

BMN HIKE REPORT

Buntzen Powerhouses

(August 8, 2015)
by Mark Johnston



Panoramic shot of the hiking group on a break at Trout/McCombe Lake. *Chloe Tu photo.*

For the third year in a row, we decided on an alternative to our scheduled hike, Bear Mountain. There seemed no compelling reason to pick a different hike. While the forecast called for increasing cloudiness and late afternoon showers, the eastern skies were clear and it appeared that we could be up and down the mountain before any views would be obscured. But the general mood of the group was to do something local, so, as in the previous two years, we chose to head for Buntzen Lake, this time not to hike the Halvor Lunden Trail but to visit the powerhouses instead.

The Buntzen powerhouses are, perhaps, more familiar to boaters plying the waters of Indian Arm than they are to the thousands of people who visit Buntzen Lake each year. Although seen to best advantage from the water, they still hold interest for those who approach on foot. They were built as part of a decades-long project to supply hydroelectric power to the burgeoning City of Vancouver. Powerhouse No. 1 produced its first power on December 17, 1903. Constructed of solid masonry, the powerhouse initially held three units, each of 3000 horsepower and producing 1500 kilowatts of power. Over time, other units were added. Then in 1951 the older units were replaced by a single unit capable of producing three times as much power. Powerhouse No. 2, built for the remaining units of the originally projected ten, was completed in 1914. Its wheels were capable of generating 26,700 kilowatts of power.

Three of us had visited the powerhouses before; for the other four it would be a new experience. Having met first in Coquitlam, we regrouped at the Buntzen Lake parking area. It was still very early—before 8:00 am—and the park was nearly empty. We could hear a raven croaking and watched a number of swifts flying high overhead in their characteristic “twinkling” style.

Since we had walked along Buntzen Lake’s eastside trail a couple of times already this year, we decided to hike along Powerhouse Road to North Beach. Walking side-by-side on the wide gravel (sometimes paved) road, we fell into conversation and took only cursory note of vegetation or birdsong. But maybe three-quarters of the way to the beach our attention was drawn to what is apparently a bat box affixed to the smooth surface of a fractured boulder. The box, a few metres above the road, is of similar proportions to the boxes at Colony Farm but smaller. It is made of a composite material and has a narrow opening at the bottom. The front of the box bears the engraved

image of a bat, more of a “Batman”-style bat than one found in nature. It seems a strange place to locate a bat box, and one wonders whether it is a functioning box or meant instead as a bit of artistry.

At North Beach we paused for a short break. The beach was quiet and the lake perfectly still. Eighteen Canada geese were nestled in the sand, hardly stirring. A lone raven flew down and, perching atop the back of a bench, surveyed the scene.

Buntzen Lake, viewed from North Beach. The foreground plant in bloom is chicory.
Chloe Tu photo.



It would have been easy to settle in and while away the morning, but with our goal in mind we pressed onward. Crossing the suspension bridge, we picked up the Old Buntzen Lake Trail and followed it toward the north end of the Diez Vistas Trail. Part way along, we could look across what is variously called Trout or McCombe Lake (contiguous with Buntzen Lake) and observe Swan Falls as it spilled down the lower slopes of Eagle Ridge. While impressive in flood, today—in the middle of a very hot, dry summer—the falls were a mere trickle.



View looking southwest from "Vista Electra," an 11th viewpoint beyond the diez vistas.
Chloe Tu photo.

Before long we reached the Diez Vistas Trail and, minutes up this well-travelled trail, located an all-but-hidden side path to the right. For the initiated, this path is signalled by an orange-coloured trail marker, not unlike the other markers but somewhat larger in size. We followed the side path up a steep embankment and then over level ground to the edge of a cliff. Here we had a commanding view looking up and down Indian Arm. Dubbed “Vista Electra” because of its position directly above Powerhouse No. 2, this eleventh viewpoint provides a better prospect than most, if not all, of the “diez vistas.” We stayed for some time, identifying various features. Looking southwest, we could see Bedwell Bay; Twin, Raccoon, and Jug islands; Capitol Hill; and distant Metrotown. Across the inlet we picked

out Mts. Seymour and Bishop. To the north we could make out the declivity of Bishop Creek and (possibly) the southern end of Croker Island. We also had a bird's-eye view of boat traffic on the water below. For much of our time at the viewpoint, we watched campers from Camp Jubilee on the far shore paddle in twelve kayaks and one Voyageur-style canoe toward the powerhouse, their voices carrying across the water. They seemed to be speaking in a language other than English, maybe French. Two great blue herons flew from the north in a southeasterly direction, squawking as they went. We also spotted four or five birds headed south, snowy white against the green foliage of Seymour Mountain. Although we didn't identify them, I imagine that they were gulls.



A large valve associated with the penstocks of Powerhouse No. 2.
Chloe Tu photo.

Satiated with views, we dropped down to the large circular well above the exposed boilerplate penstocks of Powerhouse No. 2. Then we bushwhacked down to a lower road that provides access to the pipelines. Following the road to its end, we spent some time admiring the design and construction of the large-diameter pipes—three of them—with their perfectly fitted sections and neat rows of rivets.

Powerhouse No. 2.
Chloe Tu photo.

As we couldn't see any easy way to descend directly to the powerhouse, we followed the side road back out to the main Powerhouse Road and turned downhill toward Powerhouse No. 1. Farther down the main road, a gravel path and a number of flights of stairs allow for a closer approach to No. 2. Including the few concrete steps between stairways, we descended a total of 220 steps. The final flight is ascending, consisting of fifteen steps. At the top of this flight, we walked out onto a level bench and came at last to the powerhouse. (A further descending staircase and catwalk lead to a back door entrance.) We saw that it would be challenging to get around to the front of the powerhouse, so we had to be content with viewing it from behind. We missed, thereby, the building's arched windows and other ornamentation only visible from the water.



We sat down to eat lunch on the bench, where we had a tree-filtered view of Indian Arm. Earlier in the year there had been a small fire here. The trees have blackened trunks and we detected a lingering odour of smoke. Fortunately, the fire did not spread far; the burn area is quite localized.

After lunch we returned to Powerhouse Road, this time descending the fifteen steps and then ascending the remaining 220. We continued down the road to Powerhouse No. 1, once again viewing the plant from the back. We could also look to our right toward the nearby community of Buntzen Bay and took note of Little Horn Mountain rising above it (Little Horn being the bluffy knob we had visited on our club hike in March).

To return we chose to follow Powerhouse Road as far as North Beach and then the eastside Buntzen Lake Trail the rest of the way. As we finished our circuit of Trout/McCombe Lake—and before reaching North Beach—we took one last break where Trout Creek, after dropping precipitously via Swan Falls, enters the lake. Then, with lengthened stride, we kept up a good pace all the way back to the parking area. We had spent six-and-a-half hours on the trail, about the same amount time that is recommended for the hike up and down Bear Mountain, but without having to face a long drive home at the end. One of these days we will do Bear Mountain, but in the meantime it's great to have a multiplicity of hiking options so close to home.