

# REPORT ON THE PTARMIGAN

by André Dion

## 16 WHITE PARTRIDGES BRANCHED IN ASPENS

When Éric Landry from Radisson, near James Bay, sent by e-mail this photo of a freak of nature to the ornithologist André Dion, a *young* 88 year-old man, he had only this to say, never minding the 3500 km he had to cover by motor vehicle way in way out: “I will go; I will see; I will learn.” France, his wife, simply asked: “When?” He answered: “Right away!” Just a phone call to Gordon Chicoine and his partner André Walsh, the two best guides in the area, and their answer was: “Come! The taiga is waiting for you....”



Photo by Éric Landry

## WILLOW PTARMIGAN

*“The one who runs in the snow”*. This is the name used by the Cree, autochthones who live in Northern Quebec, to call it. *Lagopus Tetrao* is the term used by the scientists from the other side of the Atlantic. It origins from the Greek *lagos*, ‘hare’, and from the Latin *pes*, *pedis*, ‘foot’. Rather a grouse with hare’s feet that grows stiff mats of feathers on his toes, under the claws, also horny fringes (similar to winter shoes).

Wonderfully equipped to reach in the heavy snow for



Photo by Michel Royer

their unique food during winter, it can cut with its sharp beak the end’s twigs and the buds from the Arctic Willows.



Photo by Michel Royer



## A NEW KIND OF BEHAVIORISM

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But this winter 2010, there is practically no snow on the ground when, as in previous years, it is waist high; the birds have the entire world's misery to reach the top of the bushes. From Radisson East to Mounts Otis there is an invasion never equaled before in this 54° latitude: thousands and thousands are seen everywhere and the White Partridges are badly equipped to practice this gymnastic they never done before.

Photos by Michel Royer

- 1- On one leg
- 2- Unstable with its "winter shoes"
- 3- Spread between two branches
- 4- Hard to grasp with this mat of feathers under the foot.

## A CENTURY AGO...

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Doctor Clinton Hart Merriam, who founded the *Nuttall Ornithological Bulletin* (the first American scientific magazine) and who was the curator of the Smithsonian Institute and of the *National Geographic Magazine*, became from the beginning the mentor of the Canadian self-made man Napoleon Alexandre Comeau. He hired him to collect more than 200 bird specimens that can still be found in the vaults of the Smithsonian Institute. He then convinced Comeau to report on the Ptarmigan migration on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence River.

After 40 years of gathering information, Comeau came with **the discovery of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**: this migration recurs almost every ten years at this 50° latitude. In 2010, these migrations are only memories although the food is still there!

## THE SOLUTION

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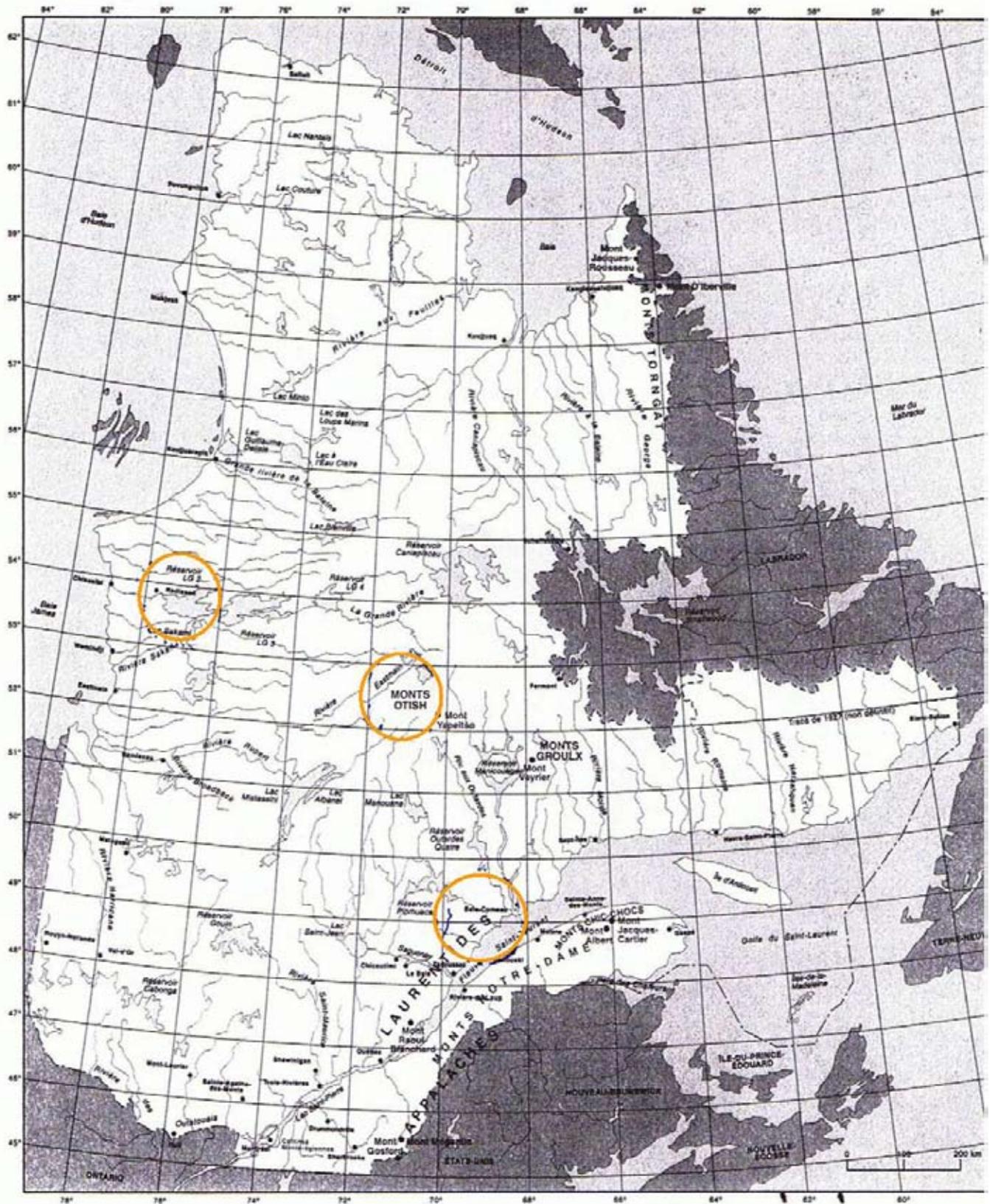
When Hydro-Québec started its work at James Bay on the Great River, the Eastmain, the Rupert and the Cania-

piscau, the erection of dams required shrubs to stabilize the slopes. Green Alder, *Alnus orispa*, was their choice.

Wise were the men who thought this way. Wish they would still be here now that the White Partridge cries for help... Would it be time to think about their salvation? The solution is simple, just waiting there: Offer them a new food they can reach for even if the snow is not so present.

Think Lappish Willow, *Salix lapponum*, 30 to 150 cm high. Install them wherever the soil permits it in the taiga. In the Hydro-Québec repertory of trees and shrubs, you will find an equivalent, the Creeping Willow, *Salix repens*, about man's height. Heavy snow, forget it! James Bay could recover its title: "White Partridge's Heaven".

**But hurry! Only nine years left until the next great migration! Here I'm still dreaming all awake!**



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All previous details related in a book published in French by the Foundation in March 2009. The book is entitled "L'Odysée du Garrot d'Islande en Amérique" and is written by the author André Dion, his 18<sup>th</sup> book about birds.