

## BMN HIKE REPORT

### Manning Park Skyline Trail (July 25 2015)

By Mark Johnston



Looking from Cascade Lookout toward Skyline divide. Lightning Lake visible below; Red Mountain, in the background. *Gay Mitchell photo.*

After a couple of hikes close to home, one on Eagle Ridge and the other on Burke Mountain, we planned to venture farther afield with a hike in E.C. Manning Provincial Park. My family and I decided to make a weekend of it and booked accommodation at the park lodge for Friday night so as to be in position to meet the rest of our group on Saturday morning. For some, the weather forecast was a concern, and before we left for the park a few had already decided against making the trip. Still, we were hopeful that those committed to gathering on Saturday morning in Coquitlam would choose to come.

My family and I arrived at the park about 2:30 pm and were able to check into our room ahead of time. Once settled, we decided on a walk around the eastern half of Lightning Lake. We began our walk at the day-use area on the north shore of the lake. At one time this area was well treed, but following the relatively recent pine beetle infestation the lodgepole pines died and the park service cut them down. Now the area is an expansive lawn, though not without interest. Columbian ground squirrels have taken up residence and, while never straying too far from their burrows, seem always ready to receive a handout. After watching these creatures for several minutes, we walked east along the shoreline, crossed the dam to the south side of the lake, and began a clockwise loop around what was formerly marshland, using Rainbow Bridge to cross the narrows back to the north side. It was a beautiful afternoon, a mix of sun and cloud, with a moderate wind and only a few drops of rain, not enough to bother about. We walked slowly, binoculars in hand, attentive to sights and sounds. Birds on the lake or at the water's edge included a lone female mallard, three Canada geese, and a couple of great blue herons. Both

barn and violet-green swallows soared and swooped above the lake. And of the many birds in the shoreline forest, we noted particularly chickadees, nuthatches, robins and varied thrushes, and woodpeckers. From some vantage points, especially on the north side, we had views of the east peak of Frosty Mountain, which displayed as copper-coloured in the late afternoon light, a few patches of snow still adorning its steep sides. In the foreground bright yellow-green horsetails and sun-spotted false azaleas trimmed the deep phthalo green lake.

Following a delectable dinner at the resort's dining room and a swim in its saltwater pool, we were ready for an early night, wondering what the morning would bring. Before turning in, we looked out our window to see a gibbous moon rising over Frosty Mountain's northeast ridge. The moon lit up a few bands of cloud.

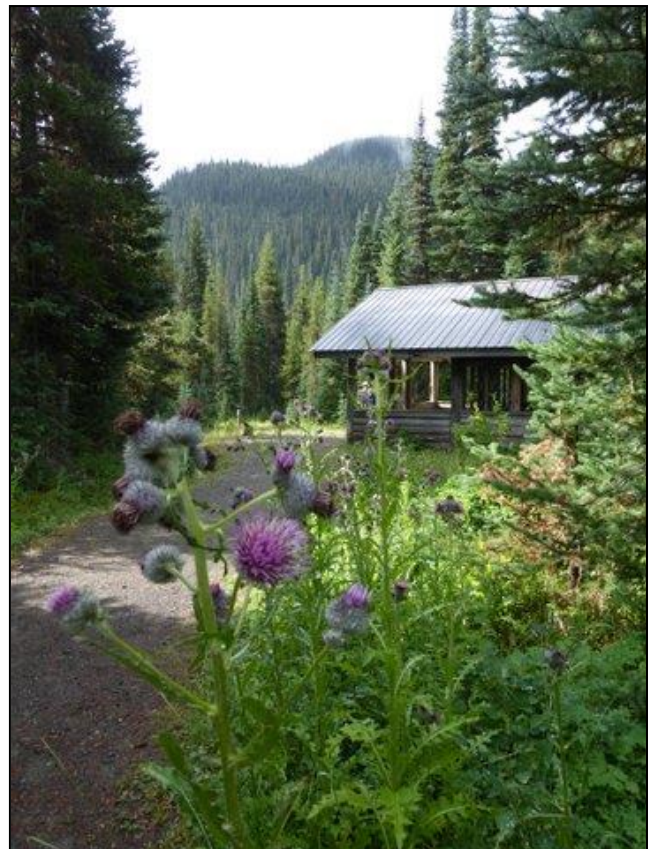
We were up early the next morning, partly in anticipation of the day's hike, but also eager to learn what the rest of our group had decided. Looking out the window, we could see that it had been raining but also noted one or two patches of blue in the sky. We checked our messages and found out that the few people who had gathered in Coquitlam had made the decision not to drive to Manning but to hike locally on Burnaby Mountain instead. Disappointed, but undaunted, we went ahead with our plans to hike the Skyline Trail.

We breakfasted on cereal with almond milk—the only “milk” we could find in the resort store the day before—and set out for the trailhead. While driving up the valley of Little Muddy Creek, we saw a female spruce grouse by the side of the road. In identifying the bird we noted its lack of a band on the tip of its tail. (Spruce grouse of the Cascades, known as “Franklin's grouse,” lack this band.)

As we continued up the valley, it began to rain again but the shower was short-lived. When we arrived at the trailhead parking area, we stepped out of the car into brilliant sunshine! This would be the pattern for the morning: a mix of sun and cloud, the occasional trace of rain (hardly enough to warrant putting on a jacket), and a general drying trend. The clouds were high, so, as we walked along the trail, we could see the heights above us, as well as the ridge top on the opposite side of the valley.

**The start of the hike: at the Strawberry Flats warming hut.  
*Gay Mitchell photo.***

We started at the Strawberry Flats warming hut, a log structure with a semi-enclosed porch and leaded-glass windows. We were on a wide track in open woods and walked slowly, careful to study and record the flora and fauna we encountered along the way. Initially we moved among Engelmann spruce and mostly dead lodgepole pine. The former tree's trunk is covered with loose greyish scales and its needles are pointed and prickly. Our path was often littered with its light brown cones. As for the latter tree, while there were a few younger pines with fresh green needles, all of the mature lodgepoles had expired. Since mature lodgepoles tend to have limbs only on the upper third of the trunk, it was sometimes hard to appreciate that the trees were dead until we turned our gaze upward toward the bare branches which hung lifelessly, pointing downward. When focused on wildflowers at the base of one of these pines, it was easy to think of the tree as living and vital. But in general views these ghostlike pines all but disappeared, reading more as negative space—as gaps in the forest.





In this dry year, we found most of the wildflowers to be finished, many having gone to seed. Nevertheless we were able to find individual plants of a number of species still sporting a bloom. Among them (more or less in the order recorded) were fireweed, yarrow, lupine, thistle, cow parsnip, aster, groundsel, Sitka valerian, mountain daisy, arnica, foamflower, and monkshood.



**Thistle and monkshood.**  
*Gay Mitchell photos.*

Species for which we could not find any individuals in bloom included columbine, false hellebore, and queen's cup. Western anemone was in its "mop-top" phase. We discovered strawberry and dwarf huckleberry, both bearing some fruit.

We walked on nearly level ground for about 600 m to the junction with the Three Falls Trail, then turned sharp left toward

the Skyline divide. We continued on level ground in open forest for a while but eventually embarked on a gradual ascent toward the ridge top. As we gained elevation—now on a narrower path in denser woods—we began to notice alpine fir and mountain hemlock. One of the more striking shrubs was black twinberry, its shiny black "twin" berries cupped by two pairs of deep-purplish maroon bracts. A delicate oak fern, *Gymnocarpium dryopteris*, sometimes formed an almost continuous carpet.

***Gymnocarpium dryopteris* and columbine.**  
*Gay Mitchell photo.*



At a crossing of a tributary of Nepopekum Creek, we found pearly everlasting in bloom. And just beyond the trail's next bridge, we came across grass-of-Parnassus, with its white five-petal flower atop a long stem graced with a clasping leaf.

To save weight we had decided to leave our binoculars behind, a decision we would regret as the day wore on. We heard a number of birds, recognizing them by their songs or calls. These included nuthatches, varied thrushes, and chickadees. We spotted what was likely a pine siskin atop a spruce and heard a Pacific wren in the undergrowth near the crossing of the tributary. But after reaching our high point of the hike and reversing course, we began to have a bit of trouble identifying with certainty. Part way back we noticed two finch-like birds near the top of a lodgepole. These birds were perched on a high branch: we could see that they had red on their heads and also (at least) their upper breasts and appeared to have long tails. While certain identification eluded us, they may have been pine grosbeaks. We'd also been hearing woodpeckers drumming and finally had a reasonably good look at a pair tapping away high up the trunk of another lodgepole. In difficult light they appeared to have dark heads and dark backs and, when not pecking away at the trunk, were chattering with one another. We thought they might be sapsuckers but, later, after consulting guidebooks, wonder whether they could have been three-toed. One bird we

had no trouble identifying, although we had to depend on our ear again, was the hermit thrush. We were able to recognize its presence by attending to its lovely flutelike song wafting through the forest.



Returning through the forest.

*Gay Mitchell photo.*

Back on the wider track, we stopped to study water droplets on lupine leaves. On most of the plants we observed, the palmate leaflets cradled a single droplet, which sparkled in the sunlight. Upon closer examination we found that the droplet acted as a lens, magnifying the stem head and base of the leaflets so as to reveal their structure. Next, our attention turned to an azure butterfly, which we watched for some time as it rested on a purplish aster petal. Finally, we were able to add red clover and partridgefoot to our list of flowers for the day.

Although the sun was definitely lending warmth, it was for the most part a cool day. After our hike we enjoyed hot chocolate at the resort bistro, then thought we might drive up to Cascade Lookout for an overview of the park and surrounding area. On the drive up we saw a yellow-bellied marmot on a rocky side-hill; then at the lookout we saw two more species of mammals: the Cascade golden-mantled ground squirrel and the yellow pine chipmunk. Also present was the seemingly ubiquitous Clark's nutcracker. The latter two mammals and Clark's nutcracker all seemed well used to handouts and weren't shy about approaching people.

At Cascade Lookout: golden-mantled ground squirrel. *Gay Mitchell photo.*

While we thoroughly enjoyed their company, we had come for the views and soon turned our attention to the panorama before us. Sweeping our gaze from southeast to west, we could see Sheep Mountain (in the United States), Windy Joe, The Parks and Mt. Winthrop (both in the States), Frosty, Hozomeen and Mox Peaks (also both in the States), Skyline divide, and Red Mountain. Clouds partially obscured the tip of Frosty's west peak and the tops of Hozomeen's two peaks; otherwise, we could clearly discern every ridgeline and mountaintop.



It was fiercely windy at the lookout, so after having a good look around we retreated down the mountain. We would have stayed a second night in the park but were unable to secure accommodation at the lodge, so after another fine meal at the dining room we began the long drive home. Although our stay at Manning was barely 28 hours, it felt like we had been there for a longer time, our memory banks full of images to attend to and ponder.