

## Quebec, Ontario and New England, November 2013

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In November 2013 I decided to drive from Rhode Island to James Bay in Quebec. James Bay Road goes parallel to the eastern shore of James Bay but never reaches it (only unpaved side roads do). It was the only road reaching the tundra in North America that I hadn't driven yet; besides, I needed to get some snow tracking practice after a few years' gap. I had only one week, so there was more driving and less walking than I'd like, in part because I didn't have time to put on new tires before the trip, and had to move at torturous 45-55 mph if the roads were icy. I slept in my car the whole time, and set ten Sherman traps every night, but never caught anything. That was unfortunate, considering that due to cold weather I had to check the traps every three hours and that meant getting out of four sleeping bags and putting on a lot of clothes. The trip proved interesting, although the other road into northern Quebec (the one that crosses into Labrador and ends in Goose Bay) is much more scenic and with more diverse habitats, especially if you make it a loop drive by returning via Newfoundland.

### Nov 10

I drove straight from Rhode Island to Parc Nacional La Maurice in Quebec (via Trois-Rivieres). It was nice and warm when I left, but as soon as I crossed the Canadian border the temperature dropped below freezing and it started snowing. It was almost dark when I finally got to the park. The only animal seen during a long night walk there was a **deer mouse**.

### Nov 11

La Maurice is a nice chunk of mixed forest with good habitat diversity, especially in deep ravines. Most of park roads were closed for the winter, but the excellent Mekinac Trail was open. Since it kept snowing all night, there were very few tracks in the morning: **pine squirrels**, **snowshoe hares**, **deer mice**, one **otter** track along the main river, and one **fisher** which I tried to follow but lost in a ravine. After about 2 km down the trail there was a bridge across a small river. Looking down from the bridge, I spotted a **star-nosed mole** swimming on the bottom. I could see it for just a few seconds, but it was only my second sighting ever, and it's probably the coolest mammal in North America, so I finally felt that the trip was worth the effort (until that moment I wasn't sure). Pileated woodpeckers, ruffed grouse, and **pine squirrels** are very common along the trail.

I drove north for most of the day, and reached Reserve Faunistique Ashuapmushuan by nightfall. It's a huge reserve, mostly of coniferous forest, crossed by a highway. It would be worth exploring, but I was in a hurry to get north, and didn't plan to stop. As I was driving across the reserve through a blizzard, I saw a **Northern flying squirrel** glide across the road (I thought it was a Northern because it was a bit out of range for Southern, but later learned that for certain; see explanation below). Then I noticed a tiny white object moving across the pavement. I couldn't stop fast enough, so I drove over it, stopped, ran back, and saw a **pygmy shrew** running

along the roadside ditch. It was very light-colored. It disappeared in the snow, but I walked along the ditch and found tracks of more shrews. It was still snowing heavily, so all tracks were very fresh; there were probably dozens of shrews in that ditch! I waited for an hour, but didn't see any, and the temperature was dropping fast, so it was becoming unlikely that any shrew that tiny would show up on the surface.

I drove to Chibougamau, the last real town before the northern wilderness. It had the last McDonalds store, which for me meant the last internet access. The unpaved Rue du Nord starts from here and eventually joins James Bay Road. Any time you drive north of Chibougamau or Matagami, even in summer, you should have a couple days' supply of food, spare cans of fuel and oil, an extra spare tire, a tire pump, winter clothing and warm sleeping bags. A camping stove wouldn't hurt, too. Make sure your radiator and windshield washer have enough antifreeze.

A few km outside Chibougamau the road enters the vast Reserve Faunistique Assinica. Its forests are purely coniferous, and you can expect all kinds of Northern fauna. I saw a **red fox** and a dead **snowshoe hare** along the road (the hare was the only roadkill I saw the entire trip, except for one hawk owl). The snow finally stopped, and I even saw the only auroras of the trip (not terribly impressive as auroras go, but still nice).

## Nov 12

I didn't see any animals during the night walk, but in the morning there were lots of tracks. In addition to ubiquitous **red fox** and **snowshoe hare** tracks, I found **mink**, **least weasel** and vole tracks; judging by the habitat, it was probably an **Eastern heather vole**. I tried following the least weasel, but the tracks were a bit old and soon disappeared in snowdrifts.

It's a long drive to Nemescou, the next town. The only living things along the road were spruce grouse digging the shoulders for pebbles, chickadees, ravens, assorted finches and abundant **pine squirrels**. I was just about to get completely bored when I saw two animals running along the road far ahead. One was white and one dark. They disappeared behind a turn, so I sped up. The moment I made that turn, I saw that they were a **snowshoe hare** chased by a **marten**; they had already turned around and were running straight into the car. I had to brake hard and the car spun sideways, but I managed to keep it on the road. The animals didn't pay any attention and continued the chase past the car; only the marten gave me a quick curious look. By the time the marten gave up and ran off the road, the hare had at least a 100-m lead. The hare never stopped running until it disappeared behind the next turn.

I kept driving all day and much of the night, past Nemescou, onto James Bay Road and all the way to Radisson where it ends. I climbed a small hill with radio towers a few miles north of Rue du Nord/James Bay Rd. junction. The view was great; I found **deer mouse** tracks and (I think) **Southern red-backed vole** tracks, plus tracks of some shrew, larger than a pygmy but not big enough for an American water shrew.

Almost all residents of this area are Cree Indians; they speak Cree and English, but no French. Still, road signs are mostly in French, like in the rest of Quebec (where people don't speak any languages other than French at all). One guy I saw near Nemescou had a parka with

the hood trimmed with wolverine fur; I asked if it was of local origin, but he vaguely said that it was from up north.

From Radisson, I took the unpaved road to Long Bay, the northernmost place on James Bay coast that you can drive to. James Bay wasn't frozen yet, so the lake effect was in full swing along the shore. A wall of dense falling snow five km thick was sharply separated from the sunlit interior. There is still some forest (full of **pine squirrels**) around Long Bay, but all hilltops are either tundra or bare rock. The snow was falling so thick that I could only see the first few meters of the bay, but locals told me that once it freezes, you can see **ringed** and **bearded seals** just offshore, and **polar bears** show up occasionally. A bit inland, where there was no snowfall, I noticed fresh **Arctic fox** tracks and followed them until I found a fox resting on a rock. It was surprisingly tame, probably having just migrated from the uninhabited tundra up north. I also found old **wolverine** tracks, and relatively fresh **ermine** tracks, but no ermine despite much searching around. All hare tracks were the same size as I'd seen earlier, so probably from **snowshoe hare** rather than Arctic, which is also supposed to occur in that area.

Then I chose a hillock with lots of lemming tracks and waited there for three hours, until I saw a gorgeous, ivory-white **Labrador collared lemming** cross a patch of snow between rocks.

By that time the weather was getting worse, so I returned to Radisson to avoid getting stuck in the snow, drove straight south for a few hours, and turned onto another unpaved side road accessing James Bay. It has numerous "caribou crossing" signs, and ends in a small town called Eastmain. The lake effect was still working, and the amazing wall of falling snow was still standing along the coast. I filled up the tank in Eastmain, turned back, drove out of the blizzard and waited for dawn.

### Nov 13

In the morning I walked around for a few hours, but saw nothing except **pine squirrels**. There is no upland tundra along Eastmain Road, just bogs and scruffy forest. The only tracks of interest were small vole-like tracks in a gully near the road; I waited there for a while and eventually saw a **Northern bog lemming**; it peeked out of its burrow under a dwarf willow but refused to come out. A few km before getting back on James Bay Road, I saw two **gray wolves** crossing the road ahead. The male left huge tracks. I followed their tracks for about an hour before I caught up with them. To my surprise, the male turned around and came to within about 50 m to investigate. I squeezed my mouse squeaker, and got both wolves to come even closer. And that's despite the fact that they are hunted (I saw a few pelts in a roadside store).

By the time I got onto James Bay Road, a storm had begun. It lasted for the rest of the day and most of the night, with tailwind so strong I probably saved about thirty bucks on gasoline. It pushed so much compacted snow into the lock of the trunk of my car that I couldn't open it for the next two days. I was lucky to have everything essential inside the car.

James Bay Road passes by really impressive Rupert Falls (there were still some glaucous gulls feeding there, and fresh **otter** tracks near the roadside rest area) and ends (or, rather,

begins) in the town of Matagami, where tame **red foxes** roam the streets at night. I drove past Matagami and stopped for the night in Parc Nacional d'Aiguebelle.

### Nov 14

It's a nice national park with good coniferous forests, lots of lakes, and some interesting canyons. But the roads were covered with so much snow that my little car had trouble moving along. There were lots of tracks, but nothing particularly interesting except for some vole tracks in one of the canyons; I think they belonged to a **rock vole**. I saw a relatively tame **coyote** there, a **moose**, and a few **white-tailed deer** (for them it's almost the northern limit of the range). Just before leaving the park, I found old tracks of a wolf pack. They were clearly too big to be anything but **gray wolves** (some guides show this area as being within Algonquin wolf range). I met another **moose** outside the park.

I was a bit tired of driving through flying snow on icy roads, so I drove south all the way to Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario. The park had only a few cm of snow in the forest, and none on the main road. I drove the length of that road six times, and saw two **moose**, one **white-tailed deer**, at least a dozen **deer mice**, and eight **flying squirrels**. I noted that some squirrels were gliding at an angle (just like the one I'd seen earlier), while others were gliding almost horizontally. I chased some of them into the forest and found the explanation: the ones gliding at an angle were **Northern flying squirrels**, and the ones gliding horizontally were **Southern flying squirrels!** The Northern ones were larger and looked like they had put on a lot more fat for the winter. I think this method of identification works only in this time of year.

### Nov 15

I spent some time before dawn looking for **Southern red-backed voles** in hemlock groves, hoping to see the grey morph pictured in Fiona Reid's *Mammals of North America*, but the only one I saw was of the typical red morph.

The park visitor center has a great view of a bog-covered plain. In winter park rangers often drag roadkill deer onto the plain so that people can watch Algonquin wolves feeding on the carcasses. There is no schedule for this, but I've been told that the best time to catch such an event is during the spring break in Canadian schools (whenever that is). The center has a bird feeder where you can see **red squirrels**, **Eastern chipmunks**, lots of birds, and sometimes martens, but the latter only show up in winter, and none had been seen this year yet. The park newspaper had an article about their small mammal census; apparently, 2013 was an excellent year for deer mice, all squirrel species, and voles, but a bad year for jumping mice. I had similar observations in New England: in 2004 jumping mice were everywhere, particularly on Cape Cod, but in 2013 I didn't see a single one, only deer mice. Anyway, by November jumping mice were hibernating.

There was also a wildlife sightings board in the visitor center, according to which people were seeing wolves and otters daily, at any time of the day and at different locations. I drove the length of the main road twice more and eventually saw an **Algonquin wolf** crossing it at Km 38,

at 10 am. I tried following the tracks, but the snow was melting fast and soon there was almost none left. I checked a few lakes for aquatic mammals, but saw only tracks of **otters** and **minks**. I also walked a few short trails through the park's mixed forests, and spotted a **Southern bog lemming** along Spruce Bog Trail, and a **porcupine** along Big Pines Trail. On the way to Ottawa, I was surprised to see **black bear** tracks in roadside mud about 6 km outside the park entrance. I expected them to be hibernating already.

I drove through Ottawa and stopped for the night in Voyagers Provincial Park near Ontario-Quebec border.

### Nov 16

Voyagers PP is a nice place to spend a night between Ottawa and Montreal. The main gate is locked at night, but a little bit down the road there is a short side road ending on the shore of Ottawa River. It's bottomland forest, good for birding, and probably the best place in Ontario to see **raccoons** (I've been there three times and never failed to meet them). It also has **Eastern gray squirrels**.

The weather was finally getting better, but it was time for me to go home. I drove through Lake Champlain Islands in Vermont, and noticed that some areas had unusual densities of molehills, but I couldn't think of any way to get to the moles, and don't even know what species they were.

I made the last stop at dusk in a small forest reserve in New Hampshire called Esther Currier Wildlife Management Area, just to stretch my legs. I didn't expect much from this place, although their brochure listed all possible species of mustelids among resident mammals. But it's a nice patch of forest surrounding a lake, with bogs and streams. As I was approaching the lake, I heard strange cracking sounds, and soon saw a bunch of **beavers**: they were swimming around, breaking up paper-thin ice on the lake. Perhaps they tried to keep the lake from freezing over, but it looked like they were just playing. When it got too dark to watch them, I walked around, and within three hours saw an **ermine**, a **woodland vole**, a **Southern red-backed vole** (again, red morph), and... a **star-nosed mole** swimming in the stream that flows out of the lake. I think my amazing luck with star-nosed moles on that trip was due to the soil being already frozen, but the snow cover still too thin to build tunnels underneath. I also found **mink** and **striped skunk** tracks. I would really like to spend more time in that forest.

### **Mammals seen:**

1. Pygmy shrew: 1 RF Ashuapmushuan.
2. Star-nosed mole: 1 PN La Maurice, 1 Esther Currier WMA.
3. Red fox: 1 RF Assinica, 3 Matagami. That's a very low count for Canada.
4. Arctic fox: 1 Long Bay Rd.
5. Gray wolf: 2 Eastmain Rd.
6. Algonquin wolf: 1 Algonquin PP.
7. Coyote: 1 PN d'Aiguebelle.

8. Ermine: 1 Esther Currier WMA.
9. American marten: 1 RF Assinica.
10. Northern raccoon: 3 Voyagers PP.
11. Moose: 2 PN d'Aiguebelle, 2 Algonquin PP.
12. White-tailed deer: 4 PN d'Aiguebelle, 1 Algonquin PP.
13. American beaver: 5-6 Esther Currier WMA.
14. Pine squirrel: abundant at all locations.
15. Eastern gray squirrel: 2 Voyagers PP.
16. Eastern chipmunk: abundant in Algonquin PP
17. Northern flying squirrel: 1 RF Ashuapmushuan, 3 Algonquin PP.
18. Southern flying squirrel: 5 Algonquin PP.
19. Deer mouse: 1 PN La Maurice, 12+ Algonquin PP.
20. Woodland vole: 1 Esther Currier WMA.
21. Southern red-backed vole: 1 Algonquin PP, 1 Esther Currier WMA.
22. Southern bog lemming: 1 Algonquin PP.
23. Northern bog lemming: 1 Eastmain Rd.
24. Labrador collared lemming: 1 Long Bay Rd.
25. Northern porcupine: 1 Algonquin PP.
26. Snowshoe hare: 1 RF Assinica.

Missed and apparently rare this year: fisher, Canada lynx, bobcat.