

Big Loop 'Round Algonquin

Riding the RAP Tour and Snow Country

Story and Photos by
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Algonquin Park has a worldwide reputation and mystique. It's an alluring magnet that continues to attract outdoors adventurers, including snowmobilers who make a pilgrimage called the RAP ('Round Algonquin Park) Tour. This is the grand daddy of sledding tours: Ontario's first "signature" loop, officially launched more than a decade ago. The RAP Tour led the way: many other regions have since established their own signature loops. Most of the original RAP markers are long gone now, but this tour lives on as one of Ontario's most popular, enjoyable and doable.

The RAP Tour skirts the fringes of Algonquin Park via TOP (Trans Ontario Provincial) Trails maintained by members of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC). These

premier trails circumnavigate its borders, making Algonquin the hub around which the RAP wheel revolves.

The RAP Tour can be completed in as little as three full days of riding. It can also be accessed from any location on its perimeter, a convenience for snowmobilers coming in from all directions to start their circle ride. For this tour, our crew of Jim Reavell, Don Webb, Dennis Burns, Glenn King and yours truly, chose to launch from the Clarion Resort Pinewood Park in North Bay and ride clockwise — with a few very notable additions...

Riding Snow Country

We wanted to put in six days of snowmobiling, so we took advantage of one of the RAP tour's other assets: its many spokes. These lead to many side

trips that provide riders with the ability to extend their tour beyond RAP's primary trails by sojourning into one or more neighbouring regions for a day or more. Renfrew County, embracing both the Upper Ottawa and Madawaska Valleys, proved to be an outstanding choice for our additional explorations.

The trails throughout what is formally OFSC District 6, better known as "Snow Country", more than fulfilled their promise of smooth sailing. Better yet, the Snow Country trails also provide a remarkable variety of outstanding riding opportunities...on forest access roads, utility corridors, abandoned rail beds, open fields and through lush woodlands. And talk about surprises: much of the interior backcountry between Calabogie and Lake St. Peter is rugged and hilly Canadian Shield with elevations up to



Busy gas stop in Stonecliffe.

RAP Choices

1,500 metres. This rolling topography provided swooping hill and dale style riding as good as any found in Quebec's Laurentians.

We enthused several times that Snow Country offered everything that a touring rider could ask for, from good signage to well-maintained trails, and from accessible services to exceptional lodgings. It's a gem of a region that every rider should experience first hand as soon as possible...and best of all, it's very handy to the majority of Ontario snowmobilers!

For RAP tourers, Snow Country provides several different options for extending your ride. The beauty of its multitude of trail choices is the ability to custom tailor your ride to the length of day or distance you want. Couples may want shorter, more leisurely days, while high milers can snowmobile from dawn to dusk no problem. Being from the latter category, we chose to rack up the kilometres, but you can get to each of

our overnight destinations (see Our Tour Itinerary) by more direct and less time consuming routes if you wish.

Behind the Park from Deux Rivières to Deep River, a series of local trails parallel the main route, TOP Trail A. These less travelled corridors are well worth a try if you have the time. Just remember that with fuel no longer available in Deux Rivières, the first on-trail fill up opportunity after Bonfield (without detouring into Mattawa) is at Stonecliffe (after crossing Hwy 17, turn right on to trail beside 1st road as you arrive in town). West of Petawawa and our next overnight stop at the Best Western Pembroke, another series of local trails also offer sublime riding. All of these local trails are usually in mint condition and many include breath-taking forest access roads.

Our Meanderings

For the normal RAP Tour, riders turn west on TOP B out of Pembroke. With our mission of spending three extra days in Snow Country, we headed south on TOP A over many open and well-staked fields, through Renfrew and Arnprior to Carleton Place (actually in OFSC District 1). I'm going to take a minute to describe our various Snow Country meanderings because anyone trying to track them on a map will immediately think we've gone nuts. But remember, our goal was to see as much of Snow Country as possible and



Snow started when we passed this sign.



Having fun on forest trails.

ride full days without repeating trails... and we did just that!

To reach our ultimate destination at the Calabogie Motor Inn that third night, we looped across from Carleton Place to TOP E on E104A, for sure the worst marked and squiggliest path we rode all tour. At Calabogie, the most direct way to get to town (and our hotel) is across the lake, so be sure to pre-check ice conditions with the hotel before you go.

For more tour extension, we circled southwest from Calabogie and looped overthrough the Mazinaw area and Denbigh. Then we rode through Griffith up to Eganville to catch the rail trail (B101A) west to the Sands on Golden Lake Inn & Resort near Deacon From there, we headed north to TOP B and experienced what may be the most scenic rail trail in Ontario, beside the Madawaska River from Barry's Bay to Whitney. With a few daylight hours left, we turned south on TOP B104E through Lake St. Peter and swung east on TOP E108 towards Combermere before targeting our overnight stay at the High Country Lodge.

Our intention was now to get back on the main RAP route through Haliburton. But Glenn's hand and thumb warmers were acting up, so we looked for a quick fix. That detoured us to the Ski-Doo dealer at Kennisis Lake and riding primarily lake trails. Some were staked and some were not, but all were well tracked. Still, I

would recommend sticking to Haliburton land trails 1, 4 & 16, which I hear may be re-designated next winter for a re-routed TOP B trail. This would be beneficial because as a visitor, I have always had some difficulty weaving my way through Haliburton's RAP route. Before settling in for the night at the Blue Spruce Resort in Muskoka, we also added a few more clicks exploring local trails 65 & 66.

Originally, the RAP Tour followed TOP D trail from near Kearney to North Bay via Powassan. Then several years ago,

that town's misguided municipal council, prompted by a few vociferous snowmobile opponents, blocked all attempts at a TOP trail passage through their community. TOP D has never been the same. So we chose to ride TOP C105D through South River and reconnect to TOP D via local trails NN430 & 440.

If you're okay with lake running, the most direct route back to our final overnighiter at the Travelodge Lakeshore Inn North Bay is to follow the stake line from local trail SSR 710. When you first



Consistently good signage in Snow Country.

Supporting Their Local Club

Many hospitality operators go that extra mile to assist their local snowmobile club. Some, like Scott Hayden, owner of Muskoka's Blue Spruce Resort even serve as club volunteers. But many others simply do their own thing with little connection to their club. So I had to comment upon hearing about new Sands on Golden Lake Inn and Resort owners Jeff Scharf and Jeff Raisbeck.

Since taking over the resort in December 2007, the two Jeff's have accommodated a trail re-route across Golden Lake by investing \$10,000 to move their septic bed. On the landward side, they not only signed land use permission for a new trail location, but also paid for necessary work. They assist their local BonnTrea Snowmobile Club by providing free meeting and event space, and worked



with their club to help secure trail use of an adjoining unopened road allowance from the local municipality. The Sands on Golden Lake houses the club Alpine, used for grooming the lake crossing, and the Jeff's even take grooming shifts! All this, plus they are regular advertisers on the district map and on trail map boards.

Jeff and Jeff are working hard to attract snowmobilers too. When the local gas bar closed, they installed their own fuel tank for sleds. Meanwhile, they have developed attractive snowmobile packages and made their resort more snowmobile friendly overall, including major room renovations (wow!) and a special "Sledder's Lounge".

Sure, all of these moves will help build their own business, but by working with and for their club, they are also building a reservoir of good will throughout the snowmobiling community and rapidly gaining a well-deserved reputation as a must-visit destination.

get to Lake Nipissing, look for the stakes and ice fishing huts...if they are out, the ice is probably good to go, but keep an eye out for pressure cracks, and traffic (sleds and vehicles) going every which way...and stay on the tracked snow. Your landmark is North Bay's blue water tower, which stands near the hotel strip.

More RAP to Come

Encompassing a massive 7,725 square kilometres, Algonquin Park is huge. One result is that the riding areas of 'Round Algonquin Park include a remarkable variety of terrain and a broad range of weather and snow conditions. On our tour, we started in a deep freeze - 30° Celsius, rode a day in mild freezing rain and experienced seasonal winter temperatures too, with oodles of snow. We were impressed by how often, when we thought our riding was fairly remote, we were actually pretty close to a main road or town. This "wilderness near civilization" phenomenon brings riders great peace of mind and means assistance is usually closer than you think. Now add in the multiplicity of alternative trail choices throughout the OFSC RAP districts — 6, 7 & 11 — and you've got an unbeatable recipe for a great snowmobiling adventure, made to measure.

Who to Contact

- Ontario Tourism www.gorideinontario.com or 1-800-ONTARIO
- Ottawa Valley Tourism: www.ottawavalley.org or 1-800-757-6580
- Ontario's Near North www.ontariosnearnorth.on.ca or 1-800-387-0516
- Muskoka Tourism: www.muskoka-tourism.on.ca or 1-800-267-9700
- Snow Country Snowmobile Association (District 6) www.snowcountryscsa.ca
- Near North Trails Association (District 11) www.nnta.net
- Muskoka Snowmobile Region (District 7) www.msrsnowtrails.com

Maps Needed

(In order of tour use)

- OFSC TOP Trail Guide
- OFSC District 11 (Near North Trails Association)
- OFSC District 6 (Snow Country Renfrew and Haliburton Counties)
- OFSC District 1 (Eastern Ontario)
- Haliburton County Snowmobile Association
- OFSC District 7 (Muskoka)

Our Tour Itinerary

Total distance: 1,609 kilometres. Total fuel cost for 2009 Ski-Doo GSX 600 H.O. ETEC: \$211.43. Total litres of oil consumed: 5.5 (293 km/l).

Notes: Toll free phone numbers are included only when they connect directly to the hotel (as opposed to an off site reservation system). TOP = Trans Ontario Provincial; Local Trail = LT

Starting 2009, these three OFSC districts are launching a renewed promotion of the RAP Tour. New RAP markers will designate the primary RAP trails. New trail kiosks will help guide visitors. The RAP Tour will gain prominence on the district maps and be promoted at snowmobile shows. Who knows, some enterprising hospitality operators may even partner to provide RAP snowmobiling packages! But whatever new marketing efforts may happen, one thing's for sure: when you ride these trails, you'll be grinning from ear to ear, because the RAP Tour is putting Ontario's best foot forward!

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DAY ONE: Trailer to North Bay (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: 4 - 5 hours; take Lakeshore Drive exit off Hwy 11 northbound, then left at 1st lights on to Pinewood Park to hotel)

Where We Stayed: Clarion Resort Pinewood Park (#9 on 2009 District 11 map) 1-800-461-9592 or www.clarionresortpinewoodpark.com Very popular with snowmobilers for tour staging, this full service hotel has an on site restaurant (breakfast, lunch and dinner), plus bar, indoor pool, whirlpool, sauna & health spa with massage services. Computer available in lobby to check trail conditions. Ample parking for trucks & trailers. Secure sled compound. Direct trail access either via LT NS 301 from TOP D or from Lake Nipissing stake line. Fuel & convenience store across the road. Best rooms for snowmobilers: those numbered 235 and higher are ground floor near rear exit door.

DAY TWO: North Bay to Pembroke (about 8 hrs.) Ride 300 km via TOP D south/TOP A102D east/TOP A east to LT 121 (use District 11 region map to Mattawa and District 6 map from there). Top notch riding on forest access roads and utility corridors. Fuel Stops: Stonecliffe, Pembroke. Lunch: Deux Rivières

Where We Stayed: Best Western Pembroke Inn (#35 on 2009 District 6 map) 1-800-567-5475 or www.bestwesternpembroke.com. Located across road from LT 121 off TOP A, this full service hotel caters to sledders with an on site bar, pool, hot tub and fitness centre, with massage services available. Great food served at on site **Westwinds Restaurant** (breakfast, lunch and dinner): check out their incredible Saturday and Sunday evening buffets! Fuel and convenience store across the road. Ample parking for sleds at front entrance or at rear exit. Best rooms for snowmobilers: those numbered 235 to 241 are ground floor near rear exit door.

DAY THREE: Pembroke to Calabogie (about 9 hrs.) Ride 300 km via TOP A south/TOP E104A west/TOP E north (maps: use District 6 to Renfrew, then District 1). Lots of open fields and unopened road allowances for primo trail riding. Fuel Stops: Renfrew, Calabogie. Lunch: no restaurants marked on trails after Arnprior.

Where We Stayed: Calabogie Motor Inn 613-752-2468 or www.calabogiemotorinn.ca. Modern 11-unit motel is comfortable, clean and complete with all the amenities, plus sled parking right in front of your room. Located across the road from TOP E and beside **Murphy's Landing** restaurant and bar where the eats (lunch and dinner) are top notch for hungry sledders. For a scrumptious, home cooked breakfast, don't miss **Pollie's Little Shanty** (take TOP E left from motel, then 1st street to the right and next left to main intersection; Pollie's is on your right.) Fuel is located about a kilometre east of motel on TOP E trail, past the intersection of TOP E102.

DAY FOUR: Calabogie to Deacon (about 9 hrs.) Ride 276 km via TOP E south & west/TOP E101 north/TOP E102 north/TOP B101A west. Use District 6 map. Many winding and hilly forest trails and some amazing forest access roads too! Fuel Stops: Denbigh (from trail off lake, turn right on Hwy 41 for about .5 km), Deacon. Lunch: Swiss Inn, Denbigh. Mandatory Butter Tart stop: Pine Valley Restaurant, Griffith.

Where We Stayed: Sands on Golden Lake Inn & Resort (#18 on 2009 District 6 map) 1-800-565-2520 or www.sandsongoldenlake.com. This very hospitable hotel really caters to sledders (see side bar) and offers exceptionally well-appointed and very large rooms. Ask for ground floor to park in front of your door. Great food at the restaurant (breakfast, lunch and dinner), plus "Sledder's Lounge" and fuel on site. TOP B101A goes directly through hotel property.

DAY FIVE: Deacon to (south of) Madawaska (about 7 hrs.) Ride 240 km via TOP B101A north/TOP B west/TOP B106A south/TOP E109 east/LT 173 north. Use District 6 map. Scenic forest trails plus rail trail along Madawaska River. Fuel Stops: Whitney, High Country Lodge. Mandatory Lunch Stop: The Mad Musher, Whitney (best burgers around!)

Where We Stayed: High Country Lodge (#30 on 2009 District 6 map) 613-637-5278 or www.highcountrylodge.ca. Rustic and homey comfort in a highlands wilderness setting located directly south of Madawaska. Wood walled main lodge

has family style restaurant, bar and living room area with TV and pool table. Personalized service and home cooked meals, plus on site fuel and an indoor fix it garage. Direct trail access from LT 173.

DAY SIX: Madawaska to Oxtongue Lake near Dwight (about 9 hrs.) Ride 268 km via LT 173/TOP B106E south/TOP E109 west/TOP E west/TOP B north/LT's 11 west, 16 north & 64 west/TOP D101B north/LT's 65, 66 & 65/TOP D101B north/LT 74. Use District 6 map, then Haliburton County Snowmobile Association and District 7. First major lake running on LT 11. Fuel Stops: Kennisis Lake, Oxtongue Lake. Lunch: The Cookhouse, Haliburton Forest Reserve, Kennisis Lake.

Where We Stayed: Blue Spruce Resort (#34 on District 7 map) 705-635-2330 or www.bluespruceresort.com. Follow stake line across Oxtongue Lake for fuel, then go back onto the lake and turn left along the same shore about ½ km to hotel. Variety of fully equipped and spacious housekeeping choices from cottages to studios and suites, with sled parking in front. The restaurant at the **Algonquin Lakeside Inn**, directly across the lake by sled, offers a tasteful and cozy restaurant with mouth-watering food and a great little bar.

DAY SEVEN: Dwight to North Bay (about 7 hrs.) Ride 225 km via LT 74/TOP D101B north/TOP D north/TOP C105D west/NN430 north/NN440 north/TOPD north/SSR 700 & 710 north. Somewhat convoluted route due to closure of TOP D trail at Powassan still gets you to North Bay with time to spare. Fuel Stops: South River. Lunch: Antonio's Grill, South River.

Where We Stayed: Travelodge Lakeshore Inn 1-866-578-7171 or www.travelodgenorthbay.com. Accessible from TOP D via NS 309 and then the stake line that parallels the eastern shore of Lake Nipissing. Full service hotel with computer available in lobby to check trail conditions. Ample parking. Ask for room number 140 or higher to be close to rear exit and best sled parking. No restaurant, but offering a good continental breakfast and room service from East Side Mario's can be charged to your room for dinner.

DAY EIGHT: trailer home