

AROUND AROOSTOOK

Miles of Memories in Northern Maine STORY & PHOTOS BY CRAIG NICHOLSON, THE INTREPID SNOWMOBILER



ABOVE: Stopped in both the U.S and Canada on the Border Trail.

LEFT: Aroostook's uplands offer many wide open trails with great scenery.

I've never snowmobiled down a trail with stone markers in the middle, but I'm a law-abiding guy. So I as we rode on that Border Trail between Maine and New Brunswick, I had visions of being pounced on by both U.S. and Canadian Customs & Immigration officers waiting in the woods. That's because Maine's Trail 81, the "Border Trail", travels through the forest directly along the International boundary between our two nations.

If you're heading north, you're mostly on the Canadian side of these 3-foot high border markers, but you're on the American side when travelling south. Fortunately, other than a few cameras, no one was lurking in the trees to stop us.

Banner Snow

Just as well because last winter, snowmobilers flocked to Aroostook

County, Maine thanks to more than 12 feet of snow that fell - and stayed - from November to April. Our Supertrax crew heard rumors in January that this popular New England snowmobile destination was already on track for a banner season, so we planned a visit in March to enjoy their long riding season for ourselves. We certainly weren't disappointed!

Aroostook County sits on top of Maine like it's the crown jewel of winter, thrusting up into Canada and bordered by Quebec to the north and west, and New Brunswick to the east. As such, Aroostook is the northern-most county in the contiguous United States east of the Great Lakes. It also boasts the largest county landmass east of the Mississippi River.

This northerly positioning, enhanced by the Appalachian Mountain range, makes Aroostook a reliable and bountiful snow maker - and a snow magnet for riders from across New England and beyond.

Maine's uplands form a high, relatively flat plateau extending northward

beyond the Appalachians. The terrain slopes gradually downward toward the north and east. The eastern part of this area is the Aroostook potato-farming region; the western part is heavily forested and tracked by numerous old logging roads, many of which become part of the 14,000-mile Maine snowmobile trail system each winter. Aroostook County boasts 2,300 miles of these highly ranked groomed trails, so there's plenty for visiting snowmobilers to enjoy here.

Riding The County

A quick review of Northern Maine Snowmobile Trails, a map produced by the Aroostook Chamber of Commerce, shows that an interconnected trail system anchors their network (as it does throughout the state). In The

County, these trans-state corridors are designated by two-digit numbers ranging from 81 to 92 (and colored red on maps) for primary trails and by three-digits (and green-colored) for secondary routes.

Wanting to be in the centre of this action, we checked into the Caribou Inn & Convention Center. Located in the Town of Caribou on the east side of Aroostook County, this snowmobile-friendly hotel is well positioned for staging day-ride loops in every direction.

For example, we snowmobiled south one day for 135 miles through Fort Fairfield, Presque Isle and Mapleton. Another 145-mile loop took us

WHERE WE STAYED

Caribou Inn & Convention Centre - caribouinn.com or (207) 498-3733. The newly renovated Caribou Inn has it all - on site restaurant, indoor pool & hot tub, bar, and 73 well-appointed rooms with comfortable beds. Plus, plenty of truck, trailer & sled parking, direct trail access to 83A and gas nearby.

north via Limestone, Van Buren and Madawaska (don't miss the lookout at the north end of Long Lake). On the third day we got a late start and cruised west for 115 miles through Washburn, Ashford and Portage.

I should note our relatively modest daily distances were due to time taken to explore, sight-see and take photos, not because of any trail deficiencies. In fact, with regular grooming and no snowmobile trail speed limits in

Maine, it's easy to set a pace that really eats up the miles - as long as your speed remains reasonable for conditions and doesn't endanger others.

Getting Around

Besides, visitors to The County need to take their time at intersections to ensure they stay on their intended trail, not blow through hoping for the best.



In my preparation for riding there, I'd heard that the trail signage was somewhat old fashioned and might not be up to snuff for inspiring confident visitor navigation. So I was pleasantly surprised to see sufficient trail number signs, but quickly learned to check them carefully at intersections.

That's because more often than not, additional directional or destination information was helpfully handwritten on existing signs with black magic marker. Not exactly up to the standard set by the top ranked trail riding destinations, but it worked and kept us from getting lost. That being said, an intersection signage upgrade would significantly enhance the Aroostook County snowmobiling experience.

Aroostook Services

Meanwhile, Aroostook County trails are well served with fuel stops, hearty restaurants and rustic lodges catering to snowmobilers. Many of them are marked on The County trail map and also appear on the back as advertisers, making it easy for visitors to plan their rides. There's also a "Quick Travel Reference" chart showing approximate mileages between various county destinations, but like me, I bet most visiting riders would appreciate a map face that showed actual distances for every trail.

During our stay in Aroostook, we met avid county sledding ambassador, Gary Marquis, who issues the popular Aroostook County Trail Report. It's a valuable resource that details the latest trail conditions and grooming

reports. Gary's also the font of all things snowmobiling in The County, and we were intrigued to hear that the trend among snowmobilers now seems to be to multi-night stays for day rides from Aroostook's numerous lodges, sporting camps and outfitters.

Whatever your choice, you'll discover that Aroostook County offers a massive snowmobiling playground each winter with an exciting variety of terrain and a welcoming "down-home" feel. Best of all, with so much snow and a well-developed network of snowmobile trails, The County typically delivers top notch riding from as early as December to as late as early April. So do yourself a favour and add Northern Maine to your sledding bucket list of new destinations to discover! ■



ABOVE: Must-see view from the north end lookout at Long Lake.

LEFT: Cruising carefully through one of several deer yards.

GET MORE INFO

- Maine Tourism - visitmaine.com/things-to-do/winter-activities/snowmobiling
- Aroostook County Tourism (includes sled registration info) - visitaroostook.com
- Aroostook Snowmobile Trail Report - mainerec.com/report.asp
- Aroostook County Trail Map - portagelakers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Snowmobile-Map-18-19-1.pdf
- Maine Snowmobile Association - mesnow.com