

Top of the World – Hiking Mount Carleton

By Chris Robinson



Suddenly the forest came to an abrupt halt. There was a stunned silence. And then a five year-old voice whispered, “We really are on top of the world...”

And so it seemed. In all directions the rocky ground fell away from us to reveal a 360 degree panorama of lakes, forest and mountains, all brilliantly clear under a cloudless sky. There was not a mountaintop higher than us anywhere in sight: we were standing on the summit of Mount Carleton in northern New Brunswick: at 820 meters (2700 feet), the highest mountain in all the Maritimes.

It had started when we were planning our family vacation around New Brunswick. Our five and ten year old boys, Timmy and Pip, were mesmerized by the choice of activities and sights to see. After a day which we planned to canoe on the Miramichi River and see the Aquarium and Marine Centre in Shippagen, we booked to stay at Campbellton, followed by a leisurely drive across the top of the province on the Appalachian



Range Route and then down the scenic Saint John River Valley. That's when I carelessly mentioned that we would be passing close to the Maritime's highest mountain. Mistake. Reaching the top of Mount Carleton instantly became the high point of the trip. And here we were...

Mount Carleton Provincial Park is easily the largest Park in the province, with over 17,000 hectares of wilderness, including Lakes Nictau and Nepisiguit. It is part of the Appalachian Mountain Range that stretches 3,200 kilometers down the eastern side of America, but surely nowhere as pretty as here in New Brunswick. There's wildlife aplenty - including bears, moose and deer - great fishing, canoeing, campsites... and memorable hiking.

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From the Information Centre close to the Park entrance, we drove 20 minutes on a good dirt road to the trailhead, packed our picnic and set off excitedly on a gentle and well-marked path through the trees. The round trip hike is around 10 kilometers and took us a little over five hours at a leisurely rate. The first two or three kilometers were full of butterflies and scampering toads which delighted the kids. The sun-speckled forest floor was car-

peted with flowers. A steeper, boulder-strewn slope led to an old cabin where we had our picnic lunch in a leafy glade and Timmy and Pip paddled and cooled down in a nearby forest spring.

The path narrowed and steepened and we hiked at a pace easy enough for five year old legs to accomplish without complaint - indeed, Timmy was leading for much of the way. The path through the trees was idyllic, but gave no hint of the mountain we were climbing until, just beneath the summit itself, the trees stopped dead. A short, steep scramble to the summit ridge...and there was most of New Brunswick spread out beneath our feet.

There's a fire tower atop the peak and great scrambling rocks on the ridge that the boys climbed around with glee and more energy than the adults had to spare. We just drank in the stunning scene all around us and thanked our ambitious off-spring that we had been persuaded to head for the top of the world...at least as far as New Brunswick is concerned.

On our triumphant return via the Ranger Station, the friendly staff assured Timmy that he was the youngest person ever to reach the top of Mount Carleton. They probably say that to all the five year olds. However, to this day, Timmy still glows with pride

about his exploit. And what a memorable way for youngsters to challenge themselves and discover a little-discovered and spectacular corner of New Brunswick.

Travel Notes

Mount Carleton is situated four hours north of Fredericton - a very scenic drive up the Saint John River Valley, with some great sights along the way: King's Landing, a 19th century Loyalist settlement recreation, the Hartland Covered Bridge - the province's longest - and Grand Falls Gorge.

Mount Carleton Natural Resources and the Provincial Park campsites are open May 15 to September 4. To check the status of the trails, information on the Park and campsite bookings phone them in season at 506-235-0793. The Park and the Natural Resources Office in Saint-Quentin are open year round, and you may also phone this office at 506-235-6040. This hike is featured in 'A Hiking Guide to New Brunswick' by M. & H.A. Eiselt, published by Goose Lane.

Insider's tips: Take your time on this hike - the scenery is great and there are several picnic opportunities. Take plenty of water, and then add an extra bottle! Remember mosquito repellent for the woods and binoculars for the summit to make the most of the spectacular views. Ensure you have a full tank of gas before setting out for the Park. And take a chocolate treat to celebrate your conquest of the highest peak in the Maritimes!

