

# TrekEast Blog 64 Gaspésie National Park, Gaspe Peninsula, Quebec

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## Boreal Abundance South of the St Lawrence

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Seeing big wild animals in natural concentrations is a vanishingly rare experience in most of our troubled world. Easily-seen legged, winged, and finned creatures in primordial abundance have been relegated to wildest or richest habitats in Alaska, northern Canada, Siberia, East Africa, unspoiled mega-wetlands and estuaries, and a few not-yet-overfished or polluted coastal waters and coral reefs. In Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula (*pictured below right*), perhaps for the first time on this trek since Florida's Everglades, I got a sense of how rich and splashy life once was.

Back on my bike for a few days because Quebec's Matane Preserve (through which I'd planned to hike on the International Appalachian Trail-IAT) was closed to hikers for hunting season, I'd pedaled north to the St. Lawrence Seaway then down-river. My first taste of Gaspé's abundance was a flock of common eiders, in the lee formed by an arc of off-shore rocks, that must have numbered in the hundreds.



Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula is the southern-most place in eastern North America where one still has a chance of seeing whales (several species make annual trips up the St. Lawrence as far as the Saguenay River), large rafts of waterfowl, caribou, lynx, marten, and Atlantic salmon. Unfortunately, wolves and wolverine have been extirpated south of the St. Lawrence, but with habitat protection and reconnection efforts, they could resume their vital regulatory roles here in the future.

The ride up from St. Anne des Monts on the St. Lawrence into Gaspésie National Park was remarkable for the abrupt transition from coast to mountains. Ten miles south of St. Anne, gulls and ducks seemed far behind, and I began to see snow on the mountains ahead.

Next day, I was duly humbled by that snow and those mountains. I'd told my skiing friends that it had been too warm; wasn't likely we'd find any skiable terrain before I had to return to the coast. Quebec's Chic-Choc Mountains are justly famous among back-country skiers for their deep long-lasting snows and open terrain. On some north-facing slopes, you can reach open alpine terrain at only about 2500 feet. By the time I reached 3000 feet on the trail up Mts Richardson and Josoph-Fortin, I was in a foot of snow. By the time I reached the summit of Mt Richardson, at a seemingly modest 3900 feet, I was above all sheltering trees and in a howling blizzard. After a cold minute and a few photos on the summit, I turned around to face a white-out and my tracks already obliterated. Following my compass, and occasionally stumbling on a snow-plastered cairn, I made it down, cold but safe. Josoph-Fortin, at only 3500 feet, was decidedly less alpine; and that climb was quick and easy.



From climbing a couple other mountains here a year and a half ago (on a ski trip with my friends Jason and Pat), including the romantically named Mt Xalibu (about 3700'), I knew that the alpine vistas atop the Chic-Chocs are spectacular but scarred. In most directions, a climber sees rugged mountains and intact forests; but in the distance, power lines, roads, and even a few clearcuts are visible.



These fractures are why caribou (*Gaspésie caribou* pictured left) south of the St. Lawrence River are now limited to a small population (estimated at between 130 and 180) here in Gaspésie National Park. Moose are thriving (I've seen 16 so far in the Northern Appalachians this trek), indeed probably unnaturally abundant since wolves have been extirpated; but caribou are in trouble. So much so that Gaspésie Park officials close their breeding habitat even to hikers in autumn (hence my not being allowed up the park's few summits over 4000'). This year's Gaspésie Park report acknowledges that logging around the Park has adversely affected

the caribou; and then, paradoxically, goes on to assure the reader that logging in the park will be made more sustainable. Why is any logging allowed in Gaspésie National Park or the Chic-Chocs Faunal Reserve around it? This is public land; why not fully protect it for its wildlife and watershed and recreational values?

Fortunately, logging seems not to be allowed adjacent to major rivers; and so some fairly teem with life. My personal triumph in Gaspésie Park was not climbing snow-capped peaks, thrilling though that was, but finding salmon spawning pools! On the St. Anne River, the same one that drains into the St. Lawrence at St. Anne des Monts, I started seeing fins and splashes shortly downstream of a great waterfall, which "chute" would block any further anadromous movement upstream. Soon I was standing by one of the great spectacles of Nature: scores, maybe hundreds, of big Atlantic salmon vying for prime spawning gravels, darting this way and that, thrashing about in flashes of pink and olive! This is how life is supposed to be, I thought.

Life is also supposed to be kept in balance by carnivores, however, and Canada south of the St. Lawrence is not. As mentioned above, wolves and wolverine have been extirpated south of the Seaway, and lynx and marten are present but scarce. Cougars were probably never common here, as this is an environment more suited to moose and caribou than to deer. High on Mt. Richardson, I saw tracks of marten (*pictured right*) and ermine, two weasel family members with boreal affinities, as well as of snowshoe hare, regular prey for many carnivores.



I nearly stepped on another boreal prey species, a female spruce grouse, who quietly stepped just far enough off the trail that I'd not trounce her tail. Pine grosbeaks were also showing their indifference to the cold snowy weather, as they foraged in spruce tree-tops.



Cycling east through Chic-Chocs Faunal Reserve (in another snow storm) and then north back to the coast after a few days in the wintry mountains was further confirmation that Gaspésie Park and the adjacent wildlife reserve are vital to an Eastern Wildway but at present too small and fragmented. I enjoyed sightings of three otters and an ermine in the upper St. Anne watershed; but too often, power lines or other cuts were in sight. Do the roads penetrating deep into the back-country, and the power line cut through the forest, need to be kept open? Why not reforest the fractures, curtail logging in and around the park, let caribou migrate outward, and assist wolves and wolverine in getting across the St. Lawrence and back to old foraging grounds?

Near the end of my stay at the fine little Mt. Albert hut in Gaspésie Park, a young couple came by to see who was hiking & biking in these parts so late in the year, as they are explorers, too. Fortuitously, they turned out to be biologists who know Quebec conservation issues intimately. Ilya Klvana (*pictured right*) kindly gave me a copy of his book *Courier Des Bois* about his 9000 kilometer kayak trip across Canada a decade ago; and his partner Emily, who works for Parks Canada, shared news from wilds to the north – much of which news is chilling.



Emily confirmed what Labrador explorer Dave Banks was warning me about a few weeks ago on the Allagash: some of the gravest threats to wildlife in North America are in the wilds of northern Quebec and Labrador. In our efforts to preserve and restore North America's great natural heritage, we must give special attention to the vast areas of boreal forest and tundra still unspoiled but unprotected. Indeed, an Eastern Wildway should not stop in Gaspe, where my trek ends (for now) but should continue north to take in the boreal forests and rivers and tundra of northeastern Canada.

Tragically, industrial interests are gaining even more control of land-use decisions affecting the far North; and present schemes (particularly Quebec's *Plan du Nord*) have much more of northern Quebec and Labrador open for damming, mining, and logging. Hydro-Quebec is damming more rivers to feed Americans' insatiable appetite for cheap energy (this electricity being marketed as "renewable" energy, by the way); mining is expanding rapidly, in part to feed the exploding market in computers and cell phones (which depend on various minerals); and excessive consumption of paper is giving Canadian logging companies a market for pulp from even the small conifers of the boreal forest. Again, wildlife conservation depends on our personal conservation efforts, as well as continental reconnection efforts and political reforms.



Ilya & Emily said that if one species can best serve as a flagship or ambassador for saving big wild places in eastern Canada, it may be the caribou. As already mentioned, the caribou population south of the St. Lawrence is small and imperiled, mainly by fragmentation of the forest. Woodland caribou need old forests with abundant lichens. Moose often do fine in fragmented and young forests, at least for awhile, but caribou do not.

Caribou, wolves, and salmon should be protected in, but not relegated to, the far North. They belong in the American Northern Appalachians, too. Better protection of Quebec's magnificent Gaspé Peninsula is an essential step in helping these great creatures recolonize more southerly parts of an Eastern Wildway.

For the Wild,

*John*

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