

BMN Trip Report

Coquitlam River / Riverview Lands Loop (March 26, 2011)

By Mark Johnston



A tangle of garter snakes along the Coquitlam River at Colony Farm.
Ian McArthur photo.

For our first hike of the year we stayed “in town,” walking down the west side of the Coquitlam River, then up through the Riverview Hospital lands, and back via Colony Farm and the east side of the river. We had a grand day for it: morning sun, afternoon high cloud, a hint of rain but no precipitation to speak of.

Our starting point was the Patricia Avenue pedestrian bridge. After admiring the view from the bridge, the seven of us (and one dog) crossed over to the west side and headed along the dyke down the river. The sun was shining; the river ran clear; and chickadees chattered in streamside trees. Passing beneath the Kingsway Avenue automobile bridge, we left the dyke and made our way to the river’s edge. We followed a fisherman’s path for a while; then when the path began to run out, resumed walking on the dyke. Except for a short side trip up Maple Creek where protective fencing and interpretive signage have been installed, we stayed with the dyke, circling behind a newer subdivision to

reach the railway bridge over Scott Creek. Then, on the other side of the creek, we walked a short stretch of an earlier road alignment to where we could cross the Lougheed Highway and access the Riverview lands.

Once on the Riverview grounds, we initially walked up the gated road that runs along the back of the property, but soon veered off on a trail that's below and parallel to the road. We walked alongside a row of stately pyramidal silver maples—planted decades ago—their structures laid bare, awaiting spring's decoration. At the same time we were moving through an understory of Indian plum. In contrast to the leafless maples, the plums sported newly minted yellow-green leaves and delicate white flowers.

Shortly after rejoining the road, we came to Finnie's Garden. In the last few years the *Friends of Finnie's* have been working to restore this half-century-old refuge. We zigzagged down—past the grapevines and the shed with its botanical mural—to the children's garden. On the far side of this garden, we viewed the *Friends'* recently planted sugar maple, the species of tree whose leaf adorns our national flag. Then, retracing our steps through the children's garden, we dropped down further to the lower garden, with its open lawn and stone-lined fish pond. Peering into the pond's dark waters, we could make out eight or nine small, brightly coloured goldfish.

After passing between the Centre Lawn and West Lawn buildings, we continued on our downward course into the heart of the Riverview arboretum. Along the way we went by a few Camperdown elms. Like the silver maples, their frames, which are umbrella-shaped, were also exposed. But the elms were not without decoration, for each was encircled by flowering crocuses—white, lavender, or violet in colour. And upon reaching our lowest point, we found a similar circumstance: this time, a grouping of Schwedler Norway maples surrounded by crocuses. We took the time to examine the flowers carefully, discovering that some of the lighter ones showed varying degrees of purple feathering and striping, with lines radiating outward from their centres.

We finished our tour of the Riverview lands by walking up Fern Terrace—past a dawn redwood, then Pennington Hall—to the road's high point. From the heights we enjoyed a panoramic view of the Coquitlam River lowlands. We could make out the river snaking its way through the old fields of the former Wilson and Colony farms; look across to the rows of houses on Mary Hill; or fix our gaze on the snowy peaks beyond.

From the top of Fern Terrace, we descended via an old road—much of its asphalt surface hidden beneath a layer of dirt and fallen leaves—to the Lougheed Highway opposite Colony Farm Road. As we made our way down, we had to take care that our pant legs weren't snagged by encroaching blackberry vines. We also noted one or two salmonberry flowers. We hadn't been seeing any of the pink blossoms till now, and there was speculation that they were beginning to show here because, due to the presence of the asphalt, the soil held a greater warmth.

After crossing the highway, we walked first the trail that parallels Colony Farm Road, and then the path that runs south of the parking lot, along the dyke, to where the

Coquitlam River empties into the Fraser. As we approached the Fraser, we ran into club members Elaine and Bruce, who were out counting herons. We conversed with Elaine and Bruce for a few minutes, bid them goodbye, and when we'd sat down near the two rivers' confluence to eat lunch, were soon doing some counting of our own. Across the Coquitlam River, on the opposite bank, there were up to 30 herons perched in a cluster of towering cottonwoods—always a few birds flying out, to be replaced by others coming in. One bird perched alone—in perfect profile—atop an otherwise unoccupied tree. Resting on a seemingly impossibly small limb, it reminded me of an elegant hood ornament. There were two geese and another eight or nine herons in the grasses along the riverbank. At one point a river otter emerged from the water and scurried up the bank, causing quite a commotion among the birds. This game of “cat and mouse” continued for a spell, and then the otter slipped into the water and disappeared. All the while, two pairs of common mergansers plied the river unperturbed.



A carpet of crocuses under Riverview's heritage trees.
Ian McArthur photo.

When we'd finished our lunch and our counting, we retraced our steps back to Colony Farm and began the homeward trek, keeping to the dykes on the east side of the river. As we approached the formerly gated Kwikwetlem land, I saw two garter snakes at the side of the path slithering away along divergent lines. Stopping to watch, we were suddenly aware of a dozen snakes, which were moving through the short grass down the side of the dyke. Finally, our gaze focused on four snakes, which were motionless and lay coiled on top of one another. We spent a few minutes photographing the snakes.

After we'd passed through the gate and into First Nation land, there were more wonders to behold. In the substantial pond on our left, we thrilled to see four or five ring-necked ducks. A little farther along, we saw up ahead a tree full of robin-sized or slightly larger birds. As we got nearer, the birds began to fly one by one to other perches. While the

one or two birds left behind were indeed robins, the others—maybe 15 in all—were flickers!

North of the Red Bridge, we elected to follow the older dyke to Gates Park. This route has the feel of a tunnel when the bordering deciduous trees and shrubs leaf out. But on this early spring day, with the trees yet to green, we could easily look through them toward Riverview, measuring our progress by keeping track of where we were relative to the hospital's various buildings.

For the last leg of the hike—mostly on asphalt—we adopted a stiffer pace, stopping only to note some of the rare streambank lupine (*Lupinus rivularis*) escaping from its fenced enclosure. Streambank lupine grows just in the Fraser Valley, this location being one of four sites. The small patch appears to be hanging on despite urban advancement all around.

We arrived back at the Patricia Ave bridge at 3:30 pm. It had been a full and very rewarding day. And to think that each and every day we move through all this richness and hardly know it's even there!

**A close-up shot of crocus.
Ian McArthur photo.**

