



# EXPLORING QUÉBEC'S Upper Laurentians

## Wood Runner Trails Deliver The Ultimate Ride Experience

STORY BY CRAIG NICHOLSON, THE INTREPID SNOWMOBILER WITH PHOTOS BY MARTIN LORTZ

One of the many things I like about snowmobiling is making new discoveries. But it's not often I've been gob-smacked, especially at a premier sledding destination like Québec's Laurentides Region, where I thought I'd seen it all on several previous snowmobile tours. Going on tour means encountering many factors that can make or break your ride. Variables include weather and snow conditions, trail routing and status, sled reliability, and the availability of appropriate services and accommodations when and wherever they're needed. Sure, good advance planning and preparedness helps, but even the most popular destinations can still be a bit of a gamble, especially for less experienced snowmobilers. So what if there was one place that provided remarkable peace of mind by eliminating most of the uncertainties? That's what we found in the Upper Laurentians, an area that sets a special benchmark that other destinations would be wise to emulate.

### Staging From Mont Laurier

The Laurentides Region runs northwest from Montreal and the Lower Ottawa River almost to Clova and Parent. If you're so inclined, you could ride all of its 2,411 kilometres (1,498 miles)

of snowmobile trails, most of which meander through the snowy Laurentian Mountains. For our 4-day couples tour, we staged out of Mont Laurier (pop. 13,799), the gateway to the Upper Laurentians (Haute-Laurentides). It's a convenient staging hub for any Laurentides Region tour, with an outstanding network of trails spoking out in every direction. From there, multiple day rides

and several loops are available so your sledding getaway can be as long or short as you choose.

Mont Laurier is also a real snowmobiling town, known for its many sled-accessible services and amenities, and for allowing snowmobiles to travel on snow along the south side of its main street (Hwy 177) that's actually part of Local Trail 223. For those trailering in, Mont Laurier is only



Signage like this at every intersection  
TOP PHOTO: Morning departure from a pourvoirie

187 miles from Massena, NY and 238 miles from Burlington VT. It's also 250 km (160 miles) northwest of Montreal and 216 km (134 miles) north of Ottawa, most of it uphill as the elevation increases north of the Ottawa River.

### About The Wood Runner Trails & Loop

We chose Mont Laurier because I'd been wondering about something called the Wood Runner Loop (Le Tour Coureurs des Bois) that had caught my eye on the Laurentides Region snowmobile trail map. Turns out Le Tour Coureurs des Bois is an outstanding 464-kilometre (288 mile) circuit into the Upper Laurentians, north of Mont Laurier, that's the showcase ride of the Wood Runner Trails (Les Sentiers Coureurs des Bois). As we quickly appreciated, unlike many loops marked on other trail guides, the Wood Runner Loop is much more than just a line highlighted on a map.

Each is named after the famous "coureurs des bois", independent French fur traders from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These "wood runners" ventured into the most remote areas, pushing the boundaries of the great unknown. Like its pioneering namesakes, the Wood Runner Trails explore a vast wilderness, taking adventurous snowmobilers on what for many becomes the ride of a lifetime.

### The Wood Runner Backstory

So what makes the Wood Runner Trails so unique? It's one of the only existing destination rides I'm aware of that's initiated and championed by its hospitality providers, the area's pourvoiries. The word "pourvoirie" is usually translated into English as "outfitter". In winter, these Upper Laurentians outfitters cater to snowmobilers; the rest of the year, to hunters, anglers, ATV riders and vacationing families. The best way to describe the pourvoiries associated with the Wood Runner Trails is authentic wilderness lodges with tasteful accommodations, modern amenities and gourmet cuisine for outdoor enthusiasts. Many snowmobilers prefer these pourvoiries to regular motels for a more special, enjoyable and memorable experience – one that they look forward to every night.

Almost twenty-five years ago, a few of these pourvoirie owners began attending American snowmobile shows to promote their area. Many stateside riders said that the Québec trail system was so big they hardly knew where to get started. These Upper Laurentians outfitters also heard show attendees express uncertainty about trying an unfamiliar place, including such worries as finding reliable places to stay, being sure of good snow and trail conditions, getting lost, running out of gas, not speaking the language, or keeping their trucks and trailers secure.

Motivated by addressing these concerns, a group of independent forest innkeepers and outfitters decided to establish a unique network of snowmobile trails in the Upper Laurentians they named "Les Sentiers Coureurs des Bois". Over the years, they've enhanced their Wood Runner Trails concept with the cooperation of local economic development and tourism offices. They've also partnered with local snowmobile clubs for regular grooming, merged their trails into the FCMQ system, attracted visiting winter lovers from overseas, included a Mont Laurier staging hotel and sled rental partner, added reliable internet, and engaged in co-operative purchasing to provide the highest quality meals at each pourvoirie. Recently, they've also expanded the Wood Runner Trails to ATV, Side X Side and dual sport bike tours in other seasons.



Devil's Mountain lookout tower

The key to their long-term success stems from the continuing alliance of like-minded hospitality providers. Natural competitors, their ongoing cooperation has resulted in a more robust winter business for all, while attracting many more visiting snowmobilers to their a group of independent forest innkeepers and outfitters decided to establish a unique network of snowmobile trails in the Upper Laurentians they named "Les Sentiers Coureurs des Bois". Over the years, they've enhanced their Wood Runner Trails concept with the cooperation of local economic development and tourism offices. They've also partnered with local snowmobile clubs for regular grooming, merged their trails into the FCMQ system, attracted visiting winter lovers from overseas, included a Mont Laurier staging hotel and sled rental partner, added reliable internet, and engaged in co-operative purchasing to provide the highest quality meals at each pourvoirie. Recently, they've also expanded the Wood Runner Trails to ATV, Side X Side and dual sport bike tours in other seasons.

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hospitality providers. Natural competitors, their ongoing cooperation has resulted in a more robust winter business for all, while attracting many more visiting snowmobilers to their entire region. They've succeeded in delivering a one of a kind snowmobiling experience with reliable and secure access to their wilderness backyard, combined with unrivalled pourvoirie hospitality. Talk about a win-win for everyone!

### What Snowmobilers Can Expect From The Wood Runner Loop

The benefits of Le Tour Coureurs des Bois for snowmobilers are numerous. While each establishment is uniquely authentic in its own way, the pourvoirie accommodations, meals, service and amenities are all reliably excellent and consistent, including multi-bedroom chalets that can easily accommodate

larger groups. Most of these include living areas where our entire group relaxed comfortably together at the end of each day's ride. My best advice: book your reservations early for the entire loop! Each pourvoirie is also located close enough to the next that there's no worry about running out of gas because fill-ups are available at each location. Each is also open for lunch and as rest stops for touring riders.

What's more, the outfitters have installed 50 signage stations throughout their loop, with maps boards and arrowed destination/distance signs so wayfinding is a breeze. And because these owners work together, visiting riders benefit from knowing that their hosts are used to keeping track of guests riding between their pourvoiries – and that help is available if needed.

Meanwhile, their easy-riding Wood Runner Loop travels through beautiful forests, with few public road crossings or ice travel. Numerous secondary trails within and around the main loop provide alternate routes for longer or shorter ride distances. Cell service can be spotty on remote trails, but trail signs indicate a few points where service is available, in addition to each of the pourvoiries.

Then there are the special attractions. Le Tour Coureurs des Bois accesses the famous Montagne du Diable (Devil's Mountain) lookout with its new "dare-to-climb" panoramic tower view from the Laurentians second-highest peak. Nearby, the picturesque Chute de Windigo (Windigo Falls) with a height of 55 metres and width of 18, is well worth a look in its scenic setting. And just to the west of these points of interest is the massive Baskatong Reservoir, where a staked Regional Trail 322 takes you for a quick, 12-km, staked ice crossing to a Sentiers Coureurs des Bois member located on the other side.

### Home Away From Home

There's one intangible benefit that's equally responsible for bringing satisfied snowmobilers back to visit the Upper Laurentians again and again. Les Sentiers Coureurs des Bois members give everyone a warm, personal welcome

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### SENTIERS COUREURS DES BOIS MEMBERS

#### ON WOOD RUNNER LOOP

- Comfort Inn, Mont Laurier (secure parking)- [www.comfortinn-ml.ca/comfort/en/home](http://www.comfortinn-ml.ca/comfort/en/home)
- Pourvoirie Club Fontbrune (secure parking) - [www.fontbrune.ca](http://www.fontbrune.ca)
- Rabaska Lodge (secure parking) - [www.lerabaska.com](http://www.lerabaska.com)
- Club Notawissi - [notawissi.com](http://notawissi.com)
- Pourvoirie Fer à Cheval - [feracheval.ca](http://feracheval.ca)
- Pourvoirie des 100 Lacs Sud - [pourvoirie100lacs.com](http://pourvoirie100lacs.com)
- Pourvoirie Meekos (secure parking) - [www.mekoos.com](http://www.mekoos.com)
- F. Constantineau & Fils (sled rentals), Mont Laurier - [www.fconstantineau.com](http://www.fconstantineau.com)

#### ON OTHER WOOD RUNNER TRAILS

- La Pointe à David – [www.pointedavid.com](http://www.pointedavid.com)
- Hotel Central Parent - [www.hotelcentralparent.com](http://www.hotelcentralparent.com)

### TOUR INFO

- Tourisme Laurentides - [www.laurentides.com/fr/quoi-faire/motoneige](http://www.laurentides.com/fr/quoi-faire/motoneige)
- Wood Runner Trails - [www.woodrunnertrail.ca/snowmobile-trails](http://www.woodrunnertrail.ca/snowmobile-trails)
- Tourisme Québec - [www.bonjourquebec.com/en-ca/to-see-and-do/winter-activities/snowmobiling](http://www.bonjourquebec.com/en-ca/to-see-and-do/winter-activities/snowmobiling)
- FCMQ - [fcmq.qc.ca](http://fcmq.qc.ca)
- Intrepid Snowmobiler (tour itinerary) – [www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com/upper-laurentians-quebec-snowmobile](http://www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com/upper-laurentians-quebec-snowmobile)

and can cater to every need in English. Each pourvoirie specializes in making your stay and ride as easy, comfortable and enjoyable as possible, starting with several choices for secure trucks and trailer parking (see list). We even had our sleds cleared of snow in the morning by staff using a leaf blower!

Their hospitality also results from working together for continuous improvement and plain-spoken honesty with guests about snow and trail status, even going so far as to advise sledders with reservations if necessary. And nothing compares to the scrumptious meals that are part of every snowmobile package: high cuisine that's artistically plated by gourmet chefs, then served by super friendly pourvoirie staff. Yes, when you stay with these go-above-and-beyond outfitters, you'll feel right at home, make enduring friendships, and keep coming back for more because it just doesn't get any

better than this on every day – and every night – of any other tour!

That's why Le Tour Coureurs des Bois is now on my list of "Fav Québec Snowmobile Destinations" – and is a perfect choice for riders of all ages and experience levels, and especially for a couples tour like ours. Another plus is that due to its northerly location, the Wood Runner Loop is normally available to ride both before and after the season ends in many other places. Consequently, and

because it's much closer to Ontario and several border states than some other Québec locations, I've also added it to my short list of early and late season riding possibilities.

For me, all of this is what makes Le Tour Coureurs des Bois a new dimension in Québec trail riding, one that may even change trailering patterns for avid snow-seekers looking for unbeatable first and last rides. So along with everything else that Mont Laurier and the Upper Laurentians have to offer touring snowmobilers, why not try the Wood Runner Trails for your next ride?

Certainly my Intrepid Snowmobiler crew, hard to impress after years of visiting many popular snowmobiling destinations, were blown away by the ultimate ride experience we enjoyed in the Laurentides Region, thanks to the Wood Runner Loop and its amazing pourvoiries! ■

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