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On A Wild Moose Chase 22/MAY/2008 A romp through the bogs of Newfoundland

I think that Ed English is a man who is not fazed by anything – except perhaps the fact that he could not conjure me up a moose.

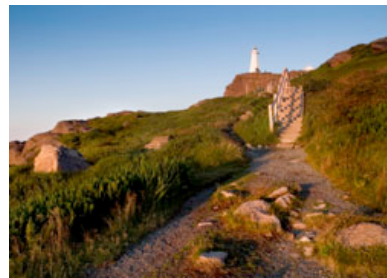
English runs Explore Newfoundland – a guiding company – and his stomping ground is prime moose country: the western arm of Newfoundland. To hear the locals tell it, there should be a moose behind every tree and around every bend on the trail.

"We saw 52 moose on this stretch of highway last week," dangled English as we turned onto Highway 430, The Viking Trail that heads north from Deer Lake through Gros Morne National Park to the historic Norse settlement in the small cove of L'Anse aux Meadows.



I took this as a guarantee of a sighting. "No guarantees," clarified the chatty guide when I explained my dire necessity to see many moose. "But I can show you my freezer." (A friend later points out to me that every second freezer in Newfoundland is bursting with wrapped moose meat.)

With a genie-in-a-bottle philosophy to guiding, English's trademark response to every customer's wish list is simply "Sure, we can do that." Anywhere else in the world there would be extensive scheduling, maps, routes, an itinerary and, quite possibly, a long waiver form. But this is Newfoundland, and they do things just a little bit differently here. Ed English will make it happen.



We were hitting the roadways to travel through Gros Morne National Park – one of Canada's UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Wheeling north along the land's edge, English explained the Newfoundlanders' quirky sense of direction. "One thing that you need to understand here is that north is down – so driving north along the coastline, we are actually driving down the coast." Apparently this makes perfect sense to all of the province's

residents, whose seafaring instincts lead them to describe direction in terms of the prevailing winds. With the predominantly southwest summer breeze, you sail downwind in order to head north.

I just nod my head. Sure Ed, whatever you say. Bring on the moose.

This does not turn out to be as simple an achievement as first advertised. There are moose tracks spinning off in every direction – but no moose in sight. English relents, falls back on a little biology lesson and confides that the North American Moose is not even native to the island. It was first introduced around a century ago – just two cows and two bulls brought in from Maine, most probably as food animals.

"They fell in love with Newfoundland ... and with each other. What started out as

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four moose has grown to an estimated 150,000. They're ideally suited to this terrain and have become a very important source of meat. For the average Newfoundlander, hunting for moose is grocery shopping."

Drive The Viking Trail down the coast and you've got the salty Gulf of St. Lawrence on your left hand side and bogs stretching out to the Long Range Mountains on your right. The bogs are sphagnum moss-dominated wetlands that have been growing for millennia, punctuated by many shallow ponds. Under the spongy moss is a series of limestone ridges that stretches along in a pattern of ripples and hollows. The moss just fills in the dips, spreading outward and blanketing more ground with each year's growth.

"Frankly," cracked English as we were leaving the park, "I am disappointed in your inability to spot a moose. It looks like your last chance might be when the plane takes off. Get a window seat."

The statistics had made it all seem fairly simple. Gros Morne National Park has one of the highest moose population densities in the world. Across the whole island, there is an average of one moose-vehicle accident each day. A dozen human casualties each year. The moose rule the roadways – and guidebooks warn "the only safe way to drive in moose country is below the speed limit."

I followed English's advice right up until my plane was far above the wild pond and bog Newfoundland landscape. I took a window seat and sat with my forehead pressed against the little window – ever hopeful.

- Josephine Matyas

- Photo Credit: Taso Hountas

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