


CAPE BRETON HIGHLANDS REGION



11. Cape Smokey Provincial Park


←---→ 11 km (6.9 mi) return

: 3+ hrs

: 3

Type of Trail: natural surface

Uses: walking, snowshoeing

: Animals. Cliffs. Expect variable weather conditions. The French name, Cape Enfumé, was given because

of the clouds that always seemed to cling to these slopes. High winds are common; be prepared for rapid weather changes

: Good reception throughout

Facilities: benches, garbage cans, outhouses, picnic tables

Gov't Topo Map: 11K09 (Ingonish)

Trailhead GPS: N 46° 35' 37.3" W 60° 22' 49.1"

Access: From Exit 11 on Highway 105, turn onto the Cabot Trail and follow it for 60.5 km (37.8 mi) to the top of what is probably the most famous hill on Cape Breton Island. A sign directs you to the right into the picnic park toward the shoreline. The trail starts at the north side of the parking lot, 500 m/yd from the highway, where there is a trellis, on which is fastened informational signage and a map.

Introduction: Most people's memory of the Cabot Trail includes Smokey Mountain. Perhaps it is the exceptionally steep drive to the summit, or maybe it is the panorama of the Atlantic Ocean spreading out beyond and below as you ascend. Possibly it is the bird's-eye view of the coastline of Wreck Cove, Birch Plain, and Skir Dhu stretching southwards until lost in the mists. Whatever the reason, a

mention of its name usually evokes an excited comment.

The picnic park is opposite the road's highest point and perched on the edge of the shoreline cliff. The communities of Glace Bay, New Waterford, and Sydney Mines are visible on clear days, despite being more than 50 km (31 mi) distant, and the towering smokestacks of the coal-fired electric generator at Point Aconi are unmistakable.

Picnic tables and outhouses are located beside the parking lot, and most people walk no further than the nearest empty bench to admire the view. But if you want an interesting hike, and the chance for different vistas, move toward the trailhead.

Route Description: The path begins with a well-defined crushed stone base for a narrow, single-person footpath. At



Cape Breton Highlands

The Highlands is unlike any other part of Cape Breton Island. It contains the oldest rocks in the Atlantic region, about 1.2 billion years old. Numerous fault lines have defined the steep sides of its hills and the drainage of many streams. The region's weather is the harshest in the province, noted for long, cold winters and short, cool summers. More precipitation, approximately 1,600 mm (63 in), falls here than anywhere else in Nova Scotia, and its annual snowfall, usually in the range of 400 cm (13 ft), covers the ground until late April or early May.

The communities in the Highlands are usually found along the coastline, and very few roads penetrate the interior hills. Although the original settlers in the early 1800s, many of whom were Scottish, attempted to raise crops or sheep, most soils are marginal, and their farms have almost all been abandoned.

the beginning of the hike only a few scrawny birch and cherry trees provide protection from the wind. Fires devastated most of Cape Smokey in the 1940s, and the poor soil and exposed location have made regrowth slow and patchy.

The rocks here date from the late Ordovician period of 450 million years ago (give or take), and although traces of sandstone overlay may still be found on the north-side incline, most has long since eroded away. As in most granite districts, especially those with frequent high winds, only a thin layer of soil has gathered in hollows and protected

spots, resulting in limited vegetation and poor drainage.

Less than 200 m/yd from the trail-head, a path splits right and leads 350 m/yd to the lookoff. It is worthwhile exploring because of superb sights to the north and south, and of the rugged coastline at the foot of the cliff. When you return to the main trail junction, you will have walked nearly 1 km (0.6 mi); turn right, as the footpath curves back toward the highway, gradually descending.

The trail, in fact, almost reaches the highway about 500 m/yd later. But it curves sharply right, crosses a railed wooden bridge over a tiny stream, then drops down the increasingly

steep hillside. Partway down, you will see a sign stating: “1 km of 5 km.”

The trail descends rapidly into a fairly open barren, where there are frequent wet areas and numerous boardwalks that somehow never quite seem to traverse all the soggy ground. Shortly thereafter you enter a thick birch forest, where I saw one of the first red metal route markers. You reach perhaps the lowest point of the hike at about 1.75 km (1.1 mi), where a bench may be found overlooking a bridge crossing a small brook.

Climbing out of this lower, sheltered area, you come to a lookoff on your right, at the cliff edge above open terrain. This is the first of several



similar lookoffs along the ridgetop, all with magnificent views and most containing benches. Climbing 90 m (300 ft) over the next 1.5 km (0.9 mi), the trail continues through areas once devastated by fire but now regenerating. In areas where there are no tall trees, the red rectangular markers designating the path are mounted at the top of stakes positioned beside the trail. Yellow markers affixed on the other side indicate the return route.

You continue over the top of Cape Smokey, barely 30 m (100 ft) higher than the trailhead. Expect to find fresh moose scat, and notice how the moose's browsing has damaged many of the trees. Look for evidence of bobcat and coyote, as well as their

dinner, snowshoe hare. The vegetation along the top is far more rugged than on the protected slopes.

The final kilometre (0.6 mi) of the trail descends about 90 m (300 ft) to the Stanley Point lookoff, facing South Bay Ingonish. You are near the headland of Cape Smokey, as the sound of the buoy off Stanley Point indicates. The trees along this final section are far healthier than any you have passed on this hike. A two-hundred-year-old yellow birch helps you visualize what the original forest of birch, spruce, and fir must have looked like.

Your view is north and west toward new sights. Keltic Lodge, one of Nova Scotia's most famous resorts, gleams white against the greens of Middle Head, the thin peninsula bisecting the huge bay. Ingonish Beach, more than 2 km (1.25 mi) long, draws a golden line to your left dividing land and sea. The hills of Cape Breton Highlands National Park range to your left. Be sure to stay behind the barrier: it is situated just above a 180 m (600 ft) cliff. Lean on the railing, take a few photographs, and prepare for the hike back, returning the route you hiked in on.

Hypothermia

Teeth chattering? Shivering uncontrollably? Hands numb? You may be entering Stage 1 Hypothermia, and in danger.



Hypothermia is a condition in which a person's temperature drops below that required for normal metabolism and bodily functions, and it can happen in spring and fall as well as winter. If you experience these symptoms, end your hike immediately. If you are far away from the trailhead, a mildly hypothermic person can be effectively re-warmed through close body contact and by drinking warm, sweet liquids.



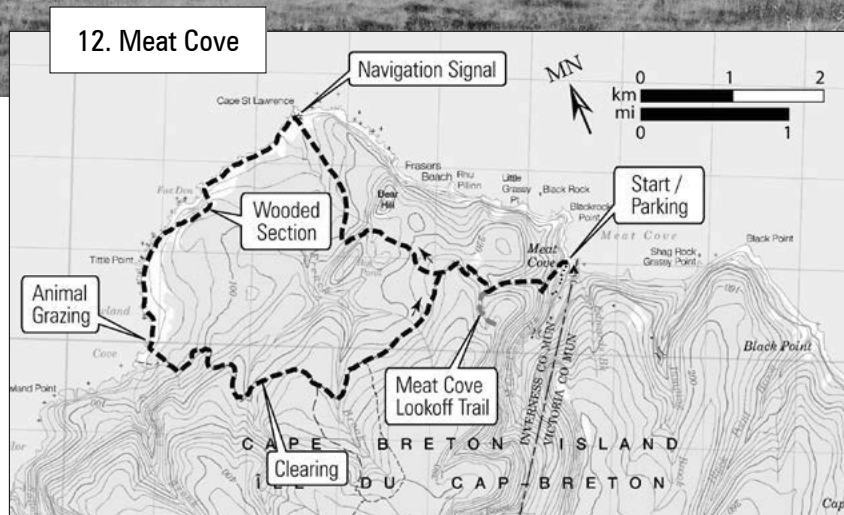
Gulls

On any stretch of coastline in Cape Breton you will find “sea” gulls. Their harsh, laughing call is as familiar as the sound of the waves. Did you know, however, that at least ten species of gull live in or regularly visit this province, and that “sea” gull is merely a convenient catch-all name?

The most common species are the herring gull, identified by pale grey wings with black tips, white body, and flesh-coloured legs, and the great black-backed gull, very large with dark slate-coloured back and upper surface of wings. Dirty-looking brown-and-white birds are immature gulls, which do not reach full adulthood for three or four years.


Gulls have increased dramatically in number in recent decades and are now breeding and scavenging far inland. They are valuable as aggressive scavengers, living on the remains of fish and other garbage that washes into the ocean.






12. Meat Cove


←---→ 16 km (10 mi) return

: 5+ hrs

: 4 [distance, elevation change]

Type of Trail: natural surface, compacted earth

Uses: walking, biking, horseback riding, ATVing, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling

: Animals. Rugged terrain. Hunting is permitted in season

: None

Facilities: camping, outhouses, tables, water

Gov't Topo Map: 11N02 (Cape St. Lawrence)

Trailhead GPS: N 47° 01' 35.2" W 60° 33' 33.3"

Access: Turn off the Cabot Trail at Cape North Village onto the Bay St. Lawrence Road. At 15.5 km (9.75 mi), turn sharply left onto the Meat Cove Road, which is paved for the first 6 km (3.75 mi), but for the last 7 km (4.4 mi) is a narrow dirt road. Follow it to the Meat Cove Campground, and park there.

Introduction: If Nova Scotia has any community that looks like an alpine village, it is Meat Cove. Situated near the extreme northern tip of Cape Breton Island, the road literally ends here, the dirt track from Bay St. Lawrence hugging steep hillsides above sheer coastal cliffs until it drops into the deep ravine carved by Meat Cove Brook. This appears to be a trail at the end of the earth, and it is as remote as it seems.

Meat Cove earned its name in the

late 1700s, when the stench of slaughtered moose caused complaints from passing ships. There are numerous hiking options available near the community; the one I am describing was profiled originally in *Walk Cape Breton*, published in 1975. The Cape St. Lawrence-Lowland Cove Loop can be a challenging one-day trek, or undertaken as a more relaxed two-day campout.

Route Description: Start uphill along a continuation of the Meat Cove Road behind the campground's picnic site. There is no trailhead signage. Just before reaching the last house, there is a continuation of the old road, suitable now only to ATVs, to the right. Expect a challenging climb as this track gains more than 200 m/yd in the first kilometre (0.6 mi), where the trail turns sharply right and crosses a creek. The

Meat Cove Lookoff Trail separates to the left and continues to follow the stream. The main trail curves right, climbing somewhat more gently, until it reaches a field where there is a cattle corral. Immediately afterward the path switches back and forth up the hillside, crests, then starts downhill. At 2 km (1.25 mi), you reach the junction with the Cape St. Lawrence Trail; there should be flagging tape and a handwritten sign. Turn right and follow this track downhill.

For the first time larger trees provide cover overhead, although in the spring and fall you should gain views of both the ocean and Bear Hill, to your right. While there is still room for two to walk alongside one another, the woods crowd this path more closely. After about 1 km (0.6 mi), just after passing a small pond on your left, the trail cuts left sharply, crosses a small brook, and plunges down the exceptionally steep and rocky slope for the next 250 m/ yd. After that, the descent is gentler for the next 1.5 km (0.9 mi), working through thick forest until the trees suddenly end, revealing the grassy coastline of Cape St. Lawrence. The tip of the point is littered with ruins of former lighthouse buildings; today there is only a small, automated signal. To the right, on a clear day, you can see St. Paul Island, the northernmost place in Nova Scotia.

From the lighthouse ruins, continue left along the open shoreline. There is no signage, but the area has long been used as a free range for cattle and ATVs, and both have created well-defined paths. The small, deep gully cut by French Brook is a popular camping site, providing shelter from the restless winds, but as there is no bridge, it may require fording. Continue past the brook, walking on the grassy slope for another kilometre (0.6 mi) to the Fox Den, a rocky, cliff-lined gorge. The trail turns sharply left and navigates around this obstacle by heading into the thick white spruce behind the cliffs. There are a few metal markers and flagging tape, but it is easy to lose the trail in the dense vegetation. Fortunately, this interior bypass is barely 300 m/ yd long before you emerge once again onto a grass and rock-covered hillside.

The path drops down the slope, heading to rugged Tittle Point. As you advance this final 1 km (0.6 mi), the breathtaking beauty of Lowland Cove gradually reveals itself. Forested hills loom over the grassy fields, creating a sheltered bowl wonderful for camping. In summer, horses and cows graze on the tough grasses clinging to the gentle slopes. The best location for an overnight is at the far end of the cove close by a small hollow near Lowland Brook; beyond that is the vertical barrier of Lowland Point.



To return, look for rather unconventional signage: float balloons usually used to mark lobster traps. A road—Meat Cove Road, in fact—may be found over the hillside behind the open ground of Lowland Cove. If you choose the inland route, expect wet conditions for the first few hundred metres/yards, followed by steep climbing, more than 200 m/yd in the next 1.5 km (0.9 mi). Nearly 2 km (1.25 mi) from Lowland Cove, you cross two brooks, then climb into a clearing that until recently was farmed.

From here, the climb continues, but more gently, as the trail curves its

way around the hillside on your right. There are several ATV trails, mostly joining from the right, but continue straight. About 1 km (0.6 mi) from the field, the trail drops into the deep gorge of French Brook, where this time there is a bridge. The path turns left; it continues, gently climbing, for the last 2 km (1.25 mi) to the junction with the Cape St. Lawrence Trail.

Retrace your initial 2 km (1.25 mi) to return to the trailhead. Trekking downhill into Meat Cove reveals more magnificent views of cliffs and ocean and the end to a hike you should not soon forget.