



SPECIAL REPORT: GASPE, QUEBEC

EXPLORING THE GASPE, QUEBEC ATLANTIC SALMON FISHERY



Over the years, I've spoken with many people who believe the Atlantic Salmon to be a superior gamefish and would argue they are the top freshwater sport fish. I've always wondered about the Atlantic, but never fished for them. Recently, I heard about a clear-water, sight fishing venue to pursue Atlantics. Clear water.....casting to sighted fish....floating lines.....dry fly fishing possible – sounded like something I should know more about so make reservations I did. My wife, Marte, and I headed off to eastern Canada. This is the report on a unique and (at least for me) different fly fishing experience.

WHO IS THE ATLANTIC SALMON?

The Atlantic is considered by many to be the ultimate freshwater gamefish, known for its spirited runs and size attained. Additionally, in the crystal clear rivers of Gaspe, they can be sight fished with floating lines. The Atlantic is born as a “parr” and stay in freshwater for their first two years reaching 4 to 6 inches in length. They go to the ocean as a smolt and return as a 3 yr old (sometimes 4 yr old) grilse of 4 to 6 pounds. Second year returnees are 10 – 12 pounds and third year (now 5 – 6 years old) are in 16-24 pound neighborhood. The 30 and 40+ pound fish are probably fourth year returnees, however some believe there are no fourth year fish. All fish return to the ocean to die as 6-7 year old fish.

The Eastern Canadian Atlantic Salmon sport fishery had been diminished over the years due to commercial netting of the species. Six years ago, the Canadian government took aggressive action to save the fishery by paying the commercial fisherman NOT TO FISH. Since that time, the fishery has been recovering successfully. While not back entirely to the days of old, the numbers of returning fish annually make sport fishing in many rivers once again productive.



THE GASPE ATLANTIC FISHERY

Gaspe, Quebec is a charming, predominantly French speaking town of about 16,000 people isolated on the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula. It is an untarnished and wholesomely industrious community of 16,000 Canadians on the shore of Gaspé Bay.

There are three primary rivers within short driving distance of Gaspé – Dartmouth, St Jean, and York. Each is broken into pools – gathering spots where salmon stop while making their way upstream to spawn. The rivers are further broken into sectors/zones. Sectors can be either “limited” or “unlimited.” “Limited” sectors have a maximum of 2, 4, 6 or 8 fisherman allowed per day. They can be as long as 10 miles (like sector 1 we fished on the St. Jean) or as short as less than a mile like sector 2 on the Dartmouth (the “falls”). Depending on the time of the season, it’s generally accepted that the pools in unlimited sectors see more fisherman each day, although this is not always the case. One of the top guides told us he has many unlimited pools on the Dartmouth that he finds very worthwhile and are some of his favorite spots. Some of the sectors are spectacularly beautiful with canyon stretches, waterfalls, and crystal clear pools over varying rock formations carved out by nature throughout the centuries.



One 30# fish joins in with several in the 15# range and a few smaller grilse

ACCESSING THE WATERS

Drawing sectors to fish: All sectors are established via a lottery. Half of all spots are drawn on November 1, the other half 48 hours prior to the day of fishing. Limited sectors cost more depending on which sector and the number of rods. Our Gaspé outfitter (who has been working the lotteries for over 30 years) stays on top of the lotteries. Of her many roles, from assigning guides to arranging hotel/meal packages, her most important contribution is monitoring the lotteries and acquiring sectors for our clients to fish. If you are in the lottery for the November 1 drawing, the odds of you getting the prime choices of water are very good. However, for our trip the decision was not made to go until about 60 days before departure and our outfitter was able to get our first choice of water for two days of our three fishing days using the 48 hour lottery.

This was like a fish zoo – lots of visible fish.....but difficult to get them to eat. If you have a decent guide, you should only fish water that you know holds fish. However, we did observe guides who couldn't or wouldn't spot fish for their anglers. Like any fishery, the guide is a critical element, especially where sight fishing is possible. I did encounter several unguided anglers who hadn't released a fish in 3 or 4 days of fishing and, after watching them fish, realized one of the reasons is they spent most of their time casting in empty water.



A good Gaspé guide will have you fish waters only where he has spotted fish. That doesn't mean you'll get the Atlantic to eat the fly, but at least, you know you are fishing "live" water. He'll also observe the fish (New Zealand style) and advise you on your drift to get the best possible shot at attracting a fish. This would be classified as a "trophy fishery" which means success is not measured in numbers of fish, but size and the overall experience. Even with a good guide, if you average a fish a day released, you're doing well. However, most of the fish you're casting to are over 10 pounds with a good

number of 15 and 20+ pounders. The first year returning grilse make up a smaller percentage of the total returning Gaspé rivers fish count than most of the famous Atlantic fisheries. That smaller percentage of grilse gives the angler much better odds of getting fish of 15, 20 pounds or larger – simply more large fish present in relation to the number of grilse. Our outfitter has three excellent guides.....all good at spotting fish.

TIMING AND THE SEASON

Timing: The season runs June 1 to the end of September. The Atlantic's are protected starting with October when the fish get ready to move into their spawning mode and they become aggressive toward any intrusion into their world of reproduction.

The big fish begin entering the rivers in May. By early June, there are usually enough fish in the rivers to make fishing worthwhile. However, the downside of early June can be the waters may still be high and, if the run is late (as it was this year) there may not be many fish available. By mid June, most would say the prime early season has begun.....at least in "normal years." This early season features fresh big fish, but not the numbers of all sizes that will be present as the summer rolls on. For the "trophy hunter" who will fish hard all week in pursuit of the "Atlantic of a lifetime," this is prime because there are not the numbers of smaller fish to get in the way.

As June comes to an end and we move into July, the numbers of fresh fish entering the system increases. In late July and through August, there can be lower (and warmer) waters. The rivers are full of fish and, with the lower water levels; dry fly fishing can be at its best. If some meaningful rain falls during this time to freshen the rivers, things can get exciting, but low and warm waters can make fishing difficult. Generally, early September brings enough rain to raise the water levels and allow significant numbers of remaining "fresh fish" to enter the rivers. The last two weeks of September can be very good with the maximum number of fish in the river systems, cooling waters, and the aggressive nature of the pre-spawning fish. A late September bonus is the turning of the fall colors.



As always, the case with attempting to identify prime times with any trophy fishery is it's a very subjective issue with many different versions of the "facts." And, unexpected weather can always alter the calendar at any time. My version of the season as stated

above comes as a result of asking lots of questions during our trip. I gathered opinions from many different veterans and applied my personal “filter of experience” to the responses.

GETTING THERE

Logistics: to get to Gaspé, you fly to Montreal and then a 2hr, 45min flight to Gaspé that stops in Quebec City enroute – two flights a day at 9:00am and 6:00pm. If you were combining a trip to the Minipi River in Labrador with Atlantic Salmon in Gaspé, you need to get from Gaspé to Halifax by returning to Montreal, flying direct to Halifax, and then to Goose Bay from Halifax.

MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE GASPE EXPERIENCE

- Fisherman can actually determine the fishing hours. We fished a split schedule, starting early and returning to Gaspé for lunch and an afternoon break, then returning to the river around 4:30 for the evening. Some folks like to stay on the river all day and have a shore side lunch. Anglers staying at the Pavilion fish a more traditional lodge schedule.
- Many of the Gaspé fly fishers are ladies fishing without spouses – speaks to the overall ambiance of Gaspé. This is comfortable fishing – as some would say, “gentleman’s fishing” or “lady’s fishing.”
- Equipment: all I used was an 8 wt rod coupled with a weight forward floating line. Could be good to have a 9 wt also and one sink tip line – I had one with me, but my guide preferred only floating lines. Bring 10# and 15# leaders – the guides will take care of the tippet. Also, don’t buy flies before coming – get your flies in Gaspé to make sure you have what works.
- All four of the fish I took were “hot fish,” fresh from the ocean.
- Fishing dry flies with an upstream presentation over fish (ala New Zealand) is exciting, given the size of the fish. We never skated dry flies during my time on the water – only floated them. One of the four fish I took was taken on a large bomber pattern on an upstream presentation – very good stuff!



MY PERSONAL FISHING EXPERIENCES....MID JULY '07

The sectors I fished:

Day 1: Dartmouth, sector 2 (the falls) - limited

Day 2: St Jean, sector 1 - limited

Day 3: York, unlimited, 1-5-7-10

Sector 2 on the Dartmouth is one of the more spectacular stretches of water I’ve fished. Watching these big fish glide and fin in the pools was a thrill in itself. Early in the morning, one of the other fly fishers we were sharing the sector with hooked a large fish that raced upstream out of control, far into the backing, went around a corner and broke off. Simply nothing the angler could do. I was fortunate in taking my first Atlantic, a 10# fish, in my first hour, and a 5# grilse later. I also hooked and lost one other nice sized (15# range) fish that morning. On this short sector, there is a local “etiquette policy” of only taking two fish per day, allowing the others who shared the sector with you a better chance at getting fish. That evening, having released two fish earlier, I was relegated to observer and took photos of the scene and others catching fish. We did observe some great leaps from hooked fish and caught some of the action on film.

The second morning, on the lengthy “limited” section 1 on the St. Jean, I was very lucky to get two fish, one 14# and the other 16# - beautiful full bodied Atlantics. One was prone to aerial antics with

several spectacular jumps while the other took to the air just once. That evening produced a wonderful sunset, but no more hook-ups. I was a happy Atlantic fly fisher!

The third day, we fished four “unlimited sectors” of the York. Since I had satisfied my “must catch an Atlantic urge” the first two days, I wanted to focus on getting one of the big fish (20 – 30#) to eat a dry fly on the third day. We had many dry fly opportunities over big fish, some in very shallow water, but couldn’t get an “eat.” Again, we were witness to some magnificent stretches of water and saw fish that were over 30#.

Our fourth day was spent without a fly rod in hand, visiting the world class Pavilion Lodge on the St Jean and generally exploring Gaspé. We had a wonderful dining experience in Gaspé’s finest to cap off our exploratory trip.

PACKAGE AND PRICING OPTIONS

Three basic packages are available with two of them based in the town of Gaspé. Both of the Gaspé based programs include guided fishing on the Dartmouth, York, and St. Jean, lodging, and meals. The price varies depending on the level of accommodations and meals. The most popular stays are four days of fishing and six days of fishing.

Adams Motel: mid-priced lodging with a restaurant.

Five nights with four days of fishing: \$2,000US pp based on shared room and guide; \$3,000US pp for a single.

Seven nights with six days fishing: \$3,000US pp shared; \$4,500US for a single



Hotel des Commandants: four star hotel with fine dining restaurant.

Five nights with four days fishing: \$2,400US pp, shared room/guide; \$3,400US for a single.

Seven nights, six days fishing: \$3,600US pp, shared; \$5,100US for a single.

The third option is the world class fishing lodge, St Jean Pavilion (photo at left). The Pavilion has over 20 miles of private water on the St Jean River available for it’s maximum of 8 to 10 anglers. \$1,035 per day, single or double.

If space is available, you could do a combination package of three days fishing at one of the “in Gaspé options” coupled with three days at the Pavilion.

A few exclusions apply, but most everything is included in these prices such as guide fees, taxes, advance river sector reservations, license, etc.

We now have a slide presentation available on the Gaspé experience.

Either phone or drop us an e-mail if you have questions or would like more information about any of our destinations.

An enthusiastic traveling fly fisherman,

Don Muelrath

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