

Nova Scotia & Newfoundland, July 5-10, 2017

VLADIMIR DINETS

In July 2017 it was time for me to move on after living in North America for 20 years. I had already seen all mammals of the continent except a few cetaceans, so I decided to spend my last week in northeastern Canada, mostly whalewatching with two friends (thanks for everything, guys!). We had six Sherman traps but never caught anything. It was a nice trip, but it would likely be even better if we went in August.

1. Cape Breton Island

Mabou area had a peak in **ermine** numbers: driving through at dawn we saw two cross the road, plus four roadkills. We also saw a few **red foxes**, a **northern raccoon**, and a **white-tailed deer** in the same area.

We spent an evening and a night exploring Cape Breton Highlands National Park. Shrew numbers were very high: we saw two **masked shrews** in half an hour along the very short Lone Shieling Trail in oldgrowth hardwood forest, and on Bog Trail **pygmy shrews** were running under the boardwalk all the time at dusk. We looked for **long-tailed shrews** of the race *gaspensis* along Buttereau Trail and found one in the first talus patch from the trailhead. But rodents were scarce: we didn't find **rock voles** near Mary Ann Falls where they were common in 2008, and saw no rodents at all while driving and walking at night. Even **pine squirrels** seemed uncommon. We saw a few **moose** and **snowshoe hares** along the main road. At dawn a **bobcat** crossed Jack Pine Trail ahead of us. Bobcats colonized Cape Breton Island after Canso Causeway was built; here they are as large as Canadian lynxes but somehow coexist with them.

Cheticamp-based Captain Zodiac (novascotiawhales.com) is the only local whalewatching operator that offers snorkeling (dependent on the weather and the presence of approachable species, mostly pilot whales). You can make reservation for snorkeling trips only between July 15 and Sept 15, but they sometimes begin in early July. We first came on July 5 and didn't go on a tour because the only cetaceans present were **minke whales** (we saw one from the shore). On July 9 we tried again and snorkeled with a few **long-finned pilot whales** (underwater views weren't good); there were also many **grey seals** around.

2. Cape Breton-Newfoundland ferries

Cabot Strait between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland is mostly shallow, but there is a deeper (350-450 m) flat-bottomed through running along, where **sperm** and **Cuvier's beaked whales** have been recorded. **North Atlantic right whale** is also possible. There are two Newfoundland-bound ferry routes from North Sydney, NS: to Channel-Port aux Basques (7 hours) and to Argentia (16 hours). In summer there are two departures a day for Channel-Port aux Basques, so you can choose the 11:45 ferry and cross the deep through in daylight. It travels over relatively deep water for the last four hours before reaching Newfoundland. During our crossing there were a lot more seabirds over the through, and an hour before arrival we saw a **blue whale**. The only departure to/from Argentia is at 17:00, the deepwater through is crossed halfway, so even in early summer you get there when it's dark. Our crossing was in really bad weather and we didn't see anything. All ferries have excellent forward views from a row of tables on Deck 7 – seize one as soon as you get onboard.

3. Newfoundland

Newfoundland has good roads crossing hundreds of miles of hills covered with coniferous forests, lush oceanic meadows and tundra-like barrens; summer driving is very pleasant if the weather is good. There are no endemic mammal species, but most of the 13 native species are represented by distinctive races, often very dark-colored. Alas, mammals are a bit thin on the ground. The only ones you are likely to see from highways (**snowshoe hare**, **moose**) are introduced, and even those aren't too common: we drove 1800+ km and saw only two of each, all on Hwy 1 between Deer Lake and Grand Falls. We didn't visit Reddickton area, claimed to have the highest **moose** density in the world. We never saw any roadkill anywhere in Newfoundland.

Bats are rare on the island, so I was surprised that the first mammals we saw were a few **northern myotis** in Gros Morne National Park, flying over the bridge at the beginning of Gros Morne Trail. This is

a scenic but difficult trail (6-8 hours return) to the summit of the island's highest peak. We hiked to the alpine tundra and got scope views of two **woodland caribou** and one **Arctic hare** of the small subspecies *bangsii*. On the way back we found a **masked shrew**; it's been introduced to Newfoundland to control outbreaks of introduced larch sawfly and basically saved the island's forests. Western Brook Pond Trail in the same park is also scenic but much easier; we saw **snowshoe hares** and an **Eastern coyote** there at dusk (coyotes have colonized the island about 40 years ago).

The northern peninsula of Newfoundland has mostly open habitats. On the short access road to Arches Provincial Park we watched a **Canadian lynx** (of the small, dark subspecies *subsolanus*) carrying a kitten. Then we walked the 3-km boardwalk at Salmon Discovery Center on Torrent River and saw a **river otter**. Short trails around Flower's Cove cross lush meadows and limestone barrens where burrows and runways of **long-tailed voles** were everywhere; we saw three voles along Thrombolites Trail. The local subspecies *terranovae* has beautiful dark-bronze color reminiscent of some tropical *Peromyscus*. We also saw a **vole** in L'Anse Aux Meadows National Historic Site. Burnt Cape Ecological Reserve it is a limestone peninsula with the northernmost known wintering sites of **little brown myotis** in small caves.

We went on a regular "whales & icebergs" trip with St. Andrew-based Northland Discovery (discovernorthland.com). We saw only one **humpback** and one **grey seal**, but the captain said that **white-beaked dolphins** are reliable in August and early September. He also said that in March-April **harp seals** are common on ice floes near the town and a boat trip to see them would be easy to arrange.

We didn't expect much from the small Terra Nova National Park, but it was great. We walked Southwest Brook Trail (6 km return); it goes through various types of forest and ends at beaver ponds where **beavers** of the chocolate-brown subspecies *caecator* were easy to see at dawn. Halfway down the trail we noticed a commotion across the creek: it was a **marten** chasing an introduced **pine squirrel**! The chase lasted for full two minutes; it looked like the marten had no chance, but it somehow managed to shake the squirrel off a branch, leaped after it and caught it mid-fall. Newfoundland marten (subspecies *atrata*) is almost black; it once almost went extinct and is still rare. **Otters** and introduced **mink** are also often seen along that trail according to the park people. Then we saw a **black bear** of the large subspecies *hamiltoni* on Blue Hill access road, and a **red fox** of the pale subspecies *deletrix* near the visitor center.

St. John's-based Ocean Quest (oceanquestadventures.com) offers snorkeling with **humpback whales** in July-August. Our trip was cancelled due to strong wind – apparently a frequent occurrence. One of would-be snorkelers told us that a day earlier he saw dolphins from the short ferry to the French-owned island of Saint-Pierre. We took the ferry (30 min each way) there and back and saw a pod of **white-beaked dolphins**, but the weather was so bad that we could barely identify them. The road to the ferry passes by numerous small lakes where **muskrats** of the blackish subspecies *obscurus* were easy to spot.

Cape St. Mary Ecological Reserve has huge seabird cliffs and a spectacular gannet colony, but we saw little of those because of fog. Folks at the visitor center said that they frequently see **mink** and **ermine** on the access road, and indeed, we saw an **ermine** carrying a **long-tailed vole** on our way back.

The island also has introduced **eastern chipmunk**, **deer** and **house mice**, and **southern red-backed vole**.

4. The Gully Marine Protected Area & Sable Island

The Gully is the largest underwater canyon off E North America, located 200 km offshore. My friends bought me a farewell gift by renting a plane in Port Hawkesbury, and we used a short window of good weather to look for deepwater cetaceans. We flew search patterns down and up Haldimand Canyon and Shortland Canyon, spent about an hour searching The Gully for northern bottlenose whales, and flew over Sable Island on the way back. We found one pod of **Sowerby's beaked whales** over Haldimand Canyon and spiraled down to about 100 m altitude before they dived. In The Gully area we sighted a pod of **northern bottlenose whales**, but they went into a dive before we got good views (we were flying above 500 m as required by MPA rules, so I'm pretty sure they didn't dive because of us). We also saw a pod of **Atlantic white-sided dolphins** over Haldimand Canyon and two groups of **long-finned pilot whales** on the way back. As expected, on Sable Island there were thousands of **grey** and **harbor seals**, plus some **feral horses**, but by that time the weather was changing and the visibility deteriorating. No sperm whales ("regular" or dwarf), even though the former are supposed to be common in the area in summer.