

BMN HIKE REPORT

St. Mark's Summit (October 4, 2015)

by Mark Johnston



View from St. Mark's Summit showing (left to right) Black Mountain, Bowen Island (Keats Island behind), Bowyer Island, Gambier and Anvil islands with the Sunshine Coast behind. Vancouver Island is visible on the horizon. *Chloe Tu photo.*

When I last visited St. Mark's Summit more than twenty years ago, I remember being alone at the top and meeting few, if any, people on the trail. How very different our hiking group's experience on this warm, sunny October Sunday! Not only were we among a small crowd of people at the top, our journey to and from the summit was made in the company of dozens of other hikers. One might account for the difference in experience in terms of a swelling metropolitan population and a growing interest in hiking, but there is likely another important factor: current upgrades to the Howe Sound Crest Trail. With 2010 Olympic legacy funding, BC Parks has rebuilt the trails in Cypress Bowl and the Crest Trail as far as Strachan Meadows. These trails are now wide, gravelled, well drained, and completely smooth—no rocks or roots to trip you up. (The project continues, with completion set for 2018/19. Presumably, by then, the Crest Trail will be gravelled to all the way to St. Mark's and beyond.)

We began our hike at Cypress Creek Lodge. There were ten of us. The air was cool, but with the sun gaining strength we knew the chill wouldn't last. Although doing so added distance to our hike, we followed the shoreline of Yew Lake, pausing twice to savour the beauty of its still, dark waters which bore a clear reflection of the mountainside above. Fall colour was evident: false azalea and berry bushes displaying yellow leaves; fireweed and bunchberry, red. We continued through Yew Meadows, its grass flaxen, and stopped a third time in the small swath of old growth that lies between the meadows and Pumphouse Road. While admiring the trees, we heard a raven croaking and the raucous cry of a Steller's jay. Out on the road we were treated to chickadees' chattering.



After leaving the road and ascending a few switchbacks, we departed from our route to visit the reconstructed Bowen Lookout.

Chipmunks at Bowen Lookout were familiar with the benefits of passing hikers. *Chloe Tu photo.*

This is a fine viewpoint, with the islands of Howe Sound stretched out map-like below. Distant views encompass Gabriola Island, Vancouver Island, and the Sunshine Coast. We observed two or three raptors

soaring; one or two were northern harriers, with light underside and white rump patch. But our attention was divided. As we snacked, two Steller's jays and then two gray jays swooped in close for handouts. Not to be outdone, a chipmunk also came near. Even if we had wanted to, we couldn't ignore them. So, with mildly guilty naturalist consciences, we spared a few nuts for them!

We were long enough at Bowen Lookout that other parties came and went. Eventually we too returned to the Crest Trail and continued northward to Strachan Meadows. At the meadows we eyed the route up the steep gully that provides access to Mt. Strachan's two summits. Some of us had followed this line previously, but today our route lay straight ahead. A few strides further on we came to the end of the gravelled trail and our first indication as to why the work is necessary. From this point on, the trail is an eroded, "rooty" mess. Whereas on the gravelled sections we had the luxury of being able to look around and take note of our surroundings, now we had to fix our eyes on the ground lest we trip over an exposed tree root and turn an ankle, or fall hard and maybe break a bone.

Hikers enjoying the ease of the newly gravelled trail.
Chloe Tu photo.

At the top of a rise, we enjoyed a level stretch on which we had some reprieve from the roots, but when we began climbing again we encountered more of the mess. We had noticed that on the new sections of trail the trail builders had cut into the bank to a considerable depth, shaving off all protruding roots, to achieve a level surface for walking.



As we clambered up the older sections of trail, we gained a greater appreciation for the difficulty of their task. While I'm not necessarily a fan of overbuilt trails, it seems, given the Crest Trail's proximity to the city and its growing popularity, that in this case it is entirely necessary.



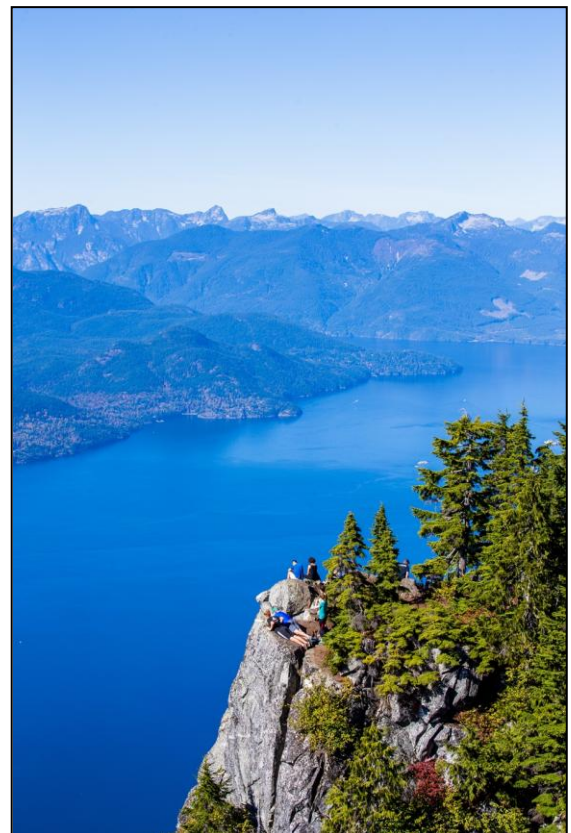
A view from the summit, looking WSW toward Mt. Arrowsmith on Vancouver Island. Bowen Island is in the left middle ground; Mt. Elphinstone on the Sunshine Coast is visible just below the branch in the upper right corner of the photo. *Chloe Tu photo.*

Coming at last to the summit area, we joined the throngs who had arrived before us. Fortunately, St. Mark's Summit has a number of rocky outcrops, so people were spread out in semi-isolated groupings. We sat down at the first outcrop we came to and had our lunch.

Views from the summit to the northwest across the lower, projecting outcrop, the northern portion of Gambier Island, and toward the peaks that rise above Rainy River on the Sunshine Coast.
Chloe Tu photo.

Our views were similar to those we had enjoyed at Bowen Lookout, except now we were looking down from a greater height. Also, our angle of view was wider. At one periphery we could see more of the Gulf Islands (as far south as Mayne) and at the other, farther along the Sunshine Coast toward Tantalus, Serratus, and Alpha mountains.

After lunch we did some exploring. From a lower, projecting outcrop it was possible to look back between Strachan and Black mountains toward Vancouver International Airport, Richmond, and the coal port. One could also look straight down to Horseshoe Bay and the Sea to Sky Highway. On the



other side of the Crest Trail, I followed a footpath to the true summit. Although the summit is treed and has no views, I had en route a few glimpses of Cathedral Mountain and farther afield, the Pinecone-Burke summits. Back on the Crest Trail, looming ahead were the Lions. In fact, the route we'd been hiking was the original approach to what Dawn Hanna calls "the most recognizable geographical landmark in the Lower Mainland." Before there was a road up Howe Sound or a bridge across Burrard Inlet, one's approach to any of the North Shore peaks was on foot, beginning from the ferry terminal in West Vancouver.

Although much of our return was by the way we had come, when we reached the kiosk paying tribute to earlier generation trail builder Paul Binkert, we turned aside from following the Crest Trail (West) and chose the eastern route instead. This route led us to a wide road/ski run, but not before we spotted a sooty grouse,



which crossed the trail in front of us and disappeared into the bush. The road/ski run allowed for views of Cypress Bowl and toward Vancouver, and also brought us to an unexpected and exciting convergence. As we approached the Collins Run and the top of Easy Rider, we saw several people looking ahead.

Black bear cubs.
Chloe Tu photo.

We followed their gaze, and there some metres up slope were two black bear cubs. As we watched, we could just make out mother bear, mostly out of view, and then later a third cub came into view. It was a thrilling sight and nice way to end a thoroughly enjoyable excursion.