

Wapusk

National Park of Canada

Pronounced “Waa-pusk”

Climate

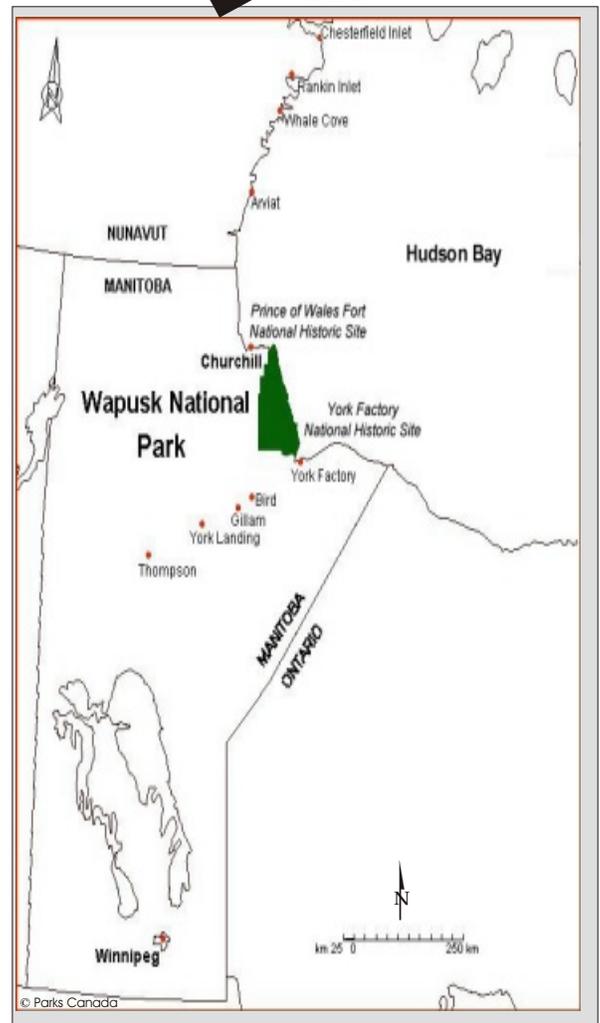
The weather in Wapusk National Park is dramatic, changeable and sometimes very fierce. It is almost always windy on the shores of the Hudson Bay and the winds can range from a gentle breeze to gale force. During the summer months (June, July and August), temperatures range from 0°C to 35°C, and has been known to drop from 30°C to 5°C in 20 minutes! Blizzards can arrive as late as the last week of June and as early as mid-August. Winter is the longest season with temperatures ranging from 0°C to a very cold -45°C. Windchill can bring the temperature down to the equivalent of -80°C, which means that exposed skin can freeze in as little as 30 seconds.

Geology

Wapusk National Park lies on a flat limestone plain that slopes towards the Hudson Bay. The plain is covered by the most extensive mantle of peat in North America. The land here has been slowly rising (about 8 metres per century) since the retreat of the last continental glaciers about 9 000 years ago. The evidence for this is the numerous former beaches of Hudson Bay now found as far as 100 km inland. Continuous permafrost lies beneath the surface of most of the park.

Location

Wapusk National park is located in northern Manitoba and extends to the east and south of Churchill, Manitoba, protecting an area of 11 475 km². Wapusk (the Cree word for “white bear”) was established on April 24, 1996. Wapusk became Canada’s 37th national park. Wapusk is located in the Hudson Plains Ecozone.



Vegetation

Wapusk is almost entirely wetland, covered with lakes, bogs, fens, streams and rivers. Most arctic and subarctic ecosystems have a low diversity of plant species. Wapusk, however, has a particularly high number of species because it is on the edge of the boreal forest. The park includes a variety of vegetation types, ranging from dry beach ridge plant communities and salt marshes on the coast, through sedge meadows, lichen and shrub tundra, and open spruce woodland in the interior.



Wildlife

The polar bear is the most spectacular land mammal in the park. Polar bears come ashore here in mid-July to early August when the bay ice breaks up. The inland region of the park is one of the world's largest known polar bear denning areas. The park also protects the critical habitat for hundreds of thousands of waterfowl and shorebirds which nest along the Hudson Bay coast in summer and gather to feed here during spring and fall migrations. La Perouse Bay, immediately west of Cape Churchill is Manitoba's only major breeding ground for Lesser Snow Geese. This colony is estimated at 50 000 geese. Large numbers of Canada Geese also nest within the park boundaries. Other birds of particular interest to birdwatchers include: Ross's gulls, swans, loons, peregrine falcons and gyrfalcons. With a variety of small mammals such as hares, lemmings, shrews, mice and voles living in the park, a number of predator species can also be found. Red foxes are the most common, but arctic fox, lynx, timber wolves, wolverines and black bears also inhabit the area. Caribou and moose are the only members of the deer family to live within the park boundaries. Moose are not found in large numbers, but as many as 3 000 caribou inhabit the area.

Activities

Wapusk National Park is in a remote area, and access is difficult for most. Visitors can, however, enjoy a wide variety of activities in the Churchill area. These include birdwatching, polar bear viewing from tundra vehicles, beluga whale viewing in the Churchill River, canoeing in the many streams, lakes and rivers in the area, and watching the northern lights dance in the night sky. Although activities in Wapusk National Park itself are limited at this time, polar bear viewing and sightseeing are the most popular.

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