

North-east passage

A voyage through Canada's icy waters from Nova Scotia to Frobisher Bay delivered seabirds galore and a host of marine mammals, among many other wildlife highlights. **Rod Standing** reports on the experience of a lifetime.

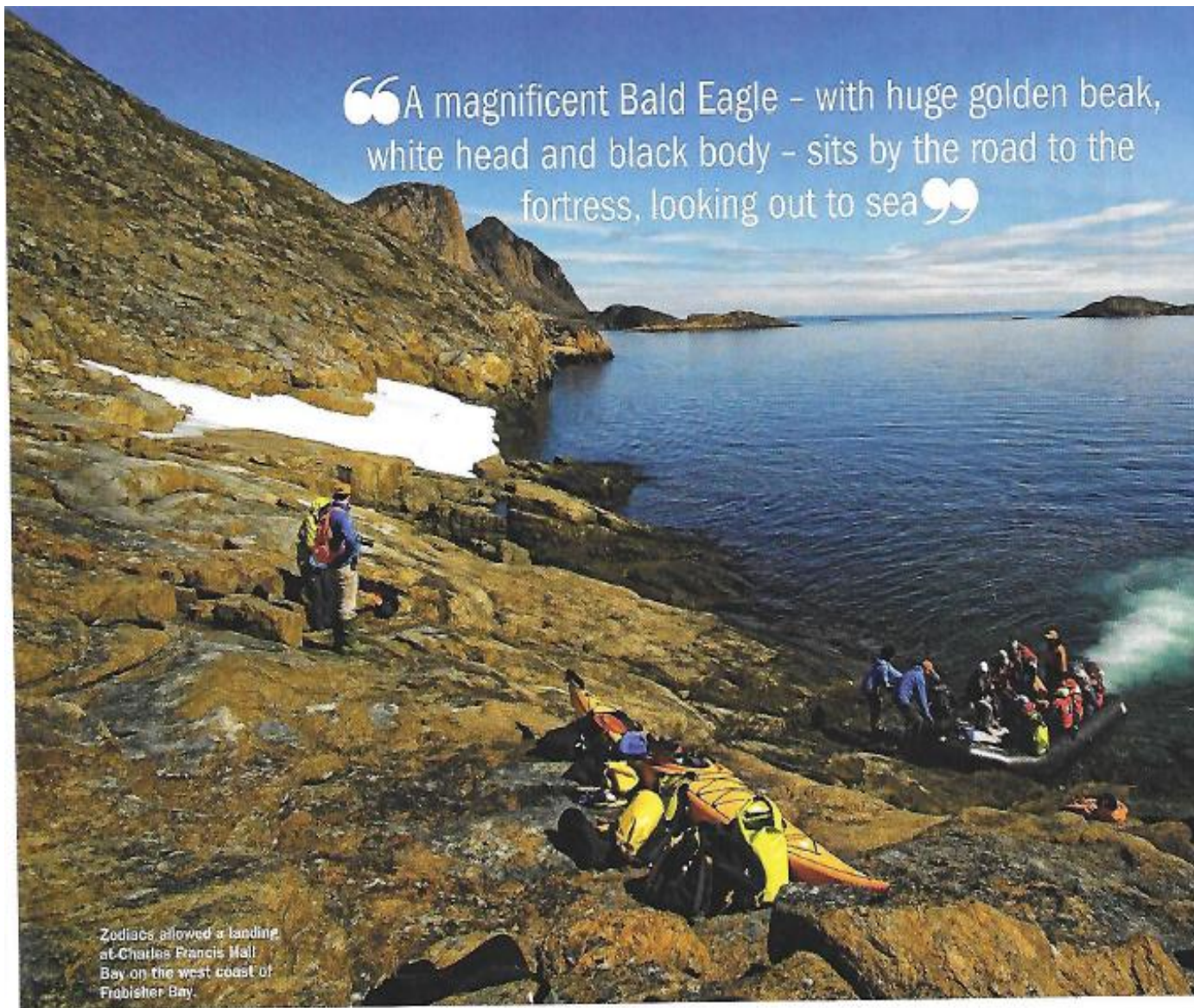
"Polar Bear, 3 o'clock, 1 kilometre!" I train the scope across the pressure ridges of the ice pack and the huge butter-yellow bear stands out clearly against the sparkling white snow. It lifts its head to sniff the chill air and then continues its quest for seals. A Brünnich's Guillemot stands like a miniature penguin on a nearby floe and an immaculate adult Iceland Gull slides past.

We are on the deck of the *Akademik Sergei Vavilov*, a polar research ship chartered by One Ocean Expeditions, under brilliant blue skies in Frobisher Bay, a huge sea inlet in Baffin Island, north-east Canada. Over the last 10 days we have travelled north from the relative warmth of the Maritimes, witnessing the extraordinary transition from boreal forests to arctic tundra.

We started our journey some 1,200 miles to the south, in Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, by getting better acquainted with some North American species previously known to me only as vagrants. At the historic fortress on a grassy promontory south of the town, American Cliff Swallows hawk around the buildings, the adults brightly coloured red, brown and cream, in contrast with the drab juvenile I saw in Suffolk in 2016. A Greater Yellowlegs, alerting me with its *tee-tee-tee* call – very similar to Greenshank – circles a small pool looking for a landing place. Family parties of Green-winged Teal swim about like town park Mallards. A small flock of 'peeps' flushed from the seaweed-line on the beach are probably Least Sandpipers, but without leg colour or photos I 'let them go'.



The seas around Newfoundland and Labrador provided wonderful views of Humpback Whale (main photo), while further north, the 'blue' variant of Northern Fulmar (inset) was numerous.



“A magnificent Bald Eagle – with huge golden beak, white head and black body – sits by the road to the fortress, looking out to sea”

Zodiacs allowed a landing at Charles Francis Hall Bay on the west coast of Frobisher Bay.

ALL PHOTOS: BOB STANDING
 Many of the birds are breathtakingly new. A magnificent Bald Eagle – with huge golden beak, white head and black body – sits by the road to the fortress, looking out to sea. At the other end of the size scale, a Yellow Warbler sings from the top of a bush, tropical looking with its yellow underparts striped red. An American Goldfinch puts even our European version to shame in the plumage stakes: lemon yellow all over with deep black highlights. As we drive away a tough-looking Cooper’s Hawk observes us indifferently from its perch on a roadside wire.

Sparrow surfeit

The profusion of Nearctic sparrow species is bewildering. Savannah Sparrows, like Corn Buntings with yellow-tinged supercilia, are everywhere in the southern part of our voyage. In Louisburg, we also see Swamp Sparrow and hear the weird hissing song of Nelson’s Sparrow coming from the wet

grassland. In Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland, we encounter White-throated and Song Sparrows (rather like a large Savannah but without the yellow tinge above the eye) and have great views of a Lincoln’s, with its broad grey supercilia. Further up the coast at L’Anse aux Meadows, at the northern tip of Newfoundland, we find singing American Tree Sparrows, a rufous-backed Fox Sparrow and our first White-crowned Sparrows.

L’Anse aux Meadows, where the earliest-known Europeans to live in North America landed 1,000 years ago, gives us our first taste of tundra. Among the Arctic Cotton and the stunted pines, we find Blackpoll Warblers singing their thin *si-si-si-si* song, resembling Great Tits with their white cheeks framed by black. An almost unbelievably large young male Moose stands among the taller pines, inspecting us from a distance. In the nearby valley bottom, a male Northern Harrier performs a

dashing food pass with his mate as she sits on the nest, while a Short-eared Owl hunts around the houses of the township as though we are on a Scottish island. Back onboard ship we are treated to a Humpback Whale repeatedly breaching, tail-waving and flipper-splashing for more than 20 minutes.

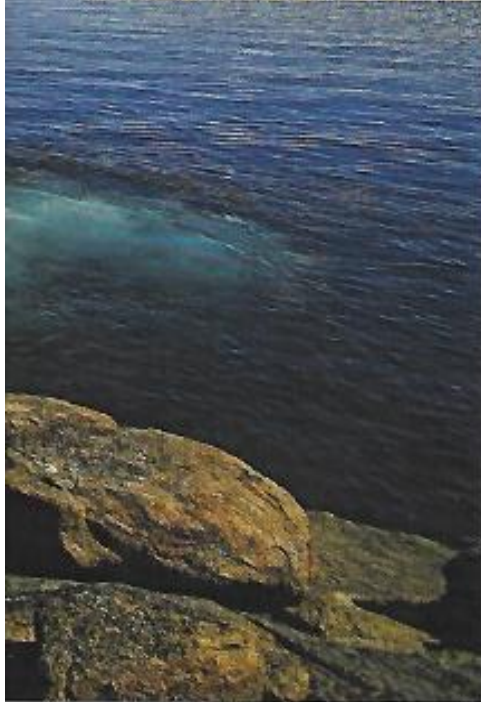
These seas are among the richest in the world for whales and other wildlife due to the Labrador Current, which sweeps down the coast of Labrador from Greenland and Baffin Island, meeting the warmer waters off the Maritime provinces. This creates a cold microclimate – Newfoundland is at the same latitude as France, but the climate is much colder. Our visit is in July, but in winter the north coast of Newfoundland has huge flocks of wintering Little Auks attended by numerous Gyr Falcons, and even Ivory Gulls are seen in good numbers.

We continue north with the Labrador coastline low on the western horizon.



A trip to northern Canada isn't just about seabirds and cetaceans. Newfoundland is also good for a variety of North American passerines such as Common Yellowthroat (above left) and Blackpoll Warbler (above right).

Below: this Moose was among pines at L'Anse-aux-Meadows, Newfoundland.



Distant icebergs and mountains are distorted into weird reflections of themselves by the 'Fata Morgana' mirage effect. We encounter our first true Arctic birds moving south. Flocks of summer-plumaged Grey and Red-necked Phalaropes wheel about the ship and settle on the water, the red bellies and white underwings of the Grey Phalaropes flashing in the sun as they twist and turn. Pomarine Skuas, Great Northern Divers and Glaucous Gulls appear and flocks of White-winged Scoter hurry past. Brünnich's Guillemots progressively replace their Common cousins as we move north and a Little Auk splashes along the water's surface under the bows.

The coast of Labrador is very lightly populated, but the Torngat Mountains at the top end are a true wilderness – no roads, settlements or even signs; they contain the highest mountains in Canada east of the Rockies. We cruise 42 miles into the range along deep

fjords lined by majestic peaks composed of some of the oldest rocks on earth. A female Black Bear, disturbed from eating berries, runs up the scree as we pass, with her two cubs scampering behind. A young Caribou, with antlers still encased in velvet, grazes along the tideline.

We take to the zodiacs and approach a shingle bar on which Semipalmated Plovers run and call to their chicks. A small dark duck swimming distantly among some large rocks is interesting. There are submerged boulders in the way but with care we find a path through them and approach the duck. It hops up onto a rock and flaps its wings as it preens while we sit just a few metres away – a Harlequin!

Chill factor

The temperature drops further as we leave continental North America behind and enter the Button Islands, named after the early 17th century Welsh

explorer Sir Thomas Button. The water thermometer registers 0.6 degrees and a chill mist blankets the islands. Large numbers of Northern Fulmars swirl around us and about a quarter of them are of the 'blue' variant, in different shades of grey. Our first Iceland Gulls and Red-throated Divers appear.

Three distant eiders fly past the bow, too far to identify with binoculars. I fire off some frames with the camera and later it is clear from the blurry enlarged photos that they are King Eiders, the two adult males resplendent in their blue-and-pink finery. Photography really does add a new dimension to modern birding.

These low barren islands sit at the pinch-point where the Hudson Strait meets the Labrador Sea. The tidal currents, funnelled by the immense land masses to the north and south, are incredible. In our zodiacs, we are propelled along the rocky coastline at 7 knots by the current alone, dodging



A male summer-plumaged Lapland Bunting singing on the outskirts of Iqaluit, Nunavut, looks very different from the winter birds seen in Britain.



White-winged Scoter take to the air at Battle Harbour, Newfoundland. Journeys such as this provide great opportunities to study species known only as vagrants in Britain.

ALL PHOTOS: BOB STANDING

standing waves one minute and the next sliding over eerily smooth upwellings from submerged ridges.

Polar position

Huge herds of Harp Seals fish the churning waters and allow surprisingly close approach as they swim splashily on their backs and turn to look at us, their black faces contrasting with their pale bodies. We see at least six Polar Bears on the islands, perhaps lured by the abundant seals tantalisingly out of reach just offshore. Bears are no match for the speed and agility of seals in the water. As we sail away to the north I spot another bear swimming slowly through the open sea well out of the sight of land, a reminder that life for Polar Bears can be very tough indeed.

Our destination is Iqaluit, the compact capital of Nunavut, one of Canada's vast northern territories. Although the city bustles with life, the trackless tundra is very close at hand. Polar Bears have been seen in the settlement (three in the last two years) and so care must be taken when exploring. In practice, the envelope of land within sight of the small but busy road network around the city is reasonably safe. There are some remarkable sights to be had further afield for which an experienced guide is essential – for example, the Snowy Owls which have just started breeding here for the first time in many years.

The best birding within walking distance is in Sylvia Grinnell Territorial Park, named after the daughter of Henry Grinnell, a friend and benefactor of the Arctic explorer Charles Francis



Rough-legged Hawk is the most northerly of North America's buzzards.

Hall. Most of the park's 17 square miles of tundra require help to visit, but there is a broad strip between the airport and the fast-flowing Sylvia Grinnell River which can be explored alone.

The path goes under the nesting cliff of a pair of Rough-legged Hawks, the most northerly North American *Buteo*, which scream and mob us until they are distracted by a passing Peregrine. A male Northern Wheatear tirelessly feeds two imploring fledglings perched on a nearby boulder. Soon, they will fly east across Greenland and the North Atlantic on their way to Africa – one of the most amazing feats of passerine migration. Walking back into town, a drake Long-tailed Duck in its brown, black and white breeding plumage bobs on a freshwater pool.

It is a joy to watch black-and-chestnut male Lapland Buntings chirping from exposed perches, Glaucous Gulls floating over the tundra and Horned Larks, American Pipits and Snow Buntings flitting by the path. In a few weeks, their brief Arctic summer will be over and they will be heading south,

some of them blown by storms across the ocean to our islands. Silence will return to the empty wastes, except for the sound of the wind.

Even in summer the birdlife here is thinly spread and the snow and ice are never far away. On our final day, a gale picks up from the south and crowds the bay in front of us with pack ice. At low tide, we walk in the freezing rain between the blue-and-white bergs stranded incongruously on the grey-brown mud. It is a world away from the richness and abundance of the forest zone, with its swallows and warblers, far to the south in Louisbourg. ■

ARCTIC CANADA

VISITING

- WestJet (www.westjet.com, 0800 279 7072) has just started operating low-cost flights from London Gatwick to Nova Scotia, Ottawa and Toronto.
- One Ocean Expeditions (www.oneoceanexpeditions.com) operates small ship expedition cruises from Nova Scotia to Iqaluit, via Newfoundland and Labrador.
- Wildfoot Travel (www.wildfoottravel.com, 0800 195 3385) offers One Ocean's 11-day Labrador and Torngat Mountains cruise departing on 24 July 2018.
- Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism (www.newfoundlandlabrador.com) provides advice on visiting the province, including Gros Morne and Torngat Mountains National Parks.
- Nunavut Tourism (www.nunavutourism.com) is based in Iqaluit and provides advice on visiting all parts of Nunavut.

FURTHER READING

- The North American Bird Guide by David Sibley is an excellent field guide which can be obtained from the Bookshop for £19.99 (SRP £25): bit.ly/bw311Sibley.

RESOURCES

- Beaches, Iqaluit (www.iqaluitbeaches.ca) is a relaxed, centrally located, multi-owned B&B with uninterrupted views across Frobisher Bay.
- Arctic Kingdom (www.arctickingdom.com/destination/iqaluit-nunavut/) organises wildlife expeditions from Iqaluit, including to see Snowy Owls.