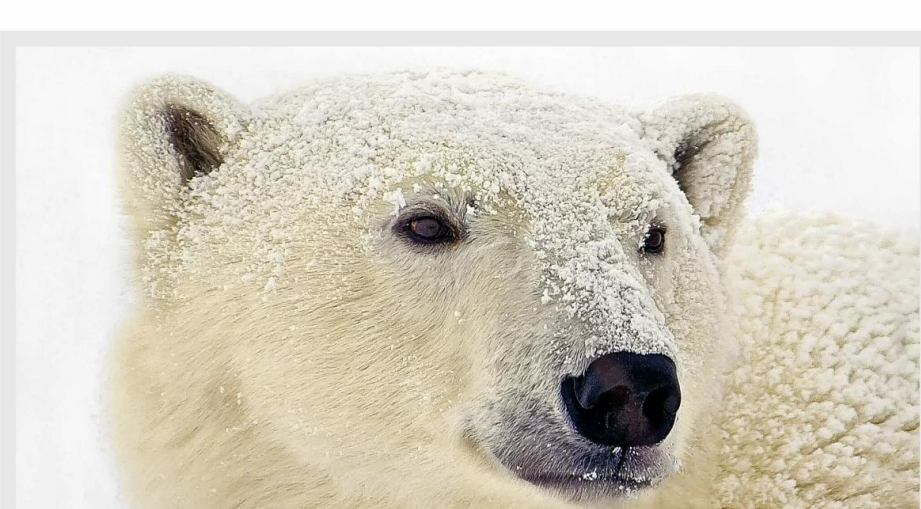


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Beluga (*Delphinapterus leucas*):

The most commonly sighted Arctic whales, these gregarious, ghostly cetaceans can seem as curious about us as we are about them. With a large population broadly distributed across the Arctic, there's a fair chance of seeing them anywhere we travel. They are especially common on the north coast of Somerset Island in the heart of the Northwest Passage.

Related to narwhals, [belugas](#) are similar in size, reaching up to 5.5 metres long and weighing 1.6 tonnes. However, they are unlike narwhals in other ways. First, of course, belugas lack tusks. As well, they are bright white, sometimes seemingly glowing in the water. Their necks flex, so they can turn their heads—the only whales that can do so. Finally, belugas are known for their chirpy vocalizations, earning them the nickname the *sea canary*.



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Polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*):

These iconic beasts—among the world's largest land carnivores—are hands down the most popular creature to see in the Arctic. And lucky for us, we spot them constantly. (No lie: on some days we've wished to see fewer of them, because they were interrupting our onshore plans.) Natural swimmers and perpetual wanderers, [polar bears](#) can turn up just about anywhere in the Far North. In summer they are particularly common scavenging at bird colonies, such as Akpatok Island. Very rarely we encounter gatherings of them feasting on washed-up whales.

The world polar bear population is estimated at around 25,000, most in Arctic Canada. They are, of course, considered threatened by climate change. Unlike their hibernating cousins, they prowl year-round, eating whatever they can kill—usually seals. Males typically travel solo and grow to fearsome proportions: a tonne in weight and three metres tall on their hind legs. Females are less than half as big and are often accompanied by one to three cubs.

About the Author



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For more than twenty years, Aaron has obsessively explored, studied, documented—and yammered about—the world's polar places.

For a decade he ran Up Here, the journal of Canada's north, which in 2010 was named the country's best magazine. Before that, Aaron edited Canada's northernmost paper (Nunatsiqa News), the world's southernmost paper (Antarctic Sun), and the highest-circulation paper in the Alaskan “Bush” (Tundra Drums).

Aaron recently left Arctic journalism for Arctic academia. He earned a master's degree in Northern Studies at the University of Alaska in 2015, and is now working on his Ph.D. at the University of Bergen, Norway, where he examines the opportunities and challenges of Indigenous governance in the circumpolar world.