

## Herschel Island Qikiqtaruk Territorial Park – Nature



The waters around Herschel Island – Qikiqtaruk Territorial Park are a haven for fish and marine mammals. The Mackenzie River flows into the Beaufort Sea southeast of the island. Its warm, nutrient-rich waters drift westward along the mainland shore as far as Herschel Island. Tiny sea creatures feed on these nutrients and are in turn eaten by larger fish, seals and whales. Arctic cod, arctic char, pacific herring and arctic flounder are all found in this area.

Whales travel past Herschel Island – Qikiqtaruk Territorial Park on their seasonal migration. In spring, they are usually well off shore using openings in the pack ice as they move east. Bowhead whales can still be seen from Herschel as they migrate westward to the Bering Sea in September. They feed close to the surface on tiny zooplankton known as krill. Beluga whales are also seen from the island at various times during the open water period. Ringed seals are the most common marine mammals in this part of the Arctic, feeding on fish along the edges of the ice during the summer months.

The polar bear is a major predator of ringed seals. In the summer they live along the edges of the pack ice across the open water from the island. In winter, a few female bears den on the northern slopes of the island. Red fox are occasionally seen while arctic fox are known to den on the island. Caribou, muskoxen, and grizzly bears are occasionally seen on the island, crossing from the mainland, swimming in summer or walking on the ice during the winter. Lemmings, tundra voles and arctic shrews are more common residents.

The bird life of Herschel includes over 90 species, 40 of which breed on the island. The island hosts the largest colony of Black Guillemots in the Western Arctic, nesting in the old Anglican mission house. Many other birds summer on the island in more natural sites. Arctic Terns, American Golden-Plovers, and Red-necked Phalaropes make use of the tundra ponds and shingle beaches. Common Eiders nest in the grass tufts and driftwood logs of the beaches while Long-tailed Jaegers and Glaucous Gulls sweep by overhead. The island is also home to a breeding population of Rough-legged Hawks.

Snow Buntings, Lapland Longspurs, Common Redpolls, and other tundra-nesting birds begin to arrive on the island in late May to early June. Between the island and the mainland, thousands of Long-tailed Ducks and Surf Scoters gather in July for the annual moult, then gather again in the fall before flying south.

From late June to early August, Herschel witnesses an explosion of colour. Its humid maritime climate during the growing season fosters a lush growth of tundra flowers. Nearly 200 plant species are found on Herschel, including a profusion of flowers like vetches, louseworts, arctic lupines, arnicas, and forget-me-nots.