

HIKE REPORT

Ramblings on Bowen (October 30, 2021)

By Mark Johnston



From Hood Point looking east toward Finisterre Island and beyond to the Britannia Range. *Photo: Terry Puls*

Mt. Collins is the third-highest mountain on Bowen Island. Unlike the much higher Mt. Gardner, Collins lacks summit views (although, halfway up, there are a couple of rocky outcroppings offering partial views). Nevertheless, *The Glorious Mountains of Vancouver's North Shore* guidebook gives the hike a "bang for buck" rating of 3/5, enthusing that the trail to the top "is a relatively undiscovered gem for runners, hikers, and peakbaggers." The book goes on to whet the appetite with this further description: "En route you will see mature trees dappled with sunlight, many arbutus clinging to sunny bluffs, and small clearings carpeted in moss. The noises of civilization are masked by birdsong." What more could naturalist hikers want?

We originally scheduled the hike up Mt. Collins for October 2019 but for a couple of reasons decided to postpone it. At the time, of course, we had no way of knowing that we were about to be plunged

into a worldwide pandemic and would not be able to reschedule the hike anytime soon. Although we are still not at the point of offering club hikes, three BMN members decided to reconnoitre Collins, with the thought of putting it back on the club's hiking agenda in the future.

After a week of rain and showers, the weekend of Halloween looked to be clear. On Saturday, Terry picked me up at 6:20 am and we met Chris in Burnaby at about quarter to seven. When travelling together, we were careful to observe COVID-19 safety protocols. We drove in the cold, near-frosty darkness across the Ironworkers Memorial Bridge. As we continued along the Upper Levels Highway, we began to see just a hint of dawn on the eastern horizon. By the time we arrived at the Horseshoe Bay ferry terminal, the sky had brightened significantly. We pulled up to the ticket window, paid our fees, and took our place in the lineup.

Just after eight we were crossing Queen Charlotte Channel toward Snug Cove. There was a stiff wind blowing down Howe Sound and the ferry heaved and rolled a bit in the choppy sea. But the adverse conditions didn't seem to affect our voyage and the ferry nosed into its island berth right on time.

As we drove off the ferry and made our way to the trailhead, the sun was just beginning to crest the crenellated ridgetop of the Britannia Range. We found the trailhead without difficulty, got out of the car, and spent a few minutes making clothing and footwear adjustments. With the windchill, it was darn cold, and we were all anxious to get underway.

At about 8:40, we started up a driveway with houses on either side. The property owner to the right had put up a crude wooden sign intended to direct foot traffic away from his house. If we had any doubts about the way we were going, the sign—bearing the word **Trail** with a black arrow beneath it—was welcome reassurance that we were indeed on the right path. We passed through a white metal gate and hiked up an impossibly steep gravel road to a green water tower. We heard a flicker give its piercing *klee-yer*. We circled around the left side of the tower and continued upward to the base of a cliff. As instructed by the guidebook, we made our way left along the cliff and avoided any temptation to tackle it directly.

Our route levelled out a bit but, as we continued on the easier grade, we noticed that we were moving steadily away from the ridgeline. We came into an open, relatively flat area where there were a number of maple trees. Some of the trees had dropped their leaves, which littered the ground. Others still bore them, though they had mostly turned yellow. As we passed beneath the maples, we had some nagging doubts about whether we were still headed the right way. As we expressed these to each other, suddenly a man walking a dog came up behind us. I turned and said hello and, as he seemed to be a local, asked whether “straight ahead” was the way to Mt. Collins. He indicated that we were heading toward “the mastodon” and eventually there would be a “goat path” to the summit, but he also pointed back toward a route we had just passed. I looked up the slope and could see a trail snaking upward. We figured the latter route was probably the one we wanted and made note of the man's further direction to “stay left at the T intersection.” Thanking our “angel,” we backtracked a few metres to the path we had missed. We didn't enquire any further about what was meant by “the mastodon.”

It was easy to see how we had walked right by the uphill trail. There was a downed and broken-up maple branch blocking the way. Although easily stepped over or walked around, it was enough of a

barrier to obscure the path from view. We got past the branch and found ourselves climbing quite steeply again. The wind continued to blow hard and with treetops waving we kept alert for any sound of breakage. I recalled the signage now placed at trailheads at Buntzen cautioning hikers that in high winds they should leave the forest at once. We reasoned that although it was blowing a little harder than we would have liked, the wind hadn't yet reached sufficient force so as to put us in imminent danger.

We were walking through a forest comprised of young Douglas-fir, hemlock, and some cedar. Beneath the canopy we passed through an understory thick with knee- to waist-high salal. Chris drew our attention to the shrub's new growth of leaves. From time to time we saw small flocks of varied thrush moving through the trees. When we approached the outer edge of the ridge, where there are rock bluffs, we found arbutus and *Pinus contorta*.

In due time we arrived at the T junction. Turning left to continue up the ridge, we found that the trail improved considerably. From the junction onward the footbed, though still narrow, is mostly soft and spongy. We came to a rocky bluff with tree-filtered views.



At the Mt. Collins bluff looking east toward the Britannia Range.

Photo: Terry Puls

Now at roughly the halfway point of our hike, we stopped for water and a snack, and to do some photography. Making allowance for the trees, our view included all of the peaks of the Britannia Range from the West Lion south to Black Mountain. The Lion and neighbouring north and south peaks of Unnecessary Mountain were snow-capped. We could

also make out Point Grey, Mt. Baker, and the Twin Sisters Range. Then, by manoeuvring a bit, we could even see north of the West Lion to James, David, and Harvey peaks. Harvey, too, had a snowy top.

The wind continued at full strength; no sign of abatement. When we resumed hiking, we stepped over a newly fallen pine branch. Once again, we wondered about the danger of falling debris. But soon after, we began to walk on the lee side of the ridge and didn't experience the wind directly anymore. We rose and dropped, rollercoaster-like, over a number of knolls. The second-growth forest, pleasant from the start, was becoming even nicer. We came across many quite-large Douglas-fir trees—one stately tree having enormous taproots—and saw at least one sizeable cedar. Here and there we heard the Pacific wren's two-syllabled call note. Working in sidehill fashion around one knoll, we dropped into a depression and came across a small pond, its water the colour of coffee grounds and surface strewn with yellow-orange needles. As we proceeded, we found the forest floor more open, no longer

covered with salal but rather a carpet of step and club mosses. We passed by another three or four ponds, the largest of which was half covered in sedge.

We topped one or two false summits and came at last to Collins Peak, which is marked by a small pyramidal rock cairn in a grove of young firs. It was 10:10. We each added a rock to the cairn, took the requisite photographs just “to prove we were there,” and stayed a while longer to have something to eat. But we didn’t linger too long, for we had planned, time permitting, to visit a couple of other scenic spots on the island. Although the guidebook suggests one may “turn on the jets” for the descent, we were content to take more of a *shinrin-yoku* (“forest bathing”) approach and spent about as much time walking out as we had walking in.

When we reached the cliff and were ready to begin our descent along its base, two or three women and a number of children were making their way up. One of the children asked us how far it was to the mastodon. We explained that we hadn’t gone to the mastodon but had instead headed straight up to Collins Peak. I asked one of the adults, “What is ‘the mastodon’?” She explained that it’s a sculpture hidden away in the forest partly as a protection against vandalism but also to evoke the beholder’s surprise. The idea is that an unsuspecting walker would happen upon it, gawk at it, and wonder about it. We were mildly tempted to follow the parents and children to see for ourselves, but, wanting to stick with our plan, decided to keep it in mind for another day. So, continuing downward, we trod carefully the steep road between the water tower and the white gate and reached our vehicle at quarter to twelve. We all agreed that even though Mt. Collins is without views, the hike to its summit is eminently worthwhile. Hopefully, we can do a proper club hike to Collins in the future and perhaps throw in a side trip to see the mastodon as well.

Next, Terry drove us to the Hood Point neighbourhood at the northeast tip of the island. The wind continued to blow as it had all day, whipping up white-capped waves that rolled down Howe Sound. We walked toward the tombolo (sand or gravel bar) that connects with Finisterre Island. The sky was blue and the water a richer blue. Our eyes were drawn toward a number of snowy peaks to the north: Mts. Wrottesley, Pelops, and Niobe on the Sunshine Coast; the Black Tusk (looking more like the “White Tusk”) beyond the head of the sound; and Deeks, Hat, Brunswick, and Harvey in the Britannia Range. If we lowered our gaze, we could scrutinize snowless Mt. Artaban on nearby Gambier Island. Looking the other way, to the south, we could see most of the peaks we’d seen previously from the Mt. Collins viewpoint.

Before dropping down to the tombolo, we could see the roofline of the house that is perched atop Finisterre Island. We could also see two bald eagles in a fir tree beside the home. Then, after descending to the isthmus, our view of house and birds was lost. We were looking instead at the island’s massive cliff and the entrance to a tunnel through the rock. Although we didn’t approach for a closer look, we could see far enough into the opening to notice a concrete driveway rising upward, presumably providing access to the clifftop estate.

We stopped at the near side of the tombolo to have our lunch. As we ate we noticed that the tide was rising. While Terry and Chris spent less time eating and soon turned to photography, I was left to keep an eye on the tide. When the water continued to rise, we all had to move to higher ground, and by the time I finished my lunch, the flow had completely covered the gravelly isthmus, cutting off access to the island.



From the end of the Sea View Trail, looking northwest toward Elphinstone, Panther, and Rainy peaks on the Sunshine Coast.

Photo: Terry Puls

After our time at Hood Point, we drove to the southwest tip of the island. We found our way to Cape Roger Curtis Lighthouse and then walked the Sea View Trail to

Collingwood Lane. The lighthouse is a small beacon on jagged rocks just offshore. Looking past it and over the water, we could see much of the length of Vancouver Island as far as Mts. Albert Edward and Washington. As we walked the trail—a beautiful public trail likely financed by the developer of the adjacent lots—we also came to have views of Worlcomb, Pasley, Mickey, Ragged, and Keats islands at the mouth of Howe Sound, and Elphinstone, Panther, and Rainy peaks on the Sunshine Coast. From all along the trail we noticed a number of very long, narrow metal piers, gleaming white, jutting out into the sea. As yet unconnected to land, they apparently await further sales of the lots before the missing links are put in place. In the meantime the piers are providing cormorants and gulls with an accommodating perch. While to date most lots remain empty, there is a brand new house on the parcel nearest the lighthouse. It is a giant of a house, too, with a dramatic wavelike glassed entry and 11,122 square feet of living space!

Our final stop was the Bowen Artisan Square, situated just above the main village. The square offers accommodations, food, shops, galleries, a Montessori school, as well as some professional services. The square seemed unusually quiet for a Saturday afternoon. We peeked through one gallery's windows and delighted to spy one or two paintings inspired by places we had just seen.

After our brief tour of the square, we drove down the hill and got into the ferry queue. It was ten to four, so we didn't have long to wait before boarding the on-the-hour sailing. Later, back on the mainland, we got into afternoon traffic. But the slowdown seemed a small price to pay for a wonderful day of camaraderie and exploration.