

Seeking Fundy's Wild Side

By Lisa K Harris

A Family Adventure at Fundy National Park in New Brunswick Includes Hiking, Sea Kayaking and Rappelling



Lyda Harris, Ava Galbraith and Lisa Harris kayaking along the Bay of Fundy Coast, New Brunswick.
Photo courtesy Fresh Air Adventure Kayaks

A large head turned toward me and our eyes met.

A moose. Its stubby ears flicked and water dripped from its mouth. After a few frozen-in-time seconds, it resumed chewing the plant it had ripped from the brackish water. I reached for my camera, but the motion of my arm startled it, and the moose lumbered into the trees, and out of sight.

I was in Fundy National Park, New Brunswick, Canada, hiking the Caribou Plain Trail. The park protects coastal forests and several miles of the Bay of Fundy. This area is best known for its huge tidal swings, where the difference between low and high tide can reach as much as 33 feet at the park's beaches and fifty feet at the narrowest point of the bay in Truro, Nova Scotia.

I am a wildlife biologist who lives in the Arizona desert, where there are no lush forests, beaches, or massive dark animals. I dragged my daughters — Ava, age 4 and Lyda, age 15 — across four time zones to see a moose and explore the bay, where at low tide the lobster boats rest in mud. Too bad I couldn't obtain proof of my beastly accomplishment.

Hiking across a bog

We followed the trail across a boardwalk made of narrow wooden planks. Interpretive signs warned us not to leave the walkway for fear of sinking into the peat; the placards tell of drowned moose. I cautioned my daughters to stay away from the walkway's edge. If the bog could swallow a moose, a four-year-old could easily slip under the brown goop. Neither believed me, and both poked sticks into the muck. After the spongy sphagnum moss swallowed their sticks, they agreed to stay in the middle of the flat walkway.

I was relieved when we entered the forest again. Our boots crunched on spruce needles and the forest smelled like Christmas. The trail skirted a beaver pond. Barren, dead tree trunks stood in the middle of the water, like the masts of sunken sailboats. A beaver lodge, a jumble of sticks with teeth marks visible at each end where the beavers gnawed the wood, was on the opposite bank. The water's surface was still except for darting dragonflies.

Attack of the black flies

We spotted beaver when we canoed Bennett Lake. At dusk

we rented a canoe from a park concession. Tiny black flies swirled about our heads as we pushed off from the postage stamp-sized dock. In between strokes of my paddles I swatted the insects from my face. The park ranger told us they would disappear once we were on the water.

He was right. By the time we paddled past several tiny islands, the flies were gone. At the end of the crooked-finger-shaped lake we found a beaver dam, a ribbon of gnawed sticks. Lyda and I hauled the canoe over the dam to a smaller pond with a beaver lodge. Frogs croaked and insects hummed as we explored. We steadied the canoe and I took photos of the lodge and dam while we waited in the reeds for a head to bob to the surface.

Our beaver stalking was interrupted by a fly invasion. I noticed drops of blood on my Nikon camera. My arm bled. I looked at my daughters. Both had gashes on their faces. We quickly hauled the canoe over the dam and paddled hell bent for leather towards the dock and away from the pests.

As we approached the boat rental concession, a beaver lumbered onto the shore and nibbled on a laurel bush. We did not watch long, as the flies soon swarmed us.

Swimming in ammonia

Dawn found me searching for relief from my itching-like-mad bites at one of the two stores in Alma, a small town (year-round population 250) at the doorstep of the park. I asked for calamine lotion. The clerk shook his head. I showed him my bites and he winced. Another patron, a salty old man, a fisherman from the smell of his clothing, suggested I put heat balm on my welts.

"Works for me," he said in a thick accent.

The clerk nodded and handed me a tube: "Try this instead." It was ammonia packaged in a pen, the applicator especially designed for this situation. Both Lyda and I squealed when we dabbed the ammonia on our open sores. Luckily, Ava had escaped with only a handful of bites, which miraculously did not itch.

I drove north along New Brunswick's scenic highway 915 to Cape Enrage in a cloud of ammonia, periodically squirting the liquid on my wounds. The narrow two-lane road wove its way past weather-worn one-room schools and churches. Bleached driftwood littered the beaches and tall grass waved in the breeze. The tide was out and acres of sandy beach had been added to the shoreline.

Cape Enrage

The road climbed the hill to Cape Enrage, the home of Cape Enrage Adventures, an outdoor activity program run by high-school and college-age students, featuring rappelling, rock-climbing, kayaking, caving, and a challenge course.

The setting took my mind off the itching. Lobster boats plied the greenish-gray waters, and forested

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Lobster boats at low tide at the Marina, Alma, New Brunswick. Photo by Lisa K. Harris

Nova Scotia was visible across the bay. The lighthouse-keeper's house, white with red trim, stood as a beacon against the surrounding spruce and aspen forest. The students had converted it to a lunchroom where they served tea, dessert, and light meals. A working lighthouse, dating from the 1850s, sat on a nearby rocky outcrop. From a distance, the squat structure, painted to match the house, looked like a troll protecting its domain. To give a sense of reality to this charming setting, large signs warned that the fog horn could damage hearing. An hour later, after a whirlwind lesson, I found myself in a harness dangling 130 feet above the boulder-strewn beach, rappelling Cape Enrage's cliff. Lyda hung next to me, bouncing from one point of the rock face to another, carefree and unafraid. One of the high-school-aged employees had agreed to watch Ava, while I focused on not falling.

Dangling from a rope



Rappelling at Cape Enrage, New Brunswick.
Photo by Lyda S. Harris

I'm scared of heights. Not just sweaty-palmed, "oh-woe is me" scared, but heart-pounding, breath-seizing scared, the type of fright that affects my ability to think clearly.

I took a bunny hop, my third from the top, and realized that as long as I focused on the rock in front of me, the rock that my feet touched, my breathing and heart rate approached normal. I also knew if I dared looked at the platform or at the beach, I was a goner. They'd have to haul me up or down, and Lyda would never let me forget my frozen moment. I could almost hear her voice ricocheting in my head, "Do you remember that time at Cape Enrage where you lost it and couldn't even navigate a simple rock face?" as in, "How stupid can you be?"

I took another step. The rock flaked easily and pieces fell to the beach below. I stared at the wall, let out

some line, and took another step. One step after another, I literally "walked" the cliff, until the cliff face disappeared and I was suspended in the space below an overhang.

"This is so cool," Lyda said, reaching the dead space. She turned herself upside down on the rope, her legs pointing towards the platform and her head towards the beach.

"This is not cool," I thought. My pulse rate zoomed and my brain locked. Somehow, through my wall of fear, I recalled my instructor saying, "Don't freeze at the overhang. Continue to let the rope out slowly." At this moment I was amazed I could remember anything from our instructional session, let alone the correct direction.

I let the rope slide through my right hand, more quickly than I should have. I could feel the heat generated by the friction through my thick leather gloves. I sailed towards the ground, past my daughter, who continued to do flips in mid-air. I landed on the rocky beach and realized I had held my breath for the final descent.

Lyda bounced to the ground. "You did it," she beamed, giving me a high five and a hug. She ran towards the stairs leading to the top of the cliff. "Let's do it again," she yelled over her shoulder.

Kayaking the coast

My bites were still driving me crazy and I reeked of ammonia the next day. I hoped that paddling would keep my hands occupied. We rented kayaks for half the day, and along with another family and a guide, we explored the coast.

The water was smooth as glass, the day bright, sunny and warm, a rare springtime day for this far north. Our three-person kayak glided past large granite boulders, darkened from knotwrack, a type of seaweed with olive-colored grape-sized bladders. The plant grew halfway up the cliff face, reminding us of the huge tide fluctuations in the area.

We paddled south, past balsam, fir, spruce, and sugar maple that covered the rolling hills like a vibrant green crazy quilt. A puffin bobbed nearby. Its distinctive white head and orange beak stood out against the dark waters. In another month or so, the bay would be

home to eight species of whales, including right and humpback.

We paddled to a beach nestled among large Volkswagen-sized boulders darkened by knotwrack and only accessible by boat. Sheer cliffs towered over our heads. The kids explored a cave whose walls were covered with damp seaweed, muscles, and snails. Obviously, it would fill with water when the tide shifted.

You eat this?

Our guide spread snacks on a granite slab — fresh cantaloupe, trail mix, and huge sticky buns fresh from Kelly's Bakery in Alma. He passed a bag full of red seaweed, called dulse, a local favorite. Ava refused, preferring the last sticky bun. Lyda, more of a culinary risk taker than her younger sister, tried the dried seaweed. After a few nibbles, she grimaced and spat it out. I selected



One room school house, Bay of Fundy, New Brunswick.
Photo by Lisa K. Harris

a medium-sized piece. It tasted like the outer portion of a sushi roll, except saltier and chewier. Definitely an acquired taste.

It was time to return. The tide was coming in. I looked at the seaweed clinging to the rocks, high over my head, and made a mental note to take extra caution while beach combing.

In the water, the tide moved faster than I had realized. Without putting much effort into paddling, the shoreline slipped past. The wind picked up, and with each dip of our paddles a fine spray dampened us. Ava complained. In the middle of the kayak, she sat close to the waterline and her jacket was drenched. She hastened us forward to dry land and a change of clothes. Each time Lyda or I halted to enjoy the ride or retrieve a camera from a dry bag, she commanded us to paddle.

Lobster boats returned with the tide, too. They lined up along the channel markers delineating the deepest area, and headed home

toward the tiny marina and wharf.

We beached our kayak on the rocky shore near the park's parking lot. As we threw our gear into the company pick up truck, we startled a woodchuck that dove for cover between two rocks. Our journey over, a crow flew above our heads and cawed. It dipped its wings, as if to say, "Come again."

Lisa K. Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.



Helpful Links

General

Fundy National Park: pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nb/fundy/index_E.asp

Village of Alma:

fundyweb.com/fundy/alma
Cape Enrage Adventures: capenrage.com

Kayak Rentals

Freshairadventure: freshairadventure.com

Accommodations

Cliff Side Suites: cliffsidesuites.com

An Artist's Garden Bed and Breakfast: anartistsgarden.com

Fundy Park Chalets: fundyparkchalets.com

Park Land Village Inn: parklandvillageinn.com

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