



hair, typically weigh only a pound (0.5 kg) or so and measure from 12 to 14 inches (30 to 35 cm). But, when the mother and cubs leave their den in March, the cubs weigh up to 30 pounds (13.6 kg) and have thick fur.

Polar bear cubs nurse for at least 20 months. During this period they must learn from their mothers how to patiently await the return of a seal to its breathing hole in the ice. In lower



Arctic regions mothers rear their cubs as they approach the age of two. On the other hand, in higher Arctic regions where conditions are more difficult, mothers care for their cubs for a third year.

Starvation is believed to be the leading cause of death for sub-adults, those bears which have not yet reached maturity at age five or six. But those polar bears which do survive to adulthood have learned to hunt well. The annual mortality rate of adult bears is only 5% annually. Polar bears, whose sole enemy is man, generally live 15 to 18 years in the wild.

After fasting for several months on land following the mid-July break up of ice on Hudson Bay, polar bears begin migrating back to the shore of Hudson Bay in late September. More bears continue to arrive during October and early November. This is the best season for close-up viewing of polar bears near the shore in the vicinity of Churchill. With their natural sense of curiosity, the bears generally will not flee a slow-approaching tundra buggy, and, in fact, sometimes they will even lean up on a tundra buggy to try to sniff the occupants! In November when the ice finally forms again on Hudson Bay, the bears go out to hunt for ringed seals, their main prey. At that point polar bear viewing can only be done at a great



distance with binoculars as the tundra buggies cannot follow the bears out onto the ice.

Fifteen polar bears were spotted during the two full-day tundra buggy drives our tour group took near



Churchill. This figure double-counts bears seen on both days. Toward the end of our tour Stu advised us that, although normally he would have expected us to see more than 15 bears, we were lucky because we had witnessed interesting interactions between some of the bears. In particular, we had been fortunate to see one group of three sub-adult males mock wrestling with one another for an extended period. Kelsey referred to these bears as 'the Scrappy Brothers' or 'the Scrappies.' Sometimes these wrestling bears even stood up on their hind legs briefly while trying to bite and paw one another.

We also saw polar bears sun themselves while lying around on kelp beds. In fact, sometimes they even gnawed on the kelp itself. We watched as one polar bear swam out into Hudson Bay. Unusually, that bear captured a duck, which was consumed on the spot.

Polar bears which happen to wander into the town of Churchill are darted, put into wheeled tubular cages fitted

with trailer hitches, and then held in an aluminum Quanset hut out near the airport for up to a month until they are transported back out onto the tundra far from town. While in captivity in what is known locally as the 'polar bear jail', the animals are given access to water or snow but not to food. The idea behind this form of tough love is to provide the bears with a negative memory of their contact with man so that they will not be inclined to return.

In addition to bears, our tour group spotted caribou, Arctic hare, snowy owl, ptarmigan and raven on the tundra in the vicinity of Churchill. Stu said that our caribou sighting was only the second of the season.

The cheapest weekend polar bear adventure package is priced at about USD 1,400 per person in double and features round trip airfare between Winnipeg and Churchill, Manitoba, two days of sightseeing in a tundra buggy with lunch, and one night at a hotel in Churchill which are not included in the package, additional pre- and post-tour hotel accommodation and meals in Winnipeg plus round trip airfare from the U.S., the total price of a polar bear adventure tour is likely to run to USD 2,000 or more from the U.S.

ABOUT TED COOKSON:

Egypt's most widely-traveled travel agent, Ted has been to every country in the world! He has also visited 307 of the 317 destinations on the list of the Travelers' Century Club (visit www.eptours.com and refer to World Travel Club). A travel agent in Cairo since 1986, Ted manages EGYPT PANORAMA TOURS, a full-service travel agency, at 4 Road 79 (between Roads 9 and 10, near the 'El Maadi' metro station) in Moadi. Contact Egypt Panorama Tours (open 7 days a week 9 AM-5 PM) at: Tels. 359-0200, 358-5880, 359-1301. Fax 359-1199. E-mail: ept@link.net. Web site: www.eptours.com. (Password for residents: eptcool)