

SLEDDING THE HIGHLANDS

A Tour of Central Ontario's Cottage Country



Story and photos
by Craig Nicholson



"Watch out for that lake effect snow in Central Ontario," said Canada's weather guru, Dave Phillips of Environment Canada, when asked to comment about upcoming winters. He was referring to the frequent and unpredictable snow squalls that sweep off the (relatively) warm and open waters of the Great Lakes to Ontario shores. This activity deposits bands of snow through regions in the lee of the lakes, such as Muskoka, and Bancroft, plus the Haliburton, Almaguin and Madawaska Highlands (see green area on inset map above).

During the winter of 2010, when most of Canada suffered poor conditions and the world witnessed Olympic meltdown, this lake effect snow was a saviour for Ontario sledding, starting with a major dump of 60 centimetres or more in December. So when our Snow Goer Canada touring

crew looked for an Ontario riding opportunity last February, this swath of what's popularly known as "cottage country" was our ticket to ride.

Dan Carty, Jean Leroux, Jim Reavell, Don Webb and I were joined by my wife, Marsha, back in the saddle after a year's sabbatical from snowmobiling due to knee surgery. Our tour started and ended in Haliburton, an easy three-hour trailer from the Greater Toronto Area. During the next four and half days, we snowmobiled 1,140 kilometres on mostly well groomed trails, sledding as far east as Golden Lake, west as Sprucedale, south as Minden, and as far north as Burk's Falls, locations which pretty much defined the periphery of this lake effect snow belt last winter.

On our first day, we rode south and west through Minden, then circled north and east to Bancroft. Day Two, we snowmobiled

north and east to loop back into Madawaska, where the trail detoured around the now-condemned railroad bridge on TOP (Trans Ontario Provincial) B (a new bridge should be in place for the upcoming season). We headed west through Whitney on Day Three, passing through northern Haliburton and turning north to Huntsville for the night. Day Four, we first rode west, then north past Burk's Falls before hightailing it south to Dwight. A morning's ride on our final day led us back to Haliburton after a loop to the northeast. Then we trailered back home.

Overall, we were very impressed with our journey. Our lodgings – PInestone Resort (Haliburton), Best Western Sword Motor Inn (Bancroft), Riverland Lodge & Black Bear Camp (Madawaska), Grandview Resort (Huntsville) and Spring Lake Resort (Dwight) – were snowmobile-friendly, comfortable and easily accessible. I highly recommend each one when you do your own cottage country tour.



Great Scenery

We were also impressed with the scenery and riding terrain. This southern edge of the Canadian Shield has its share of hills and valleys. It is highland country where the trails make some amazing ascents and descents. The trails roll over hill and dale, curve through and around valleys, and surmount some surprisingly steep slopes. In many places, the view is quite spectacular, so be sure to stop and take in the eye candy. Add to this mix countless lakes, plus massive hardwood and evergreen forests, and you've got a sure recipe for exciting, interesting and picturesque sledding that rivals many parts of La Belle Province.

Among many others, good examples of scenic trails are TOP E109 between Combermere and Barry's Bay, TOP B from Whitney to Eagle Lake, TOP E south of Harcourt, Muskoka trails 64 and 95, and TOP D123 east of Burk's Falls.

As with many things close to home, we tend to take these for granted; I think many home-grown snowmobilers simply overlook or under rate the exceptional trails that cottage country has to offer.

Great Trails

Another major plus: the clubs of Districts 2, 6, 7 and 11 of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) did a remarkable job of delivering decent trails under less than ideal circumstances. Despite weather adversity and that lake effect snow acting as a magnet to attract lots of sledders from far and wide, grooming continued; clubs succeeded in keeping their trails open and smooth just as they do when snow is more abundant in a normal winter. Sure, our skis clacked



Cottage Country delivers miles and miles of great trails.

on more stones and ice than usual, but we never worried about having enough snow to keep our heat exchangers and sliders properly lubed – or about rough trails. And as we kept reminding ourselves: this was the best sledding available in Ontario last February...in a typical season, it's no wonder these cottage country highlands are among the most popular snowmobiling destinations in the province!

What's more, the trails on this tour are among the best and most consistently signed I have encountered anywhere. There was never any doubt about what trail we were on, what direction we were going, or what destinations lay ahead. Most intersections had map boards, and the trails were numbered at virtually every junction, to eliminate any uncertainty that a visiting rider might have about which one to take. However, despite recent GPSing of trails, many clubs still do not have distance numbers on their

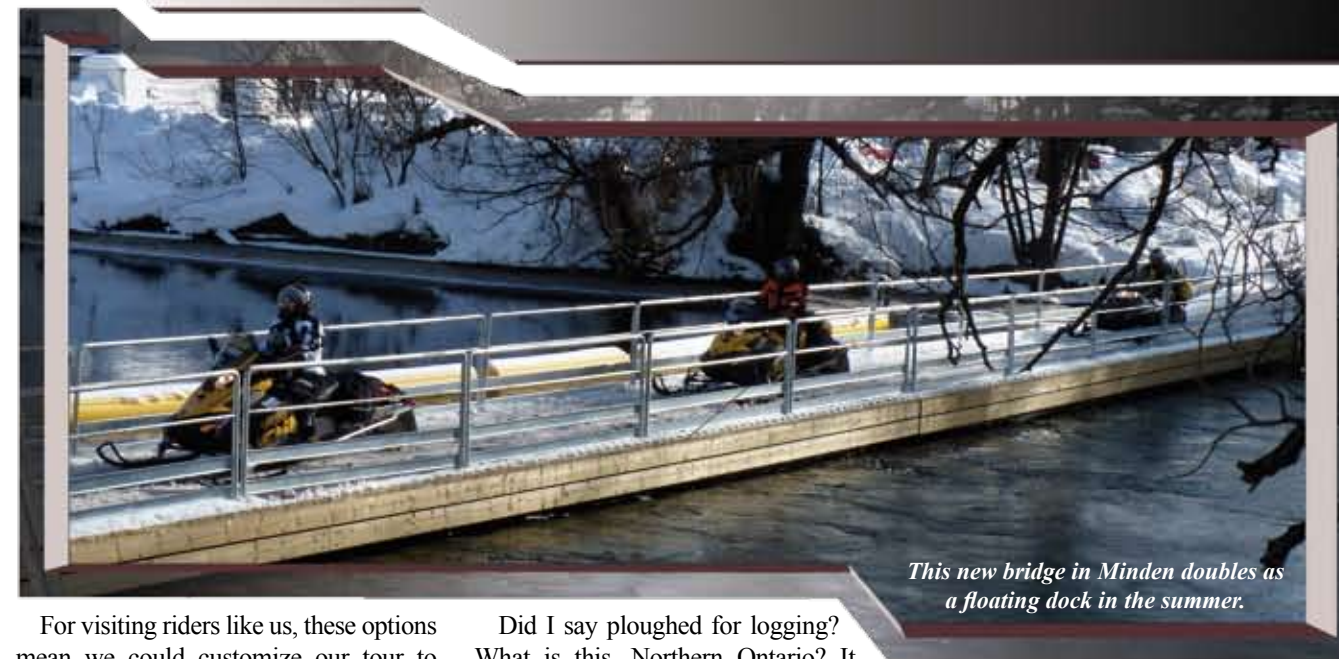
destination signs yet, just the ubiquitous "blank KM". So special kudos to the Paudash Trailblazers who do have distance numbers on their signs...very helpful!

The various district trail guides do a good job of supporting this exceptional signage. The maps are clear, well marked and accurate, so that used together with the signs, navigation is a breeze. Meanwhile, the frequent and well-placed traffic signs – stop, stop ahead and corner arrows – really enhanced our overall riding experience, not to mention trail safety.

This signage and mapping is essential, given the plethora of trail choices throughout these highland areas. Besides the TOP Trails that run district to district, many club trails provide countless additional hours of riding opportunities within each district. In fact, most club trails are every bit as good as the TOP trails and often less travelled, so don't hesitate to choose them.



Even with minimal snow, groomers did a great job keeping trails smooth.



This new bridge in Minden doubles as a floating dock in the summer.

For visiting riders like us, these options mean we could customize our tour to make riding days longer or shorter and more or less direct. So when you review our itinerary, remember that the distances between each destination listed can be adapted to suit your particular group, riding style or preferences — a great benefit for touring riders.

Lakes & Roads

I should also elaborate on a reference made earlier: countless lakes. Yes, there are waterways everywhere. That said, most of the snowmobile trails throughout these cottage country highlands are land-based, or provide bridges and culverts, or offer land-based alternative routes. Wherever ice crossing from trail to trail does happen, the way is clearly marked after the ice is good with bright florescent stakes.

I was surprised by the amount of road running and the sections of trails ploughed for logging. Now before the clubs climb all over me about roads, I know they are inevitable wherever private land abounds and trail permission is tenuous at best. And cottage country is nothing if not a mass of private land along with a new generation of property owners who can be less than snowmobile-friendly. When trail permission is denied or revoked, often the only alternative is to link the remaining trails by road. Better this than not being able to ride from here to there, but that doesn't make road running any more enjoyable. So be prepared to do some road running on this tour, but also be assured that the clubs do a great job of signing the roads too, so you can find the snow trail again easily.

Did I say ploughed for logging?

What is this, Northern Ontario? It seemed like logging operations were everywhere...certainly a big surprise, in that logging wasn't part of my preconceived mental image of cottage country. It's good for the local economy, but not so much for snowmobile trails. But remember that the trail probably wouldn't exist if a logger hadn't made it in the first place, so I guess a little sharing isn't unbearable. Again, not so enjoyable to ride, but I will say that for the most part, the loggers respected sledders' needs by not ploughing down to bare ground and by leaving passable snow on the roadsides. The clubs also do their best to keep both road running and logging to a minimum, grooming shoulders where possible; so don't be deterred, just prepared. Bottom line: if you always stay on the marked OFSC trails and follow their routes throughout cottage country, you will have one great tour!

Services & Amenities

We were also surprised that gas was hard to find in the north part of Haliburton on TOP Trail B. Several fuel locations are marked on the Haliburton County Snowmobile Association trail guide, but were not open during the early weekdays when we rode through. This was not a problem for our Ski-Doo ETEC's, but might be for other less fuel efficient sleds, so fair warning: either call ahead to check their hours or gas up whenever you see an open station, even if you don't really need it yet. Wouldn't you know, we even found one gas stop that was open, but had lost the key for their locked pumps. Get out those bolt cutters!

This fuel anomaly aside, our cottage country tour offers many other benefits. Cell service was always readily available, if not exactly where we were, then just at the top of the next hill. Lodging, food, sled repairs and parts, fuel and convenience services are frequent and plentiful, with the nearest town never very far away and mostly trail accessible. Many rural houses and farms dot the landscape, so help is usually close at hand. But as close as civilization is, these trails give you that wilderness feeling of a way-out-there adventure. So this highlands tour combines the best of both worlds, and short of buying your own cottage, it's a remarkable opportunity to explore Central Ontario's cottage country at its wintery best!

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PLAN YOUR TOUR

Who To Contact

- Bancroft & District - www.bancroftdistrict.com or 1-888-443-9999
- Haliburton Highlands - www.haliburtonholidays.com or 1-800-461-7677
- Muskoka Tourism - www.discovermuskoka.ca or 1-800-267-9700
- Ontario Tourism - www.gorideontario.com or 1-800-ONTARIO (1-800-668-2746)
- OFSC (for maps, permits and trail info)– www.ofsc.on.ca

Maps Needed

- OFSC District 2 Trail Guide
- OFSC District 6 Trail Guide
- OFSC District 7 Trail Guide
- OFSC District 11 Trail Guide
- Haliburton County Snowmobile Association Map
- Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs Provincial Trail Guide

Our Tour Itinerary

Notes:

1. Toll free phone numbers are included only when they connect directly to the hotel (as opposed to an off site reservation system).
2. TOP = Trans Ontario Provincial; CT = Club Trail

Tour Info: 1,144 kilometres. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo GSX SE 1200 4TEC: 5.95 km/l. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo 600 ETEC's (2010 models on this tour included 2 Renegades; 1 MXZ, 1 MXZ RS): 9.08 km/l. Average oil consumption for ETEC sleds: 3 litres (380 km/l). Total cost per person per day: \$171 (includes lodgings, meals, sled & truck fuel, sled oil, pro-rated permits).

DAY ONE

Trailer to Haliburton (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: 3 hours.)

Where To Stay: Pinestone Resort

1-800-461-0357 or www.pinestone-resort.com. (See 2011 OFSC District 6 trail guide – direct trail access via CT 7.) This full service resort, located on County Road 21 just south of the town of Haliburton offers excellent food in the Heatherwood Restaurant and pub fare in the Highlanders Lounge, plus well-appointed rooms, a full service spa and wellness/fitness centre with indoor pool. Ample vehicle and sled parking. On site fuel.

DAY TWO

Ride from Haliburton to Bancroft (about 9 hrs.) Ride 260 km via CT 7 south/CT 2 west/TOP B east/ TOP E east/ TOP E110/TOP B106E north. Fuel & Late Lunch: Harcourt (**Note: Fuel stops on this route were closed Monday**)

Where To Stay: Best Western The Sword Motor Inn 613-332-2474 or Google Best Western Sword Motor Inn. (Direct trail access from TOP B106E: turn east on snowmobile bridge located just north of the old train station in Bancroft, then immediate right on local path into the back of the hotel.) Full service hotel with on site restaurant, indoor pool, hot tub and sauna, plus games room. Ample vehicle and sled parking. Fuel/convenience store nearby.

DAY THREE

Ride from Bancroft to Madawaska (about 8 hrs.) Ride 268 km via TOP B106E north/TOP E109 east/TOP B102 east/TOP B102/B101A north/TOP B west. Fuel & (Great) Lunch: Sands on Golden Lake Resort. Also fuelled at Madawaska.

Where To Stay: Riverland Lodge & Black Bear Camp 613-637-5338 or www.riverlandlodge.com. (Access from TOP B: lodge located on south side of Highway 60 just west of the Madawaska River bridge.) The main lodge is ideal for a group of riders who can fill most rooms and socialize together in the dining and living rooms or downstairs bar. Reservations recommended. Home cooked meals, shared bathrooms and no phones, but good cell service. Fuel/convenience store ½ km west.

DAY FOUR

Ride from Madawaska to Huntsville (about 8 hrs) Ride 238 km via TOP B west/TOP D103B north / TOP D102B north/CT 88 west. Fuel & Lunch: Ox Narrow's Resort & Marina & Deerhurst Resort, Huntsville (**Note: Fuel stops on this route were closed Wednesday**)

Where To Stay: Delta Grandview Resort 705-789-4417 or www.deltagrandview.ca. (See 2011 OFSC District 7 trail guide – On CT 88 at north shore of Fairy Lake, with direct access to stake line across the lake). Luxurious condo-style lodgings with separate living room/kitchen areas and fireplaces make Grandview a must-stay destination, especially for couples. Excellent food in on site restaurant & lounge, plus recreation centre with indoor pool, hot tub, sauna and fitness facilities. Ample parking for vehicles and sleds.

DAY FIVE

Ride from Huntsville to Dwight (about 8 hrs.) Ride 240 km via CT 88 west/TOP D north/TOP D123 north/ TOP D south/TOP D101B south/CT 77 west. Fuel: Sprucedale, Dwight. Lunch: Pickerel Lake Lodge.

Where To Stay: Spring Lake Resort 1-877-635-9995 or www.springlakeresort.net (See 2011 OFSC District 7 trail guide – direct trail access via CT 77 just east of Dwight on north side of Highway 60.) New owners are revitalizing this popular resort with warm hospitality, classy renovations and home cooked meals in the on-site restaurant. Ample vehicle and sled parking. No phones, but good cell service. Fuel off CT 77 at Webster's Beacon in Dwight (NE corner of Hwys 60 and 35).

DAY SIX

Ride from Dwight to Haliburton (about 4 hrs) Ride 138 km via CT 77 east/TOP D101B south/CT 65 east/ CT64 south/CT16 south/TOP B east/ TOP B013 south/CT 7 south (back to Pinestone Resort).

Trailer Home.

