Anticosti Adventure
by Dr. James C. Kroll

The great North Woods of this Canadian island must be experienced to be appreciated fully—and so must its whitetail hunting. Here are a first-time visitor’s impressions of this storied hunting land.

I could tell by the look on my wife’s face as I entered the door that something big just had happened. "Gordon Whittington called, and he’s got something important to ask you," she grinned.

In a few moments, Gordon’s voice was beaming mysteriously from the office of North American WHITETAIL in Georgia. "Can you be on a plane to Quebec’s Anticosti Island in two days?" he queried. "I’ve been invited to hunt whitetails on the island by Wilderness Adventures and Cerf-Sau Outfitters, but I won’t be able to make it. You’re welcome to go in my place if you can get there."

"Now, it took me just about as long to say "yes" as it does one of my bird dogs to down a biscuit! For years, I had wanted to study whitetails at the extreme northern edge of their range. But, getting to Anticosti Island from Nacogdoches, Texas, is not that simple. It is roughly similar to going by yak train to Tibet. Several dozen phone calls to various airline companies, and back again to Gordon, finally netted me a workable scheme. It turns out that I could not get there in two days, but I could make it in three. The outfitter had no problem with that, so my adventure began.

The next two days were spent preparing for all possible needs on an island whose name I barely could pronounce. Anticosti Island, located in the Bay of St. Lawrence, is approximately 135 miles long and 30 miles wide, comprising thousands of square miles of wilderness territory. Discovered in 1534 by Jacques Cartier, Anticosti was considered an impediment to navigation until the turn of the last century. Its strategic location in the mouth of the Bay of St. Lawrence makes it very dangerous to shipping. Rising no more than 700 feet above sea level, the northern coast is littered with the carcasses of ships that ventured too close.

The most significant event in Anticosti’s history occurred in 1895, when Henri Menier either purchased or leased (there is some disagreement) the island for his private use. Menier was a French chocolate millionaire who loved to hunt and fish. Because the Atlantic salmon fishing along the Jupiter River of the island was (and still is) legendary, he made a seasonal mansion near what is now Port Menier.

The name "Anticosti" is thought to be derived from the Indian word "aticosti," which translates to mean "where the bears are hunted." Oddly enough, today there are few if any bears remaining on the island. Menier imported several species of animals to the island. Included among these were moose, foxes and white-tailed deer. Elk also were imported, but later exterminated due to reported attacks on the local citizenry.

Of course, it is the deer that I was most interested in. Although reports are confusing, we do know they were imported from nearby New Brunswick. Estimates of the number released range from 40 to a little less than 200. Whatever the number, the fact that the deer herd had increased to several thousand animals in 80 years, plus the fact that these deer were all descendents from the same ancestry, was a lure I could not resist! The trip was a real bonus to me in two regards. First, I would be able to study deer that for all practical purposes should be inbred. Second, the extreme northern location of the island means the deer have to endure severe winter conditions. Although whitetails are known to endure severe winter conditions, the species is predominately one of the temperate regions. Long ago, I became aware of the fact that deer in the two extremes of the range (Canada and Mexico) traditionally have larger antlers than those within the normal confines of the range. Consequently, areas of extremes are ideal places for the trophy hunter. This was adding up to be a year to remember. I would start the whitetail season in Canada in late October and end it in Mexico in early January.

My flight to Montreal went smoothly, and a friendly soul named Henri helped me get my bags loaded and drove me to my hotel. It was late when I settled in that night, but there wouldn’t be much time to rest. Henri was to pick me up at 5:30 a.m. for the drive to the small airport at St. Hubert, from which our flight to Anticosti Island would depart.

True to his promise, Henri arrived at 5:30 to take me to the airport. The small waiting room there already was crowded with northeastern hunters as we arrived. Pennsylvania, New York and even New Hampshire accents were thick in that room. My hackles came up as I realized that this Southern boy was now in a room full of Yankee hunters. The hunting camps of the South echo with tall stories about Northern hunters, but I soon was to learn that these are some of the finest sportsmen to be found anywhere. Still, for the moment, I would remain at a distance.

The flight to Mont-Joli, our midway stopover on the way to Anticosti, was quite pleasant; the hunters talked enthusiastically.

Continued

The author admires his Anticosti 7-pointer, shot on the first day of his hunt with Cerf-Sau Outfitters. This buck responded to calling antlers and a grunt call. Photo by Keith Benson.
about the coming hunt. Some of these men were veterans of Anticosti, returning to the island season after season with the same hunting parties. In Mont-Joli the crew loaded gear from additional hunters. When we took off, the plane was loaded with hunters from all over the northeastern U.S. and Canada. The northern coniferous forest soon turned to water as we entered the Bay of St. Lawrence, and soon the shoreline of Anticosti appeared beneath the plane.

Once we were on the ground, I was somewhat apprehensive about making the connection with Cerf-Sau Outfitters. After all, my itinerary had been changed several times, and I had no way of knowing whether or not the word had been passed along the line. But, my concerns were unfounded. “Mr. Krofft?” another French voice queried. I turned to meet what had to be one of the most congenial faces I ever have encountered under such circumstances. Michel Arsenault, manager of Cerf-Sau, came toward me and warmly shook my hand. “We are so pleased you could come, especially on such short notice,” he confided. Over lunch at the airport, Michel explained the Cerf-Sau operation. It is owned and operated by three biologists, who manage the salmon fishing and deer hunting according to sound management principles. Although the owners were away at the time, I was to take part in collection of blood samples and observation of the herd. Michel noted that the herd had experienced a dramatic decline of some 40 percent during the preceding winter. This winter kill was precisely what I was most interested in.

Deer herds on the extremes of the range experience regular reductions in population by factors which are independent of density — in this case, sub-zero weather. These constant reductions in population density make the herds ideal for trophy management. In fact, such herds seldom need the benefit of management, other than control of the age at which bucks are harvested.

After lunch, Michel and I picked up some supplies and headed toward the Cerf-Sau camp, located at the extreme eastern end of the island. The drive to the lodge was breathtaking, as the pickup moved along the higher elevations on the north coast of the island. Whales and seals played in the surf along the shore, often dashing around wrecks of old ships. During the three-hour drive, I learned much about the island, its deer herd and my host. Michel is a fascinating man with much experience in the management of hunting operations. His enthusiasm is contagious, and by the time we reached the lodge, I was more than ready for the adventure that lay ahead.

The lights of the chalet-style lodge were a welcome sight after the long ride along the coast. Michel pulled up to the lodge, helped me unload my things and excused himself. I entered the lodge to find a blazing fire in the stove and snacks on the coffee table. The other hunters had not yet arrived back in
camp from the day's hunt. I unpacked my things, poured myself a drink and settled down to await my fellow hunters. Among them was Keith Benson, North American Whitetail's photo editor, who had flown up a day earlier to get our hunt on film—and maybe even shoot a buck.

I had a short wait, as the door burst open around 5 p.m., and a bespectacled, blondeshifted fellow, covered with wet hunting clothes, came into the room. He introduced himself as Bob Smith, from New York. (By this time, I only bristled a little at that thought.) He was followed by several other guys, who warmly introduced themselves. George and Chris Schott and Larry Torrey also were from New York, while Tom and Bill Lewis, Barry McNell and Pete Jorvaniak were from Pennsylvania. "So this is our famous deer expert," George chortled. I already was beginning to like these guys. Apparently, someone (probably Keith) had filled them in about me being a whitetail biologist and hunting writer. About that time, the door opened again, and in walked a tall, bearded fellow. It was Keith, and he was wet from head to toe. "Glad you could make it," he said as he shook my hand. "You're gonna love hunting this place!"

The hunters retired to their rooms to get cleaned up for dinner. Cerf-Sau employs a host of specialized employees, among them a French chef. Soon, we were being treated to some of the finest French cuisine to be had anywhere. Talk turned to the day's hunt. Bob had bagged a fine 10-pointer, and after dinner, we all walked to the game house to inspect the buck. I was amazed by the size of these deer! His buck easily dressed out at 200 pounds and extended from the ceiling of the floor of the game house, a distance of eight or so feet. Clearly, everything I had heard about Canadian deer being big was true.

The alarm rang much sooner than I had intended. I quickly dressed for cold weather and headed downstairs for a breakfast of corn, eggs and ham. Bob's buck had stirred up the fellows, and hopes were high for a successful second day. I huddled with our guide, Francois O'Neil (that's right, O'Neil), who tactfully suggested that I hunt on my own for the first few days. Francois was a stocky, dark-bearded fellow who was everything you expect in a French-Canadian guide. He kidded us, the humor producing huge belly laughs. He announced in a good-natured way that he was "the greatest guide north of the Rio Grande!" At that time I certainly was not going to argue the point.

There is but a single road leading through the Cerf-Sau hunting territory. To each side lie thousands of acres of some of the finest whitetail hunting to be had anywhere. Balsam, spruce and pine are the predominant tree species, with occasional expanses of muskeg. A large portion of the range had been burned by a wildfire a few years back, producing a interesting patchwork of burned and green woods. The green woods occurred primarily along the many "rivers" permeating the hunting territory. The terrain was rough and strewed with rocks and dead trees, making the going difficult.

So, this was the world, and a strange one at that, I encountered as Francois gave me my wish and dropped me off near a river. He handed me a topographical map, a small bag containing two sandwiches, some cookies and a can of juice. With a smile and a wink, he told me that the river ran north and south and the road ran east and west. He advised that I hunt the green woods along the way. He also noted that the farther I traveled, the more likely it would be that I would encounter deer that had never seen a human. He had been quite intrigued with my rattling horns and grunt call, and the last thing he said was, "I think maybe you try them—they may work on these deer."

The truck disappeared into the darkness. Suddenly, there I was in the midst of the great North Woods, holding my rifle, lunch, horns call and map. It was a sobering experience. I was reminded of a scene from The Wizard of Oz, in which Dorothy said, "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore!" But, this was not only to study deer, but also prove some of my assertions that whitetails behave very much the same wherever you find them. They are streamside animals, using these features as travel corridors and feeding areas. I climbed up on a rock and waited for daylight. There is nothing like the silence of a wilderness.

Before me lay hundreds of square miles of Continued on page 76

MAXIMUM VELOCITY

SPEED. At over 228 feet per second (Standard Rating Velocity) there is no production bow in the world faster than the DARTON 60MC. In fact, all Darton bows display outstanding speed.

60% LET-OFF. 60% Let-Off is available on bows with Transition High Energy Wheels and 55% Let-Off is available on bows with Alloy High Energy Wheels.

Any Darton bow with Alloy or Transition High Energy Wheels can be upgraded to higher let-off simply by attaining our 55% or 60% Let-Off elements from your Darton Dealer.

We invite you to compare any bow to a DARTON. If you're looking for Speed, High Let-Off Power and Durability you'll choose the performance leader—DARTON.

DARTON PERFORMANCE ARCHERY EQUIPMENT

Darton Road, A
Hale, MI 48739

JULY 1988
ANTICOSTI...Continued

alternately burned and green woods. I decided to move down the river, toward the south. It had been a few years since I really had the opportunity to still-hunt, and this country was perfect for it. The soft moss of the muskog beneath my feet allowed a silent approach. I spent the morning slipping from one patch of green woods to the next. Apparently, the fire had been unable to burn some of the wetter woods.

It did not take me long to discover the impact of the previous winter’s kill. Sawn among the balsam stumps were piles of deer skeletons. It was like finding a gold mine! Quickly I aged the first skeletons, discovering that the vast majority were of fawns and older bucks. Each new patch of green woods yielded a new pile of bones, again reflecting the age structure of the winter kill. A picture quickly developed. Most of the mortality was occurring precisely as I had expected. Fawns were lacking the reserve and stamina to survive extreme winter conditions and are the first to perish. Older bucks, on the other hand, quickly wear themselves out during the rut and succumb, due to lack of fat reserves. Clearly, this was a “self-pruning” deer herd. It was a perfect trophy-hunting situation.

About 45 minutes after starting my hunt, I slipped up on a doe feeding on the tops of

Suddenly, there I was in the midst of the great North Woods, holding my rifle, lunch, horns, call and map. It was a sobering experience.

thistles that grew abundantly along the edges of the fire. I approached to within 20 yards before she noticed me; she just ran a short distance and stopped to look at me. She obviously had little concern about man invading her woods.

Each time I entered a patch of green woods, I was able to stalk one or more deer. About midmorning I stalked my first buck, a 6-point yearling. On sighting him I ran up the side of a ridge, stopped to get another glance and disappeared over the top.

By 10 a.m. I had traveled more than five miles into the woods. Stopping to have a snack, I was assailed by the lack of fear on the part of many animals. Quickly, in succession, a fox and then a camp-robber jay came up and shared my snack. This is truly a paradise, I thought.

But, none of this was getting me a buck. I decided to move on to a large patch of green woods at the intersection of two rivers. Approaching quietly, I found a great number of rubs and scrapes along the slope above the stream. Visibility was good, so I decided to make my first attempt at rattling and grunting bucks in the North Woods. Eli Haydel had sent me a grunt call a few days before my trip, and I wanted to check it out. So, I found a strategic location, placed the grunt call in my mouth, layed the 7mm Rem. Mag. across my lap and picked up my set of mule-deer antlers. I always have felt that the size of the "horns" has an effect on the size of bucks responding.

Why should a monster buck come to a wimpy set of horns?

The rut was not yet in full swing, so I decided to simulate a real feeding in a fight. Cheeking the horns together and grunting on the call, I made every effort to simulate a fight between two veteran bucks.

No sooner had I begun rattling when a 6-pointer roared in on me. I kept rattling as he circled at 30 or so yards.

Suddenly, a very large 7-pointer erupted from the understory. Blowing the call out of my mouth, I dropped the rattling horns and grabbed my rifle as the buck bolted downhill. He ran across the river and behind a thicket of spruce. I was ready for him as he emerged, the 7mm shattered the wilderness silence with its blast. The buck rolled head over heels, coming to a stop on his back.

I sat quietly for the next several minutes with the gun at the ready. The buck did not move. Wading the stream, I cautiously approached the buck; only to find that the shot had broken his spine and he was quite dead. I cleaned the buck, washed up and sat down for a bite of lunch. This is really something, I thought. Less than four hours into my first Canadian hunt and I already have a buck. This was truly to be a fun week.

Suddenly, however, a realization came over me. Here I sat, better than five miles from the nearest road, sitting at a buck that had to weigh in excess of 200 pounds! Now, this was a predicament. I decided that the best approach was to find my way back to the road and get help from Francois. As I loaded up for the long walk back, the faint sound of a rifle shot echoed to the northwest. I knew that had to be Keith, and I wondered what kind of buck he had located.

About 2:30 p.m. I arrived back at the road, wet, tired and anxious to find Francois. Sure enough, he had come down the road in less than a half-hour, in one of the strangest vehicles I ever have seen. He called it a “weasel,” but it looked more like a cross between a tank and a bulldozer. These little vehicles had been used in logging by the timber company that once had logged the forests of Anticosti. On top was another hunter’s buck, a nice little yearling 5-pointer. Of course, on Anticosti the word “little” is relative. Francois asked if I had killed bucks, and gave a toothy grin when I indicated to the affirmative. Then, he asked where the buck was. I showed him the exact location on the topo map. “Are you sure that is where you killed your buck?” he asked. I assured him that it was indeed at that precise location. “I think no one has ever gone there before,” he confided.

It was now nearly 3 p.m. and it would be dark in less than two hours. We headed off down the river in the weasel.

Around 4 p.m. we came to my buck. Francois was unable to drive the weasel all the way, so we had to drag the buck across rocks, trees and a beaver pond to get it to the vehicle. With Francois, the deer and I loaded
on the weasel, headed back for the road. Occasionally, we had to use the river as a highway, and that is where disaster struck! The weasel stalled in the middle of the river, and try as he might, Francois could not get it started again. Darkness was approaching rapidly, so we decided to leave the vehicle and the deer and walk out. Francois would return the following day to retrieve the two. We struck out into the approaching darkness, Francois in the lead and me following. My biology students accuse me of walking too fast on field trips, but they never followed Francois!

To my satisfaction, I concluded that my theories were correct. These deer behave in every aspect as Southern whitetails do.

It long since had become dark when we found the road. The other hunters were becoming concerned for our safety and were relieved to see us. Keith had killed a mighty fine 10-pointer, but like me, had had to leave him in the woods until the next day. The guides would have a busy day retrieving two bucks and a vehicle. We returned to camp, eager for a bath and another great French meal.

We were not disappointed. Returning, we discovered that Bob had killed yet another buck. We sat around that evening, telling stories and discussing deer management. By then I really had decided that I liked these guys, and that they were as good as or better hunters than my Southern comrades.

The next several days were spent in similar fashion. Although I had the opportunity to harvest another buck on several occasions, I passed up the chances. I had my fun, and now it was time to study the herd. Every bone pile, deer trail and scrape line received careful attention. To my satisfaction, I concluded that my theories were correct. These deer behave in every aspect as Southern whitetails do. They have sanctuaries, even through receiving light hunting pressure, and they use streams as travel corridors. In no time at all I patterned several good bucks, each having the opportunity to make the kill. I left the bucks to some other lucky visitor to Anfocost.

Time to depart came all too soon. We toasted our new friendships. And the next morning we loaded our gear and bucks into a large bus and headed for Port Menier. It was one of the saddest times of any hunt I’ve ever taken. There is a respect among sportsmen that is unequaled in any other endeavor. Arriving at the airport, there was the same old plane waiting to take us back to our respective territories. The fellows from New York and Pennsylvania left us at our stop in Mont-Joli, and we had grown so close I hated to see them leave. Perhaps we would hunt again in the Great North Woods. But, for me, adventures in Texas and Mexico lay ahead. Little did I know what lay in store. But, that is another story.

Tom Lewis doesn’t want hunters on his land anymore.

Can you blame him?

It’s up to us to win his respect. To find out how you can support hunting ethics, write The Izaak Walton League Outdoor Ethics Program, 1701 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 1100, Arlington, Virginia 22209.