

# Newfoundland & Labrador Cruise | Trip Report July 24 – August 3, 2018 | by Greg Smith



With Geoff Carpentier (OOE staff ornithologist), Greg Smith (Naturalist Journeys), Karen, Debra, Meghan, Pat, Reg, Meg, Jordan, Bill, Dorothy, Leah & Kurt



## **Mon., July 23 Arrivals**

Everyone arrived today and were settling into their rooms and getting rested up. This allowed us all to enjoy a tasty seafood-inspired meal at the Governor's Pub and Eatery. Mussels in this part of the world are just amazing.

## **Tues., July 24 Fortress Louisbourg & Embarkation**



For those inclined, we started the morning with a stroll along the waterfront, with bird action relatively minimal. Black-backed and Herring Gulls, a few Double-crested Cormorant, American Black Duck, and Blue Jay were regulars, while American Crows ate pizza along the esplanade. The Wentworth Municipal Park was ringed with small lakes, and we wondered what anadromous fish were being supported by the fish ladders alongside. We also had a somewhat elusive, but effusively singing Red-eyed Vireo, and a most cooperative muskrat. The walk back to the hotel produced an alternate-plumaged Common Loon, Pine Siskin, Black-capped Chickadee, and Red-breasted Nuthatch.



After breakfast we packed up and boarded two buses for the Fortress Louisbourg. This remarkably reconstructed site had been an important port for protecting the French cod fishing industry so critical to their economy. The British sacked it twice, and the last time also destroyed the buildings in large part. The reconstruction was comprehensive and beautifully done, with all aspects of village life being reenacted. A M'iqmaq drum group played, troops with fife and drum marched about, and all in all it was an entertaining few hours.

We did spend some time on a bird walk where the highlight was a nesting Nelson's Sparrow, repeatedly bringing food to its young and leaving with residual debris from the nest. Also seen by the four birders on the trip were two alternate-plumaged Willets, three species of swallows and a Belted Kingfisher.



By 4:00 it was time to board the *Akademik Ioffe* for dinner and a peaceful night in the harbor, or so we thought .... Transport Canada did a surprise inspection of the ship, which delayed our departure.





## **Wed, July 25 Coastal Newfoundland | Bonne Bay | Woody Point**

When we awoke this morning, we found ourselves out in open waters, cruising north up Newfoundland's northwest coast. There was a thick overcast, which made for easier viewing when it came to birding and looking for marine mammals. We spent part of the day being outfitted with our expedition gear, and then we got the call that a Minke whale was breaching. It put on a nice five-minute show as we moved along, but it was nothing compared to the 20-minute

breaching show put on by a Humpback whale. Throughout the event, it just kept getting closer to the ship until it was about fifty meters away. Wow!

We had a substantial snack for tea, because of a planned late pre-dinner excursion to Woody Point. We didn't arrive at Woody Point until past 5:00. Bonne Bay is spectacular, with multiple arms carved by glacial ice and Table Mountain emerging from the clouds periodically, revealing its expanse of Earth's mantle exposed here. The geology of the area is clearly exciting, with the day's summary referring to both mantle and oceanic crust visible on the surface because of the induction processes of plate tectonics. In addition, there is Precambrian granite, Ordovician sedimentary rock, as well as Paleozoic igneous rock found here.

Woody Point is a registered heritage district, named by Captain Cook, that thrived in the 1880s due to the rich herring, cod, and lobster fisheries, as well as the ample timber in the area. It was the main business center along the west coast of Newfoundland until 1922, when 58 buildings were destroyed by fire.



We landed at Woody Point in Trout River around 5:00 PM. After arriving at shore, and after climbing the steps from the dock, we were greeted by some of the women from Woody Point who wanted to chat with the newcomers.

Our hikes took us up above the quaint town along the Church Marsh trail. We passed lush undergrowth of fern and fen, with



abundant orchids and carnivorous plants. The trail was spongy and bordered by strawberries, with a spectacular view of the town and the *loff* at its crest. Some hiked down past the church graveyard, where we found signs prohibiting plowing amusing. At Woody Point, a number of the town's women gathered for coffee to see the newly arriving visitors. A quick visit with them ensued as we waited for everyone from the ship's to land at the dock. Our four birders were in the lead group as there was no roaming allowed given our short time ashore. As a group, we birded the town getting looks at Mourning Warbler, Common Tern, and Purple Finch. We also got buzzed by a Merlin near the end, our only one of the trip. Nice to have our first landing under our belts.



### **Thurs., July 26 L'Anse aux Meadows**

We had the early morning to bird from the bridge, where we got to see two of the jaeger species, Atlantic White-beaked and White-sided Dolphins, and more Humpbacks. Atlantic Puffins were regular flybys, with a few sitting on the water that gave us good looks. But we couldn't get on any storm petrels, and we knew there were colonies nearby, but that might have been more of the overcast and windy weather than anything else.

Today ended up being a day of lectures. We had all struggled into our gear (first day is always a challenge) and lined up patiently for a landing at a Newfoundland UNESCO site at L'Anse aux Meadows, a reconstruction of a Norse village found there and dating back to 1000 AD. It is the only known Norse site in North America, and proved that in fact, we weren't "discovered" by Columbus, who came 500 years later. But sadly, we would not be discovering it ourselves, as the wind and swell had come up rather dramatically, and the crew's boat got quite a drenching upon rounding the boat's bow. We waited for three hours, hoping the winds would subside, but unfortunately, that didn't happen. While waiting, we did see the first of our two Bald Eagles for the trip, and it was having a hard time making any progress in the winds. So, we headed further north and across the Belle Strait towards our Battle Harbour stop.

Instead of our visit, we had an excellent lecture on the Vikings by Robyn Eastwood, the ship's anthropologist. The Vikings emerged from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway during the 8th to 11th Centuries as arable land grew scarce in their homeland. "Viking" comes from the word "raider," but Vikings were also settlers, looking for new lands on which to raise their children. They traveled through the Baltics, the European Islands, and the Arab world, raiding villages, taking slaves (the word Slavs comes from that), and trading goods. They had no written language of their own so much of their history comes from oral tradition, except in Iceland, where a treasure trove of writings about Vikings have been found in the Icelandic language. The Vikings left villages of sod houses, that were long and ship-shaped



with a smoke hole in the roof and a raised center hearth. The reconstruction at L'Anse Meadows includes this type of house.



Geoff Carpentier (aka "Cobra"), our ornithologist, lectured next on sea birds. They are beautifully adapted for a life at sea. Most marine creatures, including sea birds, are light colored below and dark on top, to camouflage them from predators coming from the sky or sea, and also for thermoregulation. They have salt glands for excreting excess salt and webbed feet for a life on the water, and in some cases for thermoregulation. They have either short stubby wings for quick acceleration or even underwater swimming, or long wings to provide the lift for endless gliding. Most of the chicks are precocial, and they are extremely resilient to their harsh environment. Baby murres will jump off their natal cliff while still half grown and swim out to sea before fledging. Divers like the Gannet, have cushioning in their skull against the explosive impact of their deep dives, and adaptations for vision under water include a nictitating membrane across the eye and adjustment for parallax. Even egg shape is adapted for cliff nesting, being pointed on one end so it rolls in a circle! Geoff went through the major seabird groups we were seeing and described factoids for each. Fulmars are long-lived and have a nasty habit of regurgitating an oily mixture on their predators. They can drink without tilting their head up! Shearwaters are hugely populous, but rarely ashore. They nest in burrows, and the babies, who are fed oil by their parents, are important Maori food. Storm petrels, the wave dancers, eat whale feces, crustaceans, and other fare. Their eggs are huge, making up 29% of their body weight. The gannet is the plunge diver who mates for life, though divorce is not out of the question after several years of nesting failure. The skua is a top predator and kleptoparasite, raiding nests of their babies and eggs. The fancifully-tailed jaegers are in the skua group. The alcids are a diverse group, but are all characterized by their football shaped bodies. Atlantic puffins, everyone's favorite, were persecuted for meat and eggs in Iceland and even now are caught as bycatch in fishing nets. They have the charming adaptation of spikes on their beak that allow them to catch and hold more than one fish at a time.



Brian Keating presented a lively talk on seals and sea lions that included some amazing acoustical recordings of their underwater discussions. Weddell Seals are particularly chatty. There are 18 seal species, seven sea lions, three fur seals, and the walrus, in a class of its own! The various seals in the Atlantic North include the Harp Seal (still with a quota of 400,000(!)), the Bearded Seal with its luxurious



whiskers, the Ringed Seal (favorite food of polar bears), the horsehead or Grey Seal, and the Hooded Seal, which can blow a bladder out of one nostril to entice his mate and can also inflate and deflate another on his skull, presumably as a form of communication. The prettiest of the seals by far is the Ribbon Seal, with his striking black and white markings. But perhaps the most remarkable of the seals is the Elephant Seal, who can dive up to 2000 m (!) deep and spends an estimated 18 of its 20 years of life underwater. The Walrus uses his pickax-like tusks to pull himself up onto the ice and then uses his whiskers to feel out mollusks on the sandy bottom. He then essentially vacuums the guts out of them, to the tune of 40 kilos per day! The Walrus mother may nurse her young for two years, while the Hooded Seal finishes up in only four days. What amazing diversity of life strategies!



Finally, Franco Moretti regaled us with a talk on the whales of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence Bay. The Bay is relatively shallow — too shallow to support Sperm Whales, the largest toothed whale.

However, another toothed whale, the Narwhal, can be found here. It only has two teeth in addition to its tusk, which is a modified canine tooth. It is thought to feed by sucking up its prey, which are typically cod and halibut. The bay supports several species of baleen whale, which are sight feeders, scooping up fish and crustaceans and straining

them through their baleen plates. Minke are among the smaller of the baleen whales, at around 30 feet, with diagnostic white patches on the underside of their fins. Humpback fluke color is very variable, and individual animals can be told apart by the coloration patterns. Humpbacks also bend or “hump” their backs when diving, resulting in a display of their handsome flukes.

Northern Right Whales, highly endangered, are beginning to make a comeback with a population estimated at 415 individuals. However, last year alone, thirteen were killed accidentally in nets or hit by propellers. Fin Whales are streamlined and slender, making fast swimmers of 65 to 70 feet in length. They are asymmetrically colored. The left side of the head is dark, while the right side has a white patch under the chin. One theory is that they turn to show their white coloration to startle and concentrate fish.



## **Fri., July 27 Battle Harbour**

It was overcast today, but that didn't stop the RCMP from showing up and greeting us in their dress-reds! It was a classic contrast with the skies (at least at the beginning of our visit...). Battle Harbour is a restored fishing village that was in its heyday back when cod was still plentiful, complete with dry tables, salt shacks, and other assorted period specific buildings. But it was also classic maritime scenery, with glaciated granite and tundra-height plants mixed in with some different cemeteries.

Birds included nesting American Pipits, Whimbrel, a solo Pine Siskin, and Hoary Redpoll. The lushness of the setting, even with the low-growing plants, created an expectation of more birds, but it might have been more about the remoteness or the amount of habitat in the tiny hamlet.



There were two musicians playing accordion, guitar, and the ugly stick in the upstairs of the general store; they were very good and treated a number of us to some older tunes of the Battle Harbour heyday times.

J.C Roy, a world-class painter was on the island and undertaking a new painting. His paintings sell for large sums of money, and he donates half of the proceeds to the Battle Harbour Trust to help in the restoration of the village. Very generous of him and very fortuitous for all of us that he was there.

## **Sat., July 28 Hopedale**

It was a long journey to Hopedale, with 24 hours of sea time before we reached this Moravian mission town after lunch. Here we were put on a whirlwind tour through the town, beginning in the mission, where we were welcomed by a lay pastor and then a series of local people who showed us around. In the mission, which dates from the 1770s, we saw the work of stone carvers, where there were a number of small pieces carved from soapstone and labradorite. There were also beaded fur moccasins, and knitted goods, and a tiny woman showed how she scraped and stretched sealskin to prepare it for use. Throughout the building were remnants of past and current life, including several brass instruments used for the call to prayer. In the attic of the building we looked at roof beams



that were carefully hewn and numbered in Germany and brought over for construction, along with red bricks that filled the vacant spaces between them. No other building in town is made this way; the rest





being simply built houses that don't necessarily look too warm inside. At one of these, a man showed us his beautifully made sealskin kayak, and inside an adjacent shed was an enormous polar bear skin, stretched for drying. They still hunt and eat seal and other marine mammals but live in simple houses, speak, read, and write in English. They keep their crafts alive as an important source of income from the tourist trade. We saw a great demonstration of physical prowess by a 57- year old man, his son, and niece and nephew. They showed off games they play involving feats of strength, which were commonly used as family entertainment in the days before electricity became widely available. This was one way also to keep themselves fit over long winter months.



Hopedale is the capital of the district, and a beautiful municipal building here hosts the district council meetings. About 600 people live here, 80% of whom are native. It was originally called Avertok, or Place of Whales, named for the many Bowhead Whales hunted here. In 1934 a man named Junius Bird (who may be the inspiration for Indiana Jones!) from the American Museum of Natural History excavated 45 sites in the area in just a few months. Because of his haste and the method of archeology practiced in those days, not as much information was generated as there is today, but still his work formed the basis for most of what is known about the former residents of the area. A university is working on a collaborative project with Inuit communities in the area to answer the questions of most interest to the residents here. One project is to carefully re-excavate these sites, including a number of sod houses. Another is to document the material taken from this area, now found in other museums throughout the world. They are also using ground penetrating radar to examine the remains in the local cemetery, and also teaching local youth skills in photography, videography, and interviewing, to capture the living history stories of their elders.

Russell (the historian) gave a talk this morning called "From Hopedale to Hollywood," which told the story of an Inuit woman named Esther who was taken from Hopedale while pregnant to be part of an "Esquimaux Village" exhibit at the 1893 World Fair in Chicago. Hopedale served as a source of people for these "ethnological exhibits" at fairs and even circuses. Esther gave birth to Nancy at the exhibit, and since they were not transported back home as they had been told, they worked by displaying themselves. Esther ended up going back to New York and marrying the proprietor of a "Quaint People" show on Coney Island. From there she traveled widely, displaying her children and several other Inuit at shows and fairs throughout the world. Her daughter, Nancy, even wrote a screenplay, "The Way of the Eskimo," and they ended up in Hollywood, playing roles not limited to the Eskimo, and including "Indians" in westerns, and even Japanese.





Brian Keating (naturalist) was today's star performer, with two terrific talks. The first was on whales, and again his personal video clips were spectacular. One was of bubble net feeding, where half a dozen Humpbacks emerged simultaneously through the school of herring they had corralled with their bubbles. He aptly called them "living oil tankers," taking in hundreds of kilos of fish in a mouthful and gaining 25% of their body weight during their feeding season. He also showed amazing footage of Beluga Whales convening in estuaries where they molt their white skin. It

comes off in chunks — they are the only whale known to do this. He said they are very vocal and when in the water with them you can feel the pulses of their echolocation hitting your drysuit. He said they use this to help find holes in the ice for breathing. Narwhal are actually present in healthy numbers in the Arctic, now that they are no longer hunted for their unicorn tusks. He shared a story about a tusk that was sectioned by a dentist and found to contain hundreds of thousands of nerve channels. The tusks are often held out of the water, and may be used to sense temperature, salinity, and even air pressure. It's like having your own portable weather station!

After dinner, Brian gave a hilarious recounting of three of his most embarrassing field moments, of which I truly wish I had a video. These involved 1) misjudging the size of a small crocodile he planned to show his clients and trying to hide the blood streaming off his leg from the somewhat substantial bite he incurred, 2) trying, naked, from the door of his mesh tent, to show a hyena that in fact he was the alpha male, while in fact he felt very much not the alpha male, and 3) successful walking an elephant skull through baggage check, up the ramp, and into the belly of the plane, only to have a little lady detonate the emergency exit, causing an evacuation of the plane, including President Mugabe in first class. The elephant skull made it safely home to the children of Canada.



## Sun., July 29 Hebron

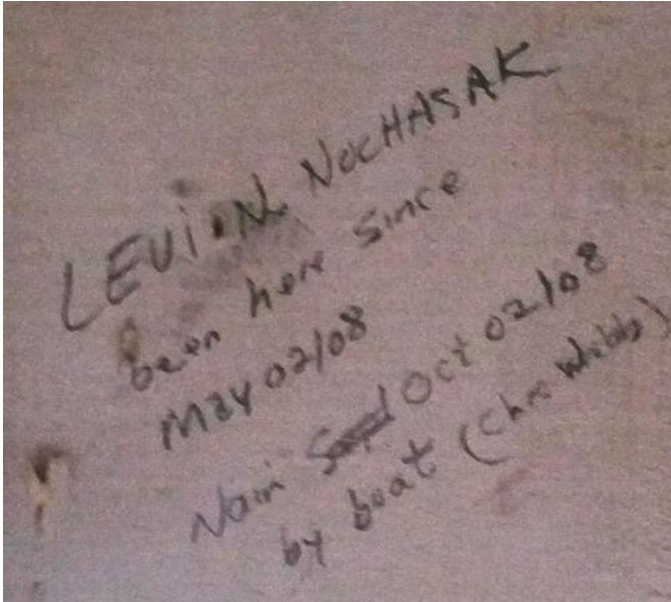
Today we landed after lunch at Hebron. This place emanates sadness, the deserted buildings slouching towards the tundra as they slowly break down with passing years. But the Moravian mission stands strong. The residents of this village were told, on one Easter gathering in 1956, that the town would be evacuated. The 50 or so remaining in 1959, were moved to various communities on the coast. The promises of new houses, and even boats, evaporated and many resided in shacks on the outskirts of town. Many lives were

shattered and the Canadian government ultimately issued a formal apology to the people of Hebron.

A gentleman named Levi, who was born here, toured us around the area, talked about the life here, the relocation, the char drying on racks for his use, and his and his family's life since the relocation. Some of



us had a similar tour with another one of our bear guards, Levi (anywhere there is the possibility of Polar Bear along the Labrador coast, you always have at least one rifle/shotgun bearing person with you). It was cold and a little windy and we took advantage of the tailwind and covered a lot of ground. We saw a few Bearded Seal heads pop up and also went to investigate a fine looking, icy-blue iceberg. And as we returned from our zodiac tour we were treated to another Minke Whale show.



## **Mon., July 30 Torngat National Park | Saglek Fjord**

The first polar bear of the trip was spotted this morning. He was the tiniest white dot on the shoreline, but grew much larger as we got closer. He ambled along for a while, occasionally going for a short swim, then beginning to climb the talus slope. He climbed quite a way up before we lost sight of him as we cruised up the fjord.

What a way to start a day! Everything else after that was gravy. We traveled up into the fjords and the hikers traveled up the north branch all the way to the river inlet. We had sun! It was a beautiful day. The water was crystal clear and we could see urchins, clam shells, schooling fish (herring?), char, and some kind of large sculpin-like fish on the sandy bottom. We hiked to the Cobra River waterfalls coursing down the walls of the ever-soaring cliffs. American Pipit and White-crowned Sparrow showed themselves here and there along the shoreline, as did Pine Grosbeak and Fox Sparrow. We had a flock of Harlequin Duck sunning on a warm rock. Those who went ashore hiked up to a lake, saw Inuit food caches, non-Inuit burials,



and were treated to zodiac cruises with another Minke show.

After our late lunch, we headed out again. Our plans diverted away from a shoreline stroll to a trip across the fjord to visit the second Polar Bear of the day. He was an equally small dot on the hillside, again, climbing upslope to take in the spectacular view. It was choppy and windy and our 22-year old Cape Breton zodiac driver was careful with us.

The wind calmed down for a lovely barbecue on the back deck and tremendously beautiful clouds and lighting as the sun dropped into the fjords.



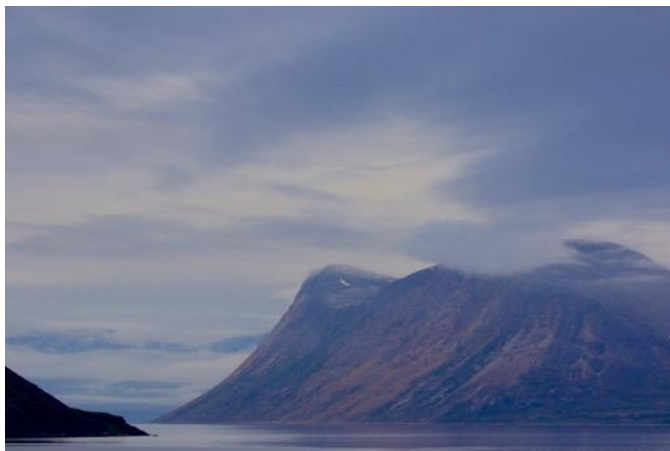
## **Tues., July 31    Torngat National Park | Necklek Fjord**

Today was drizzly and cooler, and the morning zodiac cruise was relatively uneventful. We had more Harlequin, Common Redpolls, and Common Merganser, but not a whole lot more. The shoreline was interesting, with a clear demarcation about 10 meters upslope where tsunami, probably caused by an enormous rockslide, destroyed all the willows and alders nearer the water.

Our hike was at the upper end of the fjord, across the shore from where this slide occurred. Dead twisted vegetation was pushed far up slope in a wrack line. The ground was littered with debris and cobble, making hiking slow. But it was interesting, with two species of fireweed (*Epilobium latifolia* and *longifolia*), bake apple (or cloud berry), Arctic sorrel, the succulent roseroot, nodding saxifrage, *Polygonum viviparum* (which dropped already sprouted seeds or “live young” from its flower tips), bluebells, and of course the tiny Arctic willows and alders with their catkins and cones. The remains of dead ringed seals were found here and there, as well as the scat of the giant white bear that probably ate them. We also found wolf scat and ptarmigan poop, but unfortunately not the owners. Brian Keating told us about the parabolic shape of many of the flowers here, which allows them to capture the sun’s heat to create tiny saunas for passing insects. The insects stop by for a warm up and incidentally pollenate the flower. Win, win! Other flowers, like the Arctic poppy, track the sun like a radar throughout the day, to maximize the energy they can put towards their seeds.

## **Wed., Aug. 1    Button Islands**

Today we anchored at the Button Islands. This is a complex of two longish islands and many small islands, that create channels and passageways between granitic cliffs. Because of the currents created by the islands, and its location at the north end of Labrador, is an excellent place to see Polar





Bears. We were the first set of zodiacs out for the morning, which meant we were more or less scouting for ourselves and the second group.

Much of our trip was devoid of the big white beauties, but finally we found one resting on a rock just out of the water, and another had just climbed up and over a ridge. Our bear was so white he looked like he had an aura around him. Maybe he did. He was napping in the sun, but would occasionally look at us, stretch, and reposition himself. Once he stood, because passing Harp Seals who surfaced below his rock were just too much to take, and, based on their behavior the sight of him was too much for any seal! All told the ship saw a total of eight Polar Bears here on the Button Islands!

Tonight was the fundraiser auction, a function of our operator's supporting non-profits in the Eastern Arctic.



### **Thurs., Aug. 2 Charles Hall Bay**

Our last day! Much of the morning we cruised along the extremely scenic coast of Baffin Island, headed for Charles Francis Hall Bay. Hall was an American explorer from the 1860s who set out to explore the fate of Franklin and ended up overwintering there and exploring Frobisher Bay with the aid of Inuit guides while looking for relics of Frobisher's mining operations. He published accounts of his explorations in two books.



We had a planned landing here, but due to the presence of a Polar Bear, both kayaking and hiking were canceled and instead we did a zodiac tour while exploring the bay. We were treated to a beautiful view of the glacier hanging above the bay, and the very large waterfall resulting from the glacial melt pouring off the glacier-smoothed granite. The water was turbid with milk glacial (powder) ground from the stones the glacier pulverized along its route.



The Captain's dinner was a merry event (doubly so because of the exquisite filet served) and we finally got to applaud handsome young Captain Vilany and his first and second mates. We retired to the presentation room for a viewing of the trip video by photographer Roger, and then Geoff, the ship's ornithologist told the unrelated story of how he came to be called Cobra, which involved a biker bar pool, the associated bikers, and very quick thinking.

### **Fri., Aug. 3 Departures**

We had our last breakfast on the ship before disembarking at Iqaluit. We had about ninety minutes before our departure to Ottawa, which gave all of us an opportunity to visit the town's museum that was filled with local art. Before boarding our plane, there was a lot of supporting the local art community with small and large purchases to match our memories as we headed back home.

