

## Greg Easton Quebec Trip Report—Quebec City and Tadoussac: May 8-10, 2024

Work took me to Quebec City in early May, which in hindsight was a bit too early for prime mammal viewing. I took advantage by staying a few extra days. After I booked my airfare I started working out the details but didn't really understand just how limited things would be until I was there in person. I naively figured that driving around rural Quebec for a few days it would be hard not to see moose and maybe even black bear, but I was wrong. The evening my work obligations ended I drove 30 minutes north to Manoir du Lac Delage to get out of town. I passed a few white tail deer in fields in the dying light. The hotel had a classic lake resort/summer camp vibe but I was only there long enough to sleep and not enjoy the other amenities. By 7:00 AM the next morning it had already been light for a couple of hours as I entered Parc Nacional de la Jacques-Cartier. The gate was unoccupied but open so I paid by scanning the QR code. Spring had not yet arrived to Quebec as there was very little green vegetation and only the faintest budding leaves. 10 km into the park I came to a visitor's center and a road closure. So much for spending ½ a day here. Most of the parks were either not yet open due to the "Thaw Season" or were greatly limited. With not a soul around, tourist or park employee, I found one of the few trails that wasn't blocked off, Les Coulees. I made it about 6 miles and two hours in utter solitude before I ran into a few people who had started from the other end of the loop. It was about a perfect hike other than the lack of mammals...just red squirrels and eastern chipmunks. Back at the parking lot after 10 it was starting to get busy and since there weren't many other trails open I hit the road for the Laurentides Wildlife Reserve further north. Once again I didn't have much of a plan. My cell coverage was in and out so I couldn't always use the maps. I selected some dirt roads and spent nearly 4 hours driving through thick forest of primarily black spruce. I encountered snow in a few places that led me to take other routes but I wound through the forest ever hoping to startle something on the road. Other than the power lines there were almost no clearings to speak of. Woodland Caribou was on the top of my target list and I found a number of relatively fresh tracks but not a single mammal. I didn't expect to see large quantities of mammals, but was pretty surprised to see nothing for that long. Near the northern edge of the reserve I tried another dirt road that had a few houses on it. One side of the road was flooded out and I found a beaver's lodge whose resident just happened to be waiting for me to stop. I continued northwest to Alma then headed southeast to Saguenay where I spent the night. Saguenay is a good sized city for its remoteness. Given how early the sun rises that far east, staying in the city was a poor idea to take advantage of the early morning hours.

I left again by 7:00 and wound my way south along the Saguenay River. The Parc Nacional Fjord-du-Saguenay has a number of sectors that aren't geographically connected. The first one I came to was my primary objective for the day and it was closed. I took a number of rural backroads that brought me to the water's edge and offered stunning views of the fjord. I can only imagine how much more spectacular it would be with summer or fall leaves instead of winter's brown. One detour led me to a forested hike to a La Grosse Chute (waterfall) where I saw neither people nor mammals (other than the ubiquitous squirrels). After another side trip ended at the river near Petit-Saguenay I took a turn off past a lowered chain that proved to be for a private campground. As the road climbed I looked up and spotted a porcupine in the top of a barren tree—one upside to the lack of leaves. When I reached the little administrative office there was a playground and some construction noises as a few people conducted maintenance and repairs in an open garage. As I pulled by I was startled to see a gorgeous cross fox sitting on its haunches right next to the building. I was glad I took that detour.



Heading back to the main road I saw 3 more porcupines in the next 20 minutes just after noon! So much for being nocturnal. I had to stop and turn around when I passed a brown object in long grass about 50 yards off the road. The porcupine as it turned out to be ignored me until I got about 10 yards away. At that point he looked up and his quills went erect. It was cool to see the physical change when he was alarmed but I took the hint and gave him some space. I followed the Saguenay to the St. Lawrence where I caught the ferry across the Saguenay to Tadoussac. The tourist village was a bit sleepy in early spring which meant there were actually spots to park even though signs prohibited parking just about everywhere. I walked down to the docks, checked out the dunes up the coast and then checked into my hotel. I asked the manager if there was a good place to look for moose nearby and he said there were a couple that hung out on the hill behind restaurants. A nice boardwalk provided easy access and I was once again alone as the sun began to set. I crossed my fingers but to no avail. At the peninsula below there's a crowded trail that loops out to some rocks on the shore but I didn't have much patience to look for sea mammals knowing I was going out the next morning.





Fortunately there was a single company that offered whale watching out of Tadoussac that early in the season. Belugas inhabit the St. Lawrence year-round but they have a lot of whale company in the summer. Despite being on the fringe of the season I still enjoyed the 2.5 hour Zodiac Cruise from Croisieres AML. They aren't the typical Zodiac as they hold 50+ passengers. I did see some smaller boats in the harbor. They have options on either side of the mouth of the Saguenay River. There is a free, very efficient ferry that runs nearly continuously during the day so it's no big deal to book from Tadoussac on the Northeast shore even though the nearest bridge is an hour away. I took the scenic route through the forest down to the docks and saw a couple of snowshoe hares with their last vestiges of winter white on their feet. We could not have had better weather—bright sunshine, blue skies, not much wind, and temperature nearing 50 degrees. We saw several Fin Whales, one of them reasonably close to the boat and a number of Belugas. Fortunately for the whales the captain closely followed the regulations to not be within 400 yards of the Belugas. With the smooth surface conditions and great visibility we could spot the white forms breaching the surface from what seemed like a mile away. We did have a couple of individual Belugas surface closer than 400 yards but we slowly moved away from them so didn't have great picture opportunities. The seal species in the area also vary by season so we just saw gray and harbor seals, both of which I had seen before. Minke, Blue, and Humpback are also commonly seen during the summer months.



I had booked my flights in and out of Montreal rather than Quebec due to some schedule complications so I had a 6 hour drive ahead. I broke up the trip with a stop at Parc Nacional Hautes-Gorges de la Riviere-Malbaie where I did a short mammal less hike. I did however see a dozen or so woodchucks as I drove southwest. Near Montreal there were signs of summer with green grass and growing leaves. I stopped at the impressive Chute du Montmorency just outside of Quebec. In summary I saw 13 species, but only 1 lifer, the eastern chipmunk. I'd probably seen the chipmunk 20 years ago when I lived in New Hampshire but I wasn't keeping a mammal list at that point.

Mammal List:

Eastern Gray Squirrel (parks in Quebec City)

American Red Squirrel

Eastern Chipmunk

Woodchuck/Groundhog

North American Beaver (1)

North American Porcupine (5)

Snowshoe Hare (3)

White Tailed Deer (6-8)

Red Fox (Cross Phase) (1)

Harbor Seal (5)

Gray Seal (4)

Fin Whale (3)

Beluga (10+)