

Québec (Saint Lawrence River), from September 18th – October 3rd 2011

This autumn, my girlfriend and I decided to go to Québec for two weeks, mainly to see Beluga and some other North American mammals. Not a real birding trip this time (I had already visited eastern Canada before, so the potential number of lifers was limited). We chose some National Parks we wanted to visit, and once there, did long walks every day in the hope to see as many birds/mammals as possible. In the Tadoussac area, many hours were spent watching the Saint Lawrence River to look for cetaceans. We mainly slept on the campsites in the parks, nearly all of them well equipped.

Train from Gent to Amsterdam, flight Amsterdam – Montréal, where we had hired a car through Avis.

September 18th

We arrived in Montréal at around 5.30 p.m., and by the time we got our car it was already getting dark. We started driving in the direction of the city of Québec, with the intention of stopping at a motel when I got too tired. At around 10 p.m. we started looking for a motel near a little town called Deschembault, during which we saw our first mammals of the trip: a **White-tailed deer** standing close to the road, and a bit later the first **Striped skunk**. While driving, Stefanie also saw two **Woodchuck**, which would strangely enough be the only ones on the whole trip (luckily I already saw this species in Ontario). When we finally found a motel, near the small town of Portneuf, a **Red fox** walked over the parking lot. Not a bad start of the trip!

September 19th

Today we wanted to get to Tadoussac, with a stop at the Cap Tourmente Wildlife Area (C.T.W.A.). On our way to the site, we saw our first roadkills: three **Raccoons**, one **North American porcupine**, two **Red squirrels** and one **Striped skunk**. The C.T.W.A. itself is said to be a good place for American black bear (which we did not see). It was a nice place to have a walk, with already good numbers of Snow geese arriving on their way south. Mammalwise we only saw two **Eastern chipmunks**, and two dead **Northern short-tailed shrews**. Around noon we headed north again (with another dead **Striped skunk**, and also our first alive **Red squirrel**), and upon arriving near the ferry to Tadoussac, Stefanie spotted the first **Minke whale**. By the time we had set up our tent at the Maison des Dunes Campsite it was getting dark.



Northern short-tailed shrew (found dead).

September 20th

A short walk around the campsite resulted in two **Red squirrels** (and a nice flock of migrating songbirds, with a Wilson's warbler as a lifer. We started the day with high expectations at the Pointe d'Ilet from where Beluga's are often seen. Not so this morning, but two very close **Minke whales** certainly made worth our visit. After this we went to Les Escoumins, from where we saw our first **Beluga's**. They were quite distant, but we certainly enjoyed the small groups (three + five + one + five) swimming upriver. From here we also saw one **Minke whale**, three **Grey seals** and 15+ **Harbour porpoises**. A short stop at Les Bergeronnes also resulted in **Minke whale** and **Harbour porpoise**. The day was ended again in Tadoussac, where we had one **Grey** and one **Common seal**, and a dead **unidentified mouse** (see picture below, a jumping mouse?). If someone has an idea, please let me know ☺.



September 21st

Another early wake-up for me, and from the dunes near Tadoussac I immediately saw two **Beluga's** (I also saw a Black-backed woodpecker this morning). Breakfast at Pointe d'Ilet again with two **Minke whales**, after which we went to Les Escoumins for the first of our zodiac trips. I had hoped to see Blue whale here, but unfortunately we had no luck with this species. Highlights of the trip were six **Minke whales** (some of which came very close) and five+ **Grey seals**. Birdwise the flocks of Red-necked phalaropes were nice to see. After the two-hour trip we went to Cap-du-Bon-Désir in order to do some land-based river-watching, resulting in three very close **Minke whales** (they sometimes come very close here, we saw them at less than 30 meters), five **Harbour porpoises** and two **Grey seals** (and an immature Sabine's gull was a good bird). In the woods here we had **Red squirrel** and **Eastern chipmunk**, and also our first Ruffed grouse. Another end of the day in Tadoussac, where we saw three **Beluga's** leaving the fjord (and off course a **Minke whale** was present also).



Minke whale surfacing at Cap-du-Bon-Désir.



Grey seal at Cap-du-Bon-Désir.

September 22nd

Last full day in the area, and it started well with again two groups (six + three) of **Beluga** and a Minke **whale** seen from near the campsite. We then drove to Baie Sainte-Marguerite, another good Beluga-

spot, but with no luck. One **Grey** and one **Common seal**, and lots of **Red squirrel** were seen instead. At noon we again went to Cap-du-Bon-Désir, with again some great observations of **Minke whales** (at least eight different animals were seen), **Harbour porpoise** and **Grey seal**. Our final evening in Tadoussac was spent again at Pointe d'Ilet, and it proved to be the best evening there. First, I spotted a distant whale, of which we thought it would be a Minke again, but when I watched it through the scope, it proved to be nothing else than our first **Humpback whale**! A bit later, several groups of **Beluga** (13 animals in total) were also seen, in the beautiful evening sun, a great end to our stay here. Later this evening, we visited the bird observatory of Tadoussac, where we were lucky to see one Northern saw-whet owl which was caught by the rangers.



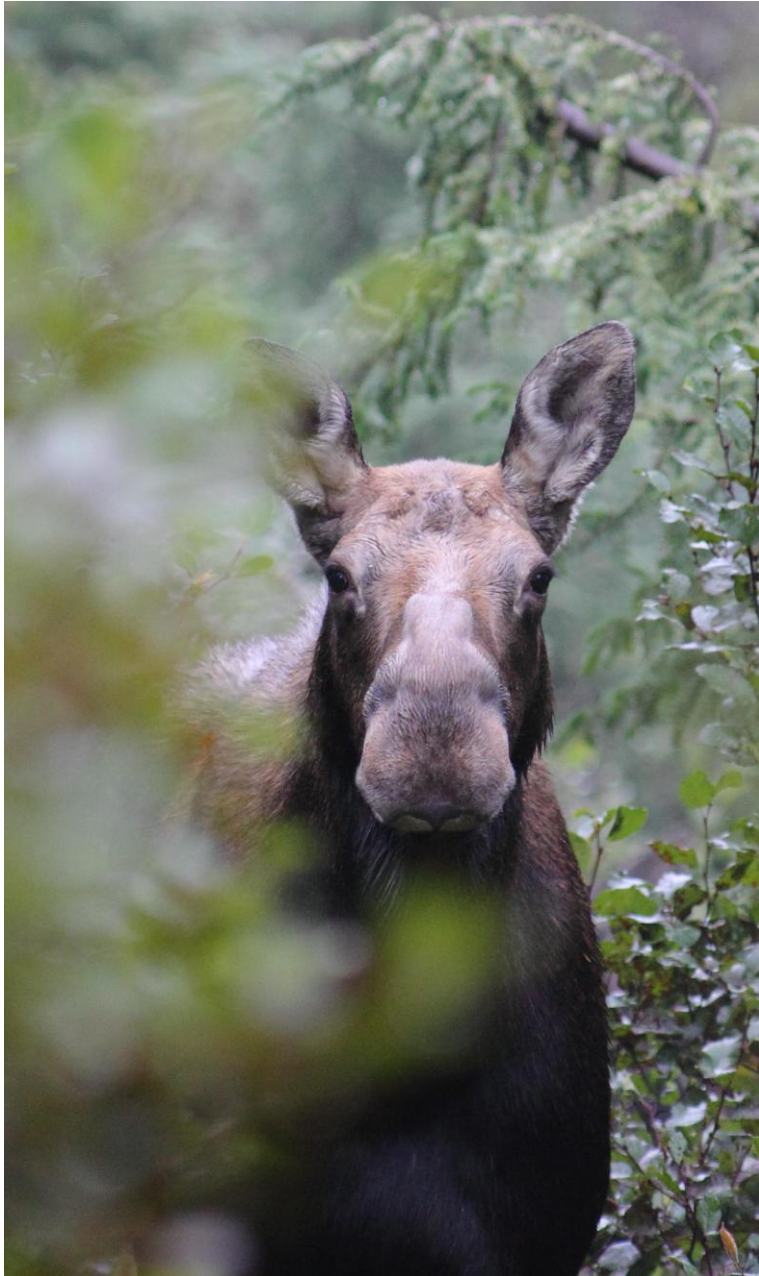
Minke whale at Cap-du-Bon-Désir.

September 23rd

This was mainly a driving and waiting day, since we did not make reservations for the ferry we decided to get there in time. This proved to be a good decision, since we were the last car without reservation that could enter the ferry, the cars behind us had to wait one day, or travel 200 km to get the evening ferry there. Two dead **Striped skunks** were the only mammals seen on the way to Baie-Comeau. Unfortunately it was very misty day (we could not see more than 50 meters during most of the crossing...), so the only mammals we saw during the crossing were a close **Grey seal**, and Stefanie also saw a **Minke whale**. After some food-shopping, we drove to the Parc National de la Gaspésie. It was getting dark when we arrived, so we decided to drive the 40 extra km to the Jacques Cartier Campsite in the hope of seeing some animals. A very nice unpaved road, we saw not a single other car during the drive, and had three sightings of **Moose** (all females, one with her calf). Great night-drive, and when we arrived at the campsite we found it to be totally empty, which gave a nice feeling of being out in the wild.

September 24th

Today we wanted to get to the top of Mount J. Cartier to look for Woodland caribou. There are three isolated groups living in the park, the only ones south of the Saint Lawrence River. Since the first bus to the start of the trail was only at 10 a.m., we drove around a bit first, and did some short walks. This resulted in another three sightings of **Moose**, first a close female + calf on a trail, and next a young male walking on the road. Very nice views of this one. A bit further another – older – male was seen. Good start of the day!



Female **Moose**, P.N. de la Gaspésie.

Also, **Red squirrel** and **Eastern chipmunk** were seen. Then on to the mountain, which was a nice uphill walk, with beautiful weather. When arriving on the top however, a strong wind was blowing, making it very chilly up there. There is an observation tower on the top, a guard was present too, and the last visitors had to leave at about 2.30 p.m. to get the last bus at 4 p.m. We immediately started scanning the tundra-like habitat, and soon found a distant male **Woodland caribou**. Mission accomplished, although it was very distant... A bit later two others were seen, but then it got quiet. After a few hours, just as we were about to leave, presumably the same two animals however crossed the path, allowing great views. Unfortunately there were some idiots who ran straight to the animals to take pictures, so they quickly moved away... Despite this, we were very happy that we had good views of these great animals. Boreal chickadees proved to be quite common in the park too. Night at the campsite near the visitor's centre.



Woodland caribou, Mount Jacques Cartier (P.N. de la Gaspésie).

September 25th

Another full day in the park, which started with breakfast near a lake, from where we heard two **Coyotes** howling. On the trail to Pic de l'Aube we found a dead **Southern red-backed vole**, and a live **bog lemming** (probably Southern bog lemming). Also some unidentified droppings, and off course **Red squirrels**. Best birds of today were two sightings of Spruce grouse (first a male and then a female, both were walking on the trail and could be observed for several minutes), and a Golden eagle.

September 26th

Our last morning in the Parc, we walked the trail up to Mont Albert (North side), where we saw another **Woodland caribou**, belonging to one of the other two groups living in the Parc. On the way down a **Red-backed vole** was seen crossing the track. **Eastern chipmunk** and **Red squirrel** were present in good numbers too, and a very tame Grey jay was a nice lifer. In the afternoon we drove to Parc National de la Forillon, in the hope to see some other mammals (it is said to be the best spot for American black bear in Québec). Night at the only campsite which was still open at this time of year (Camping Des-Rosiers), situated near the water.



Very tame **Red squirrel**, P.N. de la Gaspésie.

September 27th

Early morning drive to Cap Gaspé, where we saw our first **North American porcupines**. Also a **Grey seal** and lots of **Red squirrels** were seen. We wanted to take a boat trip today, but it turned out there were too few people and the water was too rough, so we decided to try again tomorrow. The rest of the day was spent driving around looking for good views of the water, and in the afternoon we did a short walk. Highlights were another **North American porcupine**, **Minke whale** and a **Common seal**, and the good numbers (25+) of Harlequin duck at Cap-Bon-Ami were unexpected. Bear-droppings were everywhere. Late afternoon we went to the parking lot called “Le Castor”, where a parkguide was doing the daily talk about the beavers, followed to a walk to the lake where a family of **American beavers** lives that is used to people. It proved to be a magical evening, with four animals (two adults and two females) seen at very close range, swimming with branches, eating, ... According to our guide we were very lucky, on most nights they see just one or two animals. Afterwards we drove to Cap-Bon-Ami, where we finally saw our first **American black bear**! A **Striped skunk** was walking around here too.



American beaver, P.N. Forillon.

September 28th

Today was to be the day of the whales. Nice weather, almost no wind, perfect conditions! We had breakfast at the picnic area at Cap-Bon-Ami, where we saw another **American black bear** crossing the road, and also a **North American porcupine**. **Grey** and **common seals** were present here too.



Common seals, P.N. Forillon.

The zodiac-trip proved to be very good, several **Harbour porpoises**, **Minke whales** and **Grey seals**, but the highlight was the young **Humpback whale** that we saw very well. It even was a new animal for the identification-catalogue. A truly stunning animal.



Humpback whale surfacing, P.N. Forillon.

After the trip we went to the picnic area at Cap Gaspé, where an **American black bear** was grazing between the tables... Very close views of this one, it was obvious used to being around people. Rest of the day was spent driving and walking again, ending at the eastern tip of the parc, at Cap Gaspé. During the whole day, we had another six **North American porcupines** and one **Eastern chipmunk**. At the tip, we saw a **Minke whale**, and also two **Humpbacks** (mother + calf). On the drive back to the campsite we spotlighted a **Striped skunk**.



North American porcupine, P.N. Forillon.

September 29th

Early breakfast at the Cap Gaspé picnic area, where the **black bear** from yesterday was present again. Also a **porcupine**, **Humpback** and **Minke whale**, **Harbour porpoise** and the two **seal** species were seen, not bad having this for breakfast!



American black bear, P.N. Forillon.

Since the trip yesterday was such fun, we decided to go for another one (I was still hoping to see Blue whales). Upon arriving, it became clear we were the only ones, and since they only go if there are six people, it didn't look to good. However, since the season closed the next day, the staff wanted to go out too, so they did a special trip which we could join. We would be the only tourists, so were treated more like part of the team. Again very nice weather, and the whales were present too. We saw no less than five **Humpbacks**, with close observations of the female and her calf. The female was well known to the team, and was named Quill a few years ago. Also **Minke whales** and **Grey seals** were seen, unfortunately no Blue whales or White-flanked dolphins. But we did not complain, being at sea and observing the Humpbacks was really worth it.



Female **Humpback whale** ("Quill") diving, P.N. Forillon.

While leaving the parc, we saw our only **Snowshoe hare**. The long drive to Par National du Bic was uneventful, with two dead **Striped skunks**. It was already dark when we arrived at the parc, and upon driving to the campsite, we spotlighted two **Red fox**.

September 30th

With only one day here, we walked around all day, seeing two **White-tailed deer** (female + calf), lots of **Red squirrels**, some **Common seals**, a **Red fox** and a dead **Northern short-tailed shrew**.



White-tailed deer, P.N. du Bic.

October 1st

We left early to go to Parc National de la Yamaska for our last day. The weather turned bad by now, and it rained during much of the day. On our way south we saw some **White-tailed deer**, a **Red fox**, and a **Grey seal**, with also two dead **Raccoons**, a dead **Red fox** and a dead **Striped skunk**. We reached Yamaska late afternoon, with heavy rain falling from the sky. Since it was our last evening and Stefanie was keen on seeing a live Raccoon, we drove around some time, but due to the bad weather not much was seen. Three **Woodland jumping mouse** were lifers, and a **Striped skunk** trying to steal our cooking gear was fun.

October 2nd

Last morning in Canada (heavy rain again), on which we saw another **Striped skunk**, four **White-tailed deer**, some **Red squirrels** and **Eastern chipmunks**, and some Raccoon droppings. Early afternoon we drove to Montréal to catch our flight home. It was a great holiday, we were very lucky with the weather and had some great encounters with several mammals and birds. And all of this in the beautiful colours of the Indian summer.

Mammal list

I used the field guide "Mammals of North America" by Kays and Wilson.

1. **Northern short-tailed shrew**: 2 found dead in Cap Tourmente, 1 dead in P.N. du Bic.
2. **Snowshoe hare**: one seen while leaving P.N. Forillon.
3. **North American porcupine**: 1 roadkill near Québec, seen 10 ten times P.N. Forillon.



4. **American beaver:** a family of 4 that is used to people was seen very well in P.N. Forillon.
5. **Woodchuck:** only 2 were seen by Stefanie on the first evening.
6. **Red squirrel:** common everywhere.
7. **Eastern chipmunk:** seen in most places, less often than the previous species.
8. **Woodland jumping mouse:** 3 were seen jumping around in front of the car in P.N. de la Yamaska.
9. **Southern red-backed vole:** 1 found dead in P.N. de la Gaspésie, 1 walking on the trail in the same park.
10. **(Southern) bog lemming:** 1 walking on the trail in P.N. de la Gaspésie.
11. **Coyote:** 2 were heard on a morning in P.N. de la Gaspésie, tracks were found too.
12. **Red fox:** 1 on the first night on the parking of a motel, 3 were seen in P.N. du Bic.
13. **Black bear:** P.N. Forillon proved to be the best spot for this species, with 4 observations.
14. **Raccoon:** only roadkills were seen, also droppings in P.N. de la Yamaska.
15. **Striped skunk:** 1 walking near the road on the first night, several roadkills, 2 during spotlighting in P.N. Forillon, 1 in P.N. de la Yamaska.
16. **Common seal:** several observations near Tadoussac and in P.N. Forillon (less common than the following species), 4 animals in P.N. du Bic.
17. **Grey seal:** common near Tadoussac and in P.N. Forillon.
18. **Woodland caribou:** 3 on the summit of Mount Jacques Cartier and 1 on Mount Albert, all in P.N. de la Gaspésie.
19. **Moose:** 6 observations of 8 animals, all on our first night and morning in P.N. de la Gaspésie.



Male **Moose**, P.N. de la Gaspésie.

20. **White-tailed deer**: 1 standing near the road on the first night, several animals in P.N. du Bic and in/near P.N. de la Yamaska.
21. **Humpback whale**: 1 on our last evening in Tadoussac, 1 on the first zodiac-trip in P.N. Forillon, 2 (mother + calf) the same evening from Cap Gaspé, the same 2 + 3 others on our second zodiac-trip here.
22. **Common minke whale**: very common everywhere in the Saint Lawrence River.
23. **Beluga**: Seen on several occasions near Tadoussac, always in small numbers. Also seen from les Escoumins.
24. **Harbour porpoise**: common near Tadoussac and in P.N. Forillon.

107 species of birds were seen, as well as some butterflies and dragonflies.