

BMN HIKE REPORT

Elfin Lakes and Columnar Peak (Saturday, September 27, 2014)

by Mark Johnston



BMN hikers on the summit of Columnar Peak. *Chloe Tu photo.*

On a beautiful autumn morning, fourteen of us set out from Garibaldi Provincial Park's Diamond Head parking lot bound for Elfin Lakes and points beyond. Those in the lead set a stiff pace up the jeep road which serves as the summer trail to the lakes. Despite the morning chill, we were soon stripping off outer layers of clothing. We made our way through stately old growth comprised of lichen-draped mountain hemlock as well as cedar and fir. We passed a minor viewpoint that looked down upon the Squamish River estuary. The viewpoint provided a unique perspective of the Stawamus Chief, which, from this angle, thought one of our party, resembled a giant Christmas pudding. Further along we came upon a picturesque falls cascading down a rocky outcrop.

Hikers on the trail between jeep road switchbacks. The Tantalus Range is in the background.
Chloe Tu photo.



At first, the road runs in a northwesterly direction but eventually turns back to the northeast. As we followed the road in its change of direction, we observed the trees thinning and began to see seasonal colour. False azaleas were yellow-gold, and blueberry bushes cerise. The latter still bore abundant fruit, and although one might have expected they would be past their prime, the berries were perfectly ripened and especially delicious. We had our first views to the north toward Mt. Garibaldi's Atwell Peak, its pyramidal top dusted with fresh snow.

Only slightly slowed by the availability of berries, we soon reached Red Heather Meadows. The heather bloom was long past, but the meadows still had a reddish hue, the berry bushes now supplying the colour.

Red Heather Meadows red with fall foliage of blueberry.
Chloe Tu photo.

The vegetation was wet with dew, and with the droplets of moisture backlit by the morning sunlight, the gently upward sloping meadows sparkled as if covered with a light frost.



Here, at Red Heather, we split into two parties, a faster party bound for Columnar Peak and a slower party happy to spend the day at Elfin Lakes. Those of us in the former group (nine altogether) held to a good pace. We cut the road's final switchback on a well-established, if muddy, trail and soon reached the route's high point and the start of our gradual, undulating descent to the lakes. Now views opened out in many directions. Besides the clear view of Garibaldi, we could see our destination, Columnar Peak, and toward the southeast the "riotously glaciated" Mamquam Mountain. A few clouds hung on some of the higher peaks, sometimes revealing, sometimes obscuring their summits.

Lunch on the shore of lower Elfin Lake.
Chloe Tu photo.

We reached the lakes by 11:30 am and settled down by the shore of the farther, lower lake to have lunch. The lakes sit, jewel-like, toward the end of Paul Ridge. Looking into their waters on this pretty autumn day was like gazing into a mirror, the blue of the lakes reflecting the blue of the sky.



Before we had finished eating, our second party caught up with us. But for those of us who had set our sight on the peak, we couldn't afford to linger. If we were going to reach the summit in a timely way, we needed to keep moving. So, leaving the lake, we lost a little more elevation and then began the increasingly steep climb toward the summit. Although there was some temptation to ascend the peak more directly via steeply pitched talus slopes, we decided that proceeding to The Saddle and then following the ridgeline around to the summit might be the safer route. Climbing the steep grade and breathing harder in the thin air, we stretched out along the trail, some attaining The Saddle more quickly, others more slowly. A couple of those who gained The Saddle first had time to scramble up to The Gargoyles before the last of the group arrived. Then, with everyone together again, we set out along the ridge toward the peak.

Talus slopes on the approach to the summit. *Chloe Tu photo.*

We kept to the narrow vegetated ridgetop or the open rocky sidehill just below it. We climbed over a couple of minor bumps and then up a higher one, where we had an unexpected view down the length of Howe Sound. Then we had to lose elevation once more before the final approach to the summit. When at long last we achieved the top, our views were panoramic.



Final approach to the summit. *Chloe Tu photo.*

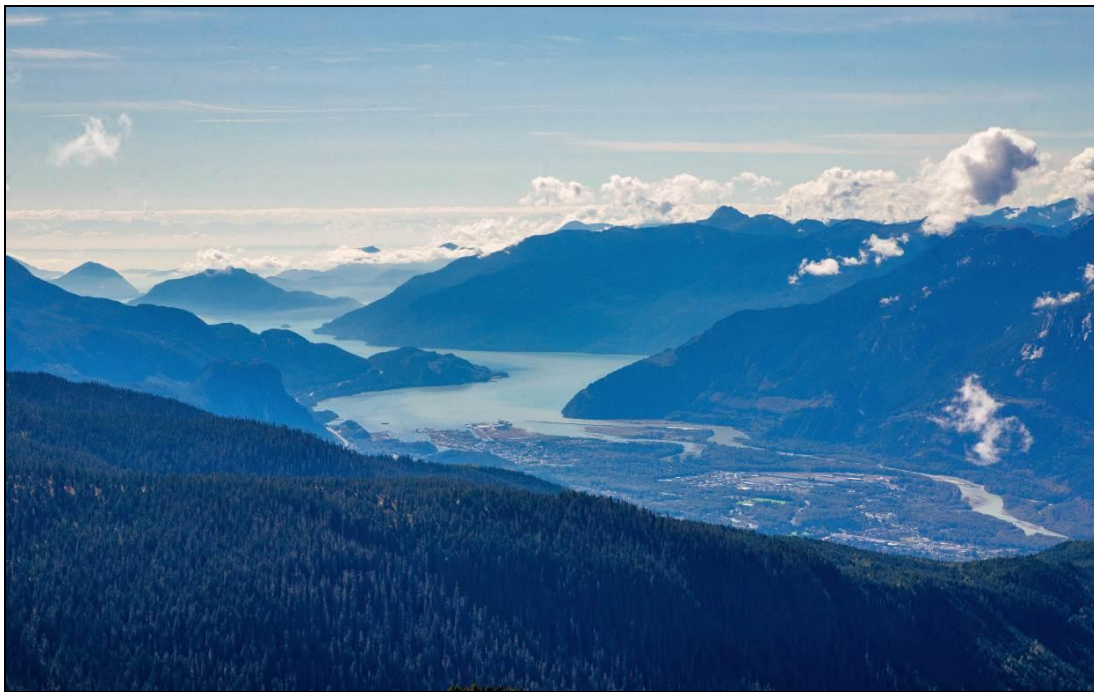
We could look along the ridgeline to a sub-summit almost as high as the peak we were on. It was also possible to trace almost our entire route to the summit: we could see the jeep road along Paul Ridge as well as the trail up from Elfin Lakes. We looked west to the Tantalus Range; south down the sound to the Strait of Georgia, Gulf Islands, and Vancouver Island; east to Mamquam Mountain; and north to Garibaldi; Atwell Peak, Garibaldi's summit, and the interesting formation known as The Tent all being plainly visible. Closer at hand we had a good look at the basaltic columns for which the peak is named. These columns are particularly noticeable just below the summit on its east side, although there are several on the ridgeline to the south as well. They are four-sided and "stacked" together, resting at an angle of about 45 degrees.



On the summit. Elfin Lakes are visible down below.

Chloe Tu photo.

As time was wearing on, we stayed on the summit for only thirty minutes or so, and then began the long descent. Ian stayed behind a little longer to do some photography. As I took care on the loose rock of what had been our final approach to the peak, I looked back up to see Ian still at the top. A moment later, I looked back up again: no Ian, but I saw perched near where he'd been standing a lone raven!



Looking down Howe Sound as seen from the summit. *Chloe Tu photo.*

By the time we reached the lake, our other party had already departed. Nonetheless, we stopped to have a snack. While it had been cool up on the ridge, it was warm and pleasant by the lake. It would have been easy to stay for a while, but, disciplining ourselves, we were soon on our way. On our return journey our gaze was often drawn to the Tantalus Range directly before us. The clouds that had wreathed the peaks earlier in the day had now dissipated and we could identify the various summits.

Gray jays swoop down for a nutty treat.
Chloe Tu photo.

We stopped also at Red Heather Meadows. While we snacked, a gray jay or two looked on entreatingly. When a couple of our party held out nuts, the jays swooped down to snatch them from the outstretched hands. Before long more jays arrived, a half dozen in all, and the feeding frenzy was on. While it may not be good practice to feed birds in this way, it's hard to resist providing a few morsels for these companionable creatures.



From Red Heather we kept up a steady pace to the parking area. All of us, that is, except for the few who stopped a third time for a “naturalist moment.” After re-entering the forest, we heard birds chattering—clearly chickadees, but which species? Some of us lingered for a few moments, hoping to get a good look at them. I stayed on a bit longer, hoping for a clearer view, and was finally able to identify them as *chestnut-backed* chickadees.

We rendezvoused with our other party at the parking lot. The five of them had gotten down maybe forty minutes before us and had a tale to tell. On their way through the forest, they had run into a black bear! Although they had been able to pass by it safely, there was a moment of concern directed toward one member who, intent on photographing it, had remained in its proximity, maybe not realizing the potential danger.

As we prepared for the long trip home, we reflected upon what had been a brilliant day in a truly magnificent area. While it was hard to turn away from so much mountain grandeur, our drive along Howe Sound in the pink of sunset mitigated any sadness.