



SLEDDING THE ZONES

Circle Tour of New Brunswick

Story and Photos
by Craig Nicholson



Our New Brunswick tour had a brutal start. After chasing snow all winter across Canada, it finally found us. Almost two feet fell overnight as we dreamed of the groomed trails to come at our launch hotel, the Quality Inn, Edmundston. Instead of delaying our take-off to let snow settle, we spent the next 10 hours slogging a mere 100 kilometres. With minimal signage and few stakes to follow, our sleds got buried more than 25 times as we broke through the deep powder trying to find and stay on the completely obliterated NB12. Fortunately, the temperature hovered just below 0°C all day, so at least we weren't freezing too! We ended up staying that first night at our intended lunch stop, the Quality Inn Pres du Lac, Grand Falls. We barely made it...

Pathfinding in daylight was bad enough, but when darkness fell, we were still about six clicks out of Grand Falls. We came to a road and couldn't find the trail on the other side. We shuttled around that road with our headlights pointed every which-way looking for any indication. We had

pretty much decided to go to Plan B (yet to be developed), when we spotted truck headlights coming along the road. Some local sledders had seen our lights from their home down the way and come to investigate. Hearing our predicament, Nick Sénéchal promptly offered to get his sled and guide us to the hotel. Thank goodness he did, because otherwise we would have had to ride the Trans Canada Highway!

This snowstorm was the first of three that hit New Brunswick that week; the other two delivered just enough new snow that we mostly snowmobiled fresh powder on top of groomed trails – sweet! However, the storms also changed our intended itinerary somewhat and I've listed both our completed and intended routes in the "Our Itinerary" section at the end, so you can take your pick.

ABOUT NEW BRUNSWICK

Dan Carty, Norm Clegg, Glenn King, Jim Reavell, Marsha and I had set out to ride our Ski-Doo snowmobiles through each of New Brunswick's eight snowmobiling zones. Particularly, we wanted to ride the

under-rated Bay of Fundy Highlands (Zone 8), the Acadian Peninsula (Zone 3) and the area north and east of Moncton (Zone 6).

With a bit of dipsy-doodling, we succeeded, and I highly recommend including these areas in your own tour. Oh by the way, remember that New Brunswick is on Atlantic Time, so coming from Ontario, we lost an hour, but gained it back on our return.

New Brunswick is undoubtedly our most truly bilingual province. Some areas are very francophone, particularly along the Atlantic Coast and the Acadian Peninsula, but communication was never a concern. What's more, the New Brunswick Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (NBFSC) offers over 7,000 kilometres of maintained trails, a large percentage of which are on abandoned rail lines, old logging or mining roads or utility corridors. Blue (lines on the maps and signs on the trails) and 2-digit numbers denote trails in the provincial network. Local trails are green in colour with three digits. All of this makes for generally excellent sledding and easy getting from one destination to another.





25 sled burials and still having fun!

WHAT ABOUT SIGNS?

Speaking of signs, I was pleased to note that both signage and staking improved considerably in the other zones we visited in this tour. No doubt we would have found our way more easily after a major storm in these regions. It also helps that the NBFSC recently embarked on a massive intersection signage project. Now most junctions are marked with a large metal stand that has one wing pointing in the direction of each adjoining trail. So if it's a "T" intersection, there will be three wings, one for each trail direction, so you know exactly what is down that way.

One sign that was conspicuous by its absence was for a provincial speed limit. That's because apparently there isn't one for snowmobiles on the trail, except for slow zones posted by some municipalities. Now before you get

all excited about this prospect, please note that if you ride like an idiot, you can be charged with dangerous driving and that's more serious than a speeding ticket.

ICE AND WATER

Water plays a huge role in New Brunswick snowmobiling. The Gulf of Saint Lawrence and the Gulf of Chaleurs are on the east side. The south end is the Bay of Fundy. These bodies of salt water significantly impact climate and snowfall. They are also the repositories for the many rivers and their tributaries that cut deeply into the landscape, widening as they reach the coast. So maybe more than other sledding destinations, New Brunswick's waterways dictate where land trails can be placed and make numerous ice crossings a fact of life. Many are simply too wide to bridge. Poor ice conditions at the beginning or end of a normal winter, or during an unseasonably mild

one, can effectively sever their trail system into several unlinked parts. This isn't necessarily the end of great trail riding, but is definitely a consideration for visitors deciding where to go.

For example, the same storm that hit Edmundston had brought some rain and milder temperatures to Fredericton farther south. On our way to the Riverside Resort near Fredericton, the Keswick River was slushy and open looking, so even though it was probably just water over solid ice, we had no way of knowing and decided not to take the chance. Unfortunately, the only other way to the hotel by sled was to cross the even bigger and even sloppier looking Saint John River. We opted to try another hotel on the east side of town, but once again were stymied by a sloppy looking



New intersection signs make navigating easier.

river and had to turn back.

Caught between two uncrossable rivers, we knocked on the door of a house that had snowmobile tracks all around it. The owner, Jeff Dunphy, generously offered to park our sleds in his heated garage overnight while we hailed a cab to the Riverside. He told us next morning that when his 15-year old son came home and saw their garage full of new sleds, Jeff was the dad of the century for at least a moment!

To avoid more river problems, we took a more northerly route the following day, heading to Miramichi instead of directly to Moncton as originally intended. The good news is that the Miramichi River was okay to cross and within two days, all the rivers were frozen solid again, not an issue for the rest of our tour.

IN THE ZONES

As noted previously, New Brunswick comprises eight snowmobiling zones, each with its own trail map. Like me, visitors may find it confusing to piece together the various zones, but each map does have a small inset of the whole province and the trail conditions map on the NBFSC website also helps.

The popular "Northern Odyssey" takes in the northern zones – parts of 1, 2, 3 and 5. But if that's all you do, you'll be missing out big time. Our tour started in Edmundston and circled counter-clockwise by Woodstock, Fredericton, Moncton, Sussex, Miramichi, Bathurst and back to Edmundston. Our only day that really involved the Northern Odyssey area was the final ride from Bathurst to Edmundston. But that's only one small part of the whole New Brunswick snowmobiling story...

One must-visit area is Zone 8, what I am calling the Fundy Highlands. Located at the southern end of the province along the Bay of Fundy, it's book-ended by Saint John to the west and Moncton to the east. This uplands region is truly an undiscovered gem. With both elevation and Fundy-effect snow working for it, the Fundy Highlands share many of the best attributes of its northern counterpart, including sledding that can last into April, but with several significant advantages: it's interlaced with many more trail choices; it's closer to major New Brunswick population centres; it's closer for riders trailering in from PEI or Nova Scotia; and its trail are every bit as good as anything else in the province. Besides, where else can you ride your sled onto the beach at the Bay of Fundy like we did at Martin Head, or climb to the incredible lookout on Caledonia Mountain via NB34 or stay at a neat place like Adair's Wilderness Lodge?

On day seven, you'll see in Our Itinerary that we rode from Adair's due north to Chipman on a trail that shows on the Zone 7 map as "Under Development". I'm not sure what that means, since the trail was groomed, signed, and easy to follow. It provides good access directly into the Fundy



Ice crossings are part of New Brunswick sledding.

Highlands and a good shortcut to both Fredericton and Miramichi.

The Acadian Peninsula in Zone 3 is also worth a visit. Not only can you see a different gulf from each coast, especially near Tracadie-Sheila and Caraquet, but this very francophone part of New Brunswick has its own special charm. In all my years of riding, I've never had traffic stop both ways of its own accord so our sleds could cross the road, but in Caraquet, that happened each of the three times we crossed. Talk about snowmobile-friendly!

Riding the Acadian Peninsula can be a bit of a crapshoot in that prevailing ocean winds tend to either blow the snow away before it can be packed by groomers or pile it in huge drifts that block the trail. But we hit it just right and had a great ride, except for NB19 west. NB19 is on an abandoned rail line through Caraquet on the north coast. Just west of town, a sign for NB19 pointed into the bush, while the rail trail we were on appeared to continue straight ahead. Being obedient riders, we followed the sign and rode a snow-covered, but largely ungroomed wilderness trail for 50 kilometres or so. Imagine my chagrin when it finally reconnected farther along that same rail trail we'd been on!

So why two parallel trails? Apparently, the rail trail is very vulnerable to severe drifting that often makes it impassable and that's when to take the more protected inland route. Unfortunately, there was no sign or on-trail information about this choice, so visitors like us are left guessing.

I've snowmobiled in this province several times over the years, but the New Brunswick we rode last winter is a destination whose time has come. They've worked hard to pull together a well integrated, mapped, signed and maintained provincial system that rivals the best in North America. We rode many memorable trails in one week. I especially remember LT535 near Baie-Sainte-Anne, LT780 between Chipman and Rogersville, and NB34 in the Fundy Highlands. I'm sure you'll find favourites of your own, so give yourself a real treat by discovering New Brunswick sledding before everyone else does!

Special thanks to Alison Aiton, Ross Antworth, Kevin Bailey, Darren Duncan, Jeff Dunphy, Dave Garland, Kyle Good, Lisa MacDougall, Dale Miserid, Nick Sténoch and Sandy Young for assistance with this tour.

Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Ski-Doo), Gateway Powersports, FXR Racing, Murphy Insurance, Launch Helmet Cams, Triton Trailers, Woody's and Unica Insurance.

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