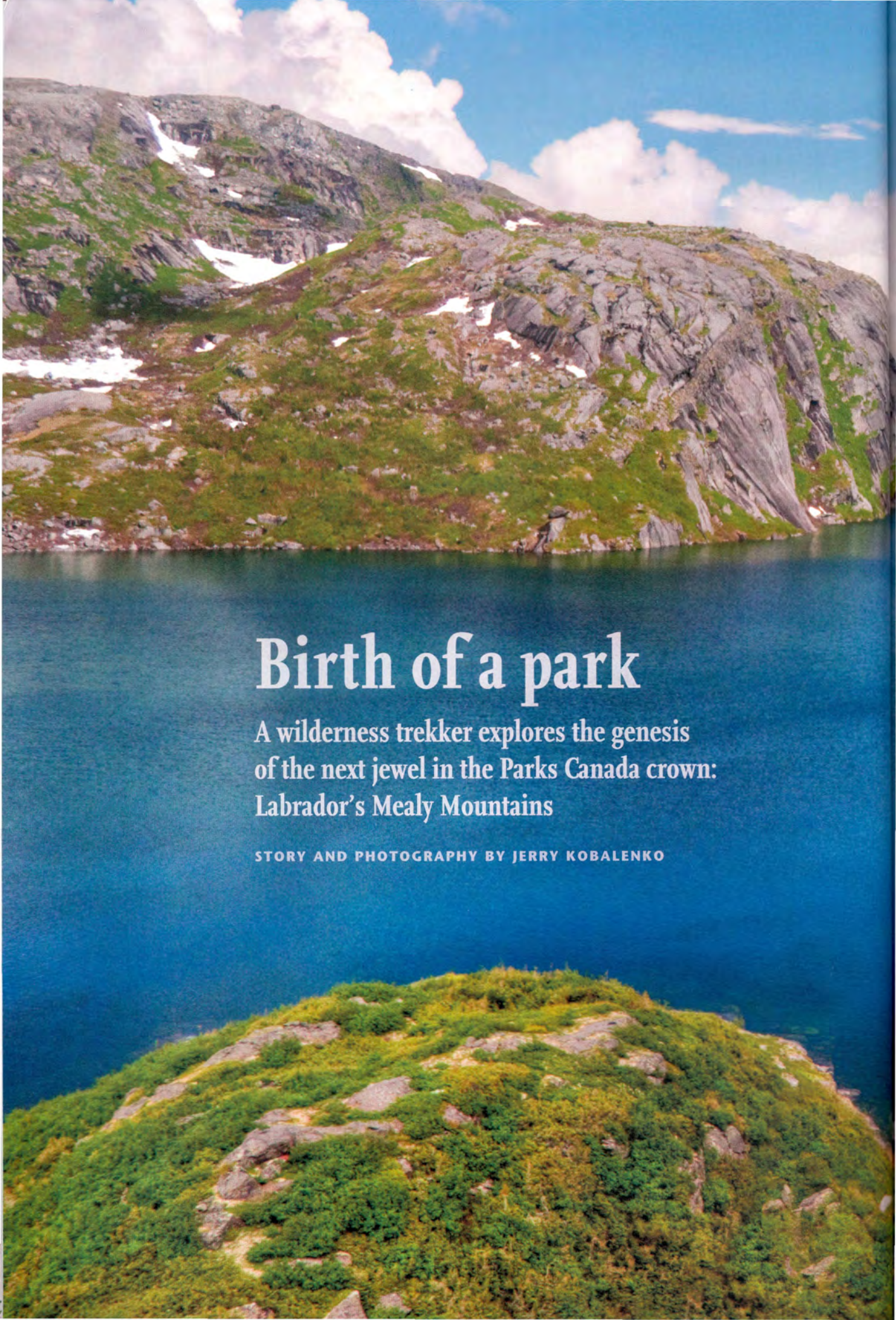


Birth of a park

A wilderness trekker explores the genesis of the next jewel in the Parks Canada crown: Labrador's Mealy Mountains

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY KOBALENKO

I AM CAMPED ON THE SHORE of a fiord lake in Labrador's Mealy Mountains, in the heart of what will soon be Canada's newest national park reserve. The lake has no name on topographic maps, but the Innu here call it Cave Creature Lake. According to legend, human-like creatures live in a grotto at one end. They have two-dimensional faces and eyes on one side, like a flounder. I haven't seen these beings, but then, such spirits never reveal themselves to *akaneshau* — white people.

Plenty of other creatures, however, are less choosy about keeping me company. Summer in the Mealy Mountains is blackfly season. In a lifetime of northern travel, I have never seen so many. What Canadian explorer and map-maker A. P. Low called "the gay festive mosquito" remains largely absent from this high country, but about 10,000 blackflies clamber madly over me on this warm and windless July afternoon. Clouds more of them rise at every step. Little wonder that only gormless travellers like myself venture here in summer. Locals, far smarter, traditionally fish the breezy coast until September. Only then do they head into the interior by canoe, to reach their trapping grounds by November, when the fur is prime. When I had tried to enlist some former trappers to join me on this summer excursion, each one had suddenly remembered either a prior commitment or a leg injury.

There is an essential contradiction about Labrador. To an outsider, it feels like the deepest wilderness. You can walk the interior for 500 kilometres, as I have, and not see a soul. But every unnamed lake, every point of land, every bald-topped granite hill has a name and a history and is part of a fabric that has sustained Innu, Inuit, Métis and European settlers for centuries. Even the remote range where I am camped, the English Mountains, served as winter caribou hunting grounds for the coastal Inuit of Rigolet.

For years, I have wanted to visit the English Mountains. They are the roof of the Mealy Mountains, topping out at almost 1,200 metres, and they are fiendishly inaccessible. No outfitters run tours here. No roads pass anywhere near them. They are guarded on three sides by tractless forest and on the fourth by string bogs. Hiking in would be what you might charitably call an interesting experience. The only practical ingress is by air, and that's how I've come here. Gudrid Hutchings, the manager of Rifflin' Hitch Lodge, an elite fishing sanctuary on the nearby Eagle River, kindly agreed to drop me off by helicopter during one of the regular supply runs.

The kingly view from 200 metres in the air gives a very different impression of the Mealy Mountains from ground-level reality. As the helicopter climbs the escarpment on the Lake Melville side, waterfalls spill down slick black slopes, flashing like burning magnesium in the sunshine. The many cliffs reinforce local warnings about how easy it is to fall off some precipice in bad winter light. Nevertheless, the subalpine landscape looks inviting, like seemingly decent hiking terrain. As we approach the English Mountains, snow appears on the highlands. The origin of the name Mealy is not certain, although one theory links it to an old word meaning "spotted," because of these snow patches that linger into August. The Innu call the Mealys *akamiuapishku*. Pronounced kamiwa-pushku, it means, somewhat similarly, Across White Rock.

PRECEDING PAGES: Granite hills surrounding an inland fiord lake in Labrador's English Mountains — the roof of the Mealy Mountains — are covered in krummholz, a seemingly innocent but diabolical subalpine brush. Blackflies diminish dramatically on the water, so packrafting on Cave Creature Lake (OPPOSITE TOP) is a good way to explore the cliffy shoreline. Snowmelt tumbles into the lake (ABOVE), giving the water a bone-aching frigidity.

The 40-minute flight from Happy Valley-Goose Bay excites me about my travel prospects for the next four days. I pick Cave Creature Lake as a base more because of its beauty than its legends. It is also close to a snow-flecked pyramid that pilot Darin Silver has informally judged as the highest peak in the Mealys simply by flying around the area and watching his altimeter. A venturi wind, as Silver calls it, rips down the narrow inland fiord. We land and unload, the helicopter leaves, I set up my tent in peace — and then the wind stops.

WHEN MANY OF US THINK of national parks we imagine familiar icons like Banff, which tries to balance protection of the area with hosting three million visitors a year. But many of the newer northern parks see few tourists. Ellesmere Island's Quttinirpaaq National Park, the second largest park in Canada (after Wood Buffalo in Alberta/Northwest Territories), can get just eight or nine hikers a year. Such parks exist for reasons other than recreation.

The English Mountains may become the scenic icon of this new park, but visitors will remain as rare as Innu creatures of legend.

Wind bends an alder on the shore of Cave Creature Lake (OPPOSITE), forcing the author to batten down his tent after returning from a refreshing thrash through almost impassable vegetation. The Mealys drop away to a boreal plain (BELOW) at the eastern edge of the English Mountains. On this alpine meadow at around 900 metres, walking is good, amid some of the rocks that locals say God threw at Labrador during Creation.

The Mealy Mountains have been under consideration as a national park since the 1970s. They represent one of 39 distinct Canadian ecosystems; in this case, the East Coast Boreal Region. The mountains may not erupt 1,000 metres directly out of the open ocean, as they do in Torngat Mountains — Labrador's first national park — far to the north, but the English Mountains feel like Labrador's version of Gros Morne, in Newfoundland: ancient sugarloaf granite riven by deep interior fiords, the haunt of wolves and caribou.

Beyond representing an ecosystem, a new national park has to be politically possible. That's more of a challenge than it used to be. Western models like Banff were created when residents had little input. Politicians and bureaucrats inked in a park on the map, and nearby communities relocated or adapted to the restrictions. Today's parks — especially northern parks with rich histories of land use where traditional activities remain part of daily life — are custom-made to consider the needs of the local people who know them best.

This change began painfully for all sides, with the establishment of New Brunswick's Kouchibouguac National Park in 1969. More than 200 families were given modest buyouts and told to move. But one man, Jackie Vautour, would not go. In 1976, after he had turned down several expropriation offers, his house was demolished. He put up tents and stayed put. The confrontation dragged on for years. Parks Canada eventually won the battle, but it lost the public relations war. Other new parks of that era, including Forillon, in Quebec, and Gros Morne, left a similar legacy of bitterness among locals.

MAP: STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC

Choosing the lesser of evils, the author bushwhacks (RIGHT) through a patch of close forest to avoid lower but gnarlier krummholz.

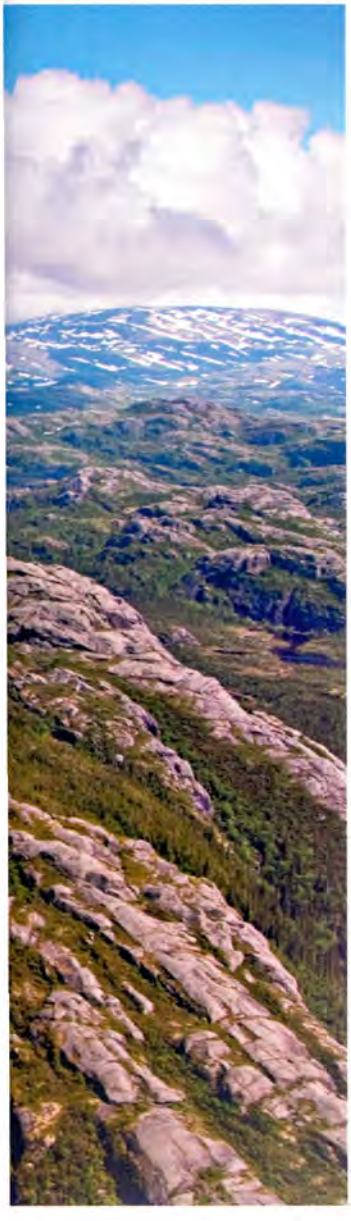
Residents of Labrador, including retired nurse Susan Felsberg, still recall the early, awkward town hall meetings about the prospect of a national park in the Mealy Mountains. In 1976, at the end of the era of pre-emptive park establishment, officials held information sessions in several Labrador communities, including Mud Lake, a tiny roadless settlement accessible only by boat or snowmobile from Happy Valley-Goose Bay. At the end of the presentation, one man asked what would become of the many wilderness cabins on the shores of Lake Melville, within the proposed boundaries. Felsberg recalls that an official replied, somewhat haughtily, "If there are people there, we could buy them out and move them somewhere else."

A young man sitting behind her muttered under his breath, "Nobody buys me out." That summed up the local sentiment on the idea.

The Torngat and Mealy Mountains proposals then sat on the shelf for 30 years. Apart from requiring a more progressive attitude toward traditional use, it was clear that land claims negotiations had to begin before these potential parks could be revisited. The Torngat Mountains eventually became a national park in 2005, with the same stroke of the pen that

resolved Inuit land claims. There, Inuit became more than consultants — through the Nunatsiavut Government of northern Labrador, they became co-managers of the park.

The Mealys situation is more complicated, because Labrador Innu, Inuit, Métis, descendents of European settlers and possibly even Quebec Innu all have a stake in the area. Kevin McNamee, director of Parks Canada's parks establishment branch, estimates that it will take up to two years to work through these issues. "We will be exploring means to co-operatively manage the park reserve with aboriginal communities," he says. The new park will allow small-game hunting, fishing, trapping, logging for personal use and some snowmobiling. Locals will be able to maintain their wilderness cabins indefinitely, without the sunset clause tabled into such concessions in most other parks. It's a far cry from the vision outlined during that town hall gathering in Mud Lake.



Granite ribs emerge from the central Mealy Mountains (LEFT), while the snowy peaks of the English Mountains flirt with the clouds in the distant east. Innu snowshoe trekkers Francis Penashue (BELOW, at left) and his son Jack take a breather after setting up a tent with a thick bed of spruce and balsam fir boughs to serve as aromatic floor insulation.

MY TANTALIZING FIRST GLIMPSE of the Mealy Mountains came years ago, from one of the ferries that commute down Lake Melville and along the Labrador coast. Passengers ran for their cameras to snap the abrupt rise of the distant mountains. Then, in March 2008, I joined Innu elder Elizabeth Penashue on a two-week snowshoe trek from her village of Sheshatshiu and through the western Mealys to a lake the Innu call Flows in Both Directions, because it marks the headwaters of two rivers. Penashue has led these inspirational journeys every year for more than a decade, to keep her people in touch with life on the land. Participants came and went, but up to 19 of us slept in a heated bush tent, ate ptarmigan, porcupine and bannock and snowshoed an old Innu path through the ranges.

Occasionally, the ambiguities of the modern world intruded. One afternoon, a group of snowmobilers from Happy Valley-Goose Bay passed by. Their day trip included the very untraditional sport of high-marking, gunning their powerful machines up a steep slope to see how far they could get. And, on Lake Flows in Both Directions, we met a group of Quebec Innu who had just poached half a dozen caribou from the threatened Mealy Mountains herd. Enforcing the ban on hunting this herd, of which only 250 to 300 caribou remain, is a political hot potato. Even when conservation officials are aware of the infringements, they do little to interfere with the Quebec Innu. The Quebecers

Innu elder Elizabeth Penashue has led inspirational journeys every year for more than a decade, to keep her people in touch with life on the land.

gave our party a shank from one of the animals, so we had stew that evening. Not all local activities seem equally suitable for a future national park.

THE PLAN FOR MY FOUR-DAY STAY in the English Mountains is to explore Cave Creature Lake by packraft — in case any flounder-faced hominids make an appearance — and to hike the peaks above my camp. I am well protected from the blackflies behind a head net and bugproof clothing, but it is hard for such multitudes not to dominate one's consciousness. When I reach behind my head, my hand seems to move through a solid mass of insects. I brush myself vigorously before diving into the tent but still take about 500 blackflies in with me. Fortunately, unlike mosquitoes, blackflies get disoriented inside tents. They lose interest in biting and just crawl up the netting, trying to get out. I can partly unzip the door and brush most of them outside. Nevertheless, creating a bug-free interior is a lengthy process, as is armouring up to go out again. As night falls, the pee bottle emerges as my most valued item of camp equipment.

A margin of bog buffers the Mealy Mountains from Lake Melville (ABOVE). Celebrated Innu activist Elizabeth Penashue and her husband Francis (LEFT) host an annual snowshoe trek through the Mealy Mountains.

The following morning, cool overcast and a light breeze minimizes my entourage. But as I hike up behind camp toward the summits of the English Mountains, another challenge appears. The low vegetation that carpets so much of this part of the Mealys — which looks insignificant from a helicopter — is actually krummholz, the stunted spruce that easterners call tuckamore. Researchers recently found one wizened specimen that is 370 years old, making it the oldest tree in Labrador. Age has given krummholz an almost supernatural toughness. The branches have as much give as a metal pipe. To advance, you must step either on the trees or over them, in Monty Python-esque silly-walk fashion. Moreover, they grow not on regular terrain but on the many rocks that, as locals say, God threw irritably at Labrador during Creation. Each step forward is painstaking and tentative. In the first hour, I advance 100 metres.

Luckily, I soon get wiser in my walking. I thrash over to a creek leading up the mountain. Alders guard its banks, not krummholz. I've never been grateful for alder stands before. Another hour, and I reach a snowfield that leads sharply upward to the alpine meadows at the top of the

The high point of a Mealy Mountains park experience will have little to do with an actual high point. Rather, it is a beach walk.

Mealys. Here, walking is good. To the east, the mountains drop away escarpment-like. Far below, the English River snakes its tortuous course through boreal forest toward Lake Melville. To the north looms the highest peak in the Mealys, which I had hoped to climb but which the slow going precludes as a day hike.

A chill wind rakes the alpine. Low clouds flutter like torn rags from the summits. Intermittent rain drizzles down. But with blackflies and krummholz both absent, the day is pleasant. A ptarmigan clucks. During one heavy squall, I take refuge in a cave of interlocking boulders. No spirits emerge.

Certain remote places have a mystique proportional to how hard they are to visit. The English Mountains are one of these. No human footfall intrudes on the primeval silence nowadays, except for the odd fishing group on a lunchtime heli-picnic from Rifflin' Hitch Lodge. I'm aware of one party of American climbers who flew in by charter aircraft several springs ago and skied a few peaks. These and my own modest trip and the occasional scientific party sum up recent travel here. The English Mountains may eventually become the scenic icon of this new park, but visitors will remain as rare as Innu creatures of legend because the region is so remote and rugged and the sensible travel window so small — a couple of weeks in September, between the disappearance of the blackflies and the onset of winter, and maybe a little spring snowshoeing. For the foreseeable future, the high point of a Mealy Mountains park experience will have little to do with an actual high point. Rather, it is a beach walk.

THE TOWN OF CARTWRIGHT is currently vying with Happy Valley-Goose Bay to become the headquarters of the future park. Happy Valley-Goose Bay is easier to reach, but Cartwright adjoins the only accessible part of the park: the 54-kilometre sand beach known as the Wonderstrands.

Thanks to the extension of the Trans-Labrador Highway, adventurous motorists can now drive to Cartwright from southern Canada. Happy Valley-Goose Bay has been accessible by gravel road for years. Although geographically linked by this bumpy wilderness highway, Cartwright and Happy Valley-Goose Bay remain worlds apart. The people around Happy Valley-Goose Bay come from a culture of inland trappers. Those in Cartwright made their living from the sea. Many still do.

The Wonderstrands get their name from the Saga of Eric the Red: "They also gave name to the strands, calling them

Archaeologist Lisa Rankin (TOP) inspects an old Inuit seal oil lamp from a site near the Wonderstrands, a spectacular length of beach on the Atlantic coast. Following fresh bear and wolf tracks, outfitter George Barrett strolls along the Wonderstrands near Sandy Point (LEFT).

Residents with a deep history in Labrador, Doris and Llew Davis have a summer home in Packs Harbour, a few kilometres from the Wonderstrands. Doris assisted archaeologist Lisa Rankin for years at digs on the Wonderstrands.

Furðustrandir [Wonder Strands], because it took so long to sail by them." Although some New Englanders claim that the Vikings were referring to their beaches, most researchers accept that the strand near Cartwright is the likeliest candidate. The line of sand glints in the sunshine from a long way offshore. The length is, indeed, wondrous on this famously rock-bound coast; there is no other shoreline like it in Labrador. Beginning 13 kilometres north of Cartwright at Sandy Point, it sweeps in a long, graceful scimitar to the rugged peninsula of Cape Porcupine. Beyond this rocky interlude, the northern half of the beach curves another 28 kilometres to the abandoned fishing village of West Bay. Rollers from the capricious North Atlantic led one early park advocate to naively tout the beach's surfing potential.

Although no one lives on the strand now, human habitation here dates back 7,000 years. It doesn't surprise archaeologist Lisa Rankin of Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's that no Viking artifacts have turned up, as they have at L'Anse aux Meadows, in northern Newfoundland, and elsewhere. Rankin has studied the Wonderstrands for almost a decade and has uncovered more than 100 sites — dating from Maritime Archaic to 19th-century Métis — but has found few artifacts.

"The preservation on the strand is atrocious," says Rankin. "The soil must be heavily acidic, because little but stone tools seems to have survived." In particular, a keel from an earlier shipwreck spotted on the Wonderstrands by those Norse explorers would have vanished long ago.

Yet it is easy to imagine such a shipwreck. The Wonderstrands are more treacherous than most sandy shoals. When I kayaked near Sandy Point, even my little craft grounded half a kilometre offshore at low tide. Local outfitters George and Peyton ("Pete") Barrett sometimes photograph clients appearing to walk miraculously on water, far out to sea.

I visited the Wonderstrands with the Barretts one afternoon last July. While Pete, an avid kayaker, paddled nearby with a friend, I tramped the beach with George, who prefers larger boats. George grew up near North River, just a kilometre away from the southern terminus of the Wonderstrands. When the beach became too narrow or too soft, we trekked the berm above it, skirting the erosion craters and the seagrass that Inuit women traditionally sewed into watertight baskets. Sunlight twinkled one minute; a fog bank slid in the next. A visiting fisherman casting off Sandy Point saw a wolf just minutes before our arrival. Such sightings are so common that the Wonderstrands may emerge as the best place in the national park system to spot wild timber wolves. The many wolf tracks competed with equally recent black bear prints and with the dark streaks of the titanium ore for which the strand is also known.

Doris Davis of Cartwright regrets that hunting will be allowed, even though it will only be for small game.

SOME BRED-IN-THE-BONE LABRADORIANS have reservations about the liberties afforded them in the upcoming park. Doris Davis of Cartwright regrets that hunting will be allowed, even though it will be for small game only — no bears, no caribou. Woody Lethbridge doesn't want ATVs chewing up the Wonderstrands. But many are especially upset that the final park area has been halved from its original boundaries — a victim, some say, of federal-provincial tension. "No way [former Premier] Danny Williams was going to give Harper that much land," they insist. Some of those early zones were simply excluded, while the Eagle River — one of the great salmon rivers of the world — will become a provincial waterway park. Still, the remaining 10,700 square kilometres will make the Mealy Mountains the largest park in Eastern Canada outside Nunavut.

By 2013, 35 years after the idea for two national parks in Labrador was first proposed, the Mealy Mountains should officially become Canada's newest national park. Some Labradorians dream that it will be a Banff North, creating an economic boom that will rejuvenate a region still suffering from the decline of the fishery. Others, such as canoe-builder Joe Goudie of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, who trapped in the Mealys for years, are more realistic. "I don't care if there are a lot of visitors at all," he says. "It doesn't matter a damn. It's being protected, and that's enough."

Writer-photographer Jerry Kobalenko lives in Canmore, Alta. His most recent book is Arctic Eden.

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