



especially lone bulls, are less afraid, and can be aggressive. Photograph muskoxen from a distance, with a good telephoto lens!

Caribou are also frequently seen in the park. These are referred to as “island caribou” and are likely a hybrid between the barrenland caribou and the endangered Peary caribou found only in the arctic islands. They are smaller and have heads that are more triangular than barrenland caribou, but are larger and a bit darker than Peary caribou. This herd migrates to the mainland in winter, crossing the Coronation Gulf on the ice. As a result, the “island caribou” is susceptible to problems that are caused by climate change, especially the late formation of solid sea ice.

Arctic foxes and arctic hares are often seen in the park. These are white in winter and brown and tan in summer, so are a bit hard to spot – look for movement and then try to pick out the animal. Voles and lemmings are also found in the park, and their burrows, runs, and nests of tangled grasses can be seen, usually at the bottom of slopes or edges of wetlands.

A summer trip to the park is a birder’s dream. The tundra pond areas around and in the park support large breeding populations of arctic birds, and the road provides easy access to their nesting habitat. With a good spotting scope, many of these arctic nesters can be observed doing courtship displays or rearing their young. Some of these species are not easily observed anywhere else in the world during the breeding season. These special birds include the yellow-billed loon, king eider duck, snowy owl, and a host of shorebirds including the black-bellied plover, red phalarope, ruddy turnstone, red knot, and sanderling. Many birders see these on migration in the south, but few have the opportunity to see them in their glorious breeding plumage. Red phalaropes, for example, winter at sea, so are seldom seen except in very restricted northern areas. To be able to drive to find nesting red phalaropes is very special indeed.

Yellow-billed, Pacific, and red-throated loons, tundra swans, long-tailed and king eider ducks nest on the edges of the tundra ponds. Shorebirds nest between ponds, or on the gravel slopes, and can be seen feeding anywhere there is exposed mud. Black-bellied and golden plovers nest on the tundra uplands. The red-necked and red phalaropes spin like little tops in shallow tundra ponds, feeding on small invertebrates dislodged by their busy feet. Sandhill cranes forage on the open tundra or in wetland areas, seeking mostly lemmings. Because of their size, it is easy to spot these big birds, and their courtship displays are marvels of grace and agility. Snowy owls nest on hummocks or small hills, and also hunt voles and lemmings on the tundra. Peregrine falcons and rough-legged hawks nest on the steep sides of several ridges on the northeast

side of Ovayok. Long-tailed, pomarine, and parasitic jaegers nest in the park. Look for dark gull-like birds, sometimes harassing gulls or nesting snowy owls. Willow and rock ptarmigans are around all year, though not as common in winter. These feed on the buds of the woody plants.

Ovayok has relatively few plant species but many of these bloom in great profusion in July. Purple mountain saxifrage, mountain avens, cushion oxytrope, arctic poppies, and moss campion occur on the mountain crest and in gravel areas. Arctic white heather, large-flowered lousewort, woolly lousewort, and mountain sorrel are common on the slopes, and purple bladder campion, bistort, and arctic cotton in the wetlands.

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE PARK

There are 22 kilometres of trails in **Ovayok Territorial Park**. Each of the five trails are marked with numbered and colour-coded posts and interpretive panels that coordinate with a printed guidebook, but the surfaces are not altered or prepared in any way so visitors are encouraged to wear appropriate footwear. The short *Cycle of Seasons Trail* leads from the trailhead at the entrance southwest down the lower slopes and passes by many old campsites with stone tent rings, storage caches, and waiting places (*taluit*) where the people awaited the return of the caribou. The *Tolemaqk Trail* leads from the park entrance trailhead southeast along the lower slope of the mountain, and circles two small lakes. Muskoxen are often seen in this area. *Tolemaqk* means “ribs” and refers to the parallel ridges above – the “ribs of the giant”. This trail connects to the short *Neakoa Trail*, which runs southeast to a wonderful archaeological site on the shore of a large lake, with many tent rings. The *Ovayok*

Trail ascends the southwestern slope of the mountain, and circles the summit, with great views out across the lowlands and down into the “Giant’s Ribs” gorges. It’s a good place to look for peregrines, rough-legged hawks, caribou, and muskox. The longest trail (8 kilometres) is the *Keakoa Kengmetkoplo Trail*, which heads north from the *Neakoa Trail* at the southeast end of the park. It circles the mountain along the lower slopes and joins the *Ovayok Trail* about halfway up the slope to the summit of the mountain. This trail is best done as a two-day hike, camping at Neakoa.

The *Ovayok Territorial Park Guidebook* is very helpful in exploring this park and contains maps and good information including lists of birds, mammals and plants. It is available at the Arctic Coast Visitors’ Centre in Cambridge Bay, which provides a good introduction to the natural history, history, and Inuit culture of the region

through displays of artifacts, clothing, and artwork, as well as maps and photographic exhibits. On display is an old caribou skin kayak, and a very large *kudluk* (stone lamp) historically used in a dance *iglu*. A large map displays the routes of many of the expeditions that searched for the Northwest Passage. Elders often gather at the centre for coffee, and there is a small library of northern books. The visitors’ centre is staffed full time during the year and for extended hours in summer. In the centre, showers are available for use by campers.

For more information on **Ovayok Territorial Park** and the Arctic Coast Regional Visitors’ Centre, check the Nunavut Parks website at www.nunavutparks.com, or call Nunavut Tourism at 1-866-NUNAVUT to request the Nunavut Travel Planner, which lists all licensed tourism operators, accommodations and services. ■



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