

BMN HIKE REPORT

West Knob (June 23, 2018)

by Mark Johnston



View from the West Knob viewpoint, looking toward Bowen Island. *Steve Giannopoulos photo.*

West Knob is a rock bluff overlooking Bowen Island in Howe Sound. Although one could begin at Cypress Bowl and drop down to it, our plan was to start in West Vancouver and hike up to it via the Whyte Lake and Baden-Powell trails. We thought a trip to West Knob, given its relatively moderate statistics (a round-trip distance of 12 km with an elevation gain of 610 m), would be a perfect hike for the shoulder-season, so we were a bit surprised when only two hikers showed up at our prearranged meeting place.

Not to be disappointed, the two of us drove to the Whyte Lake trailhead just off Westport Road at the highway viaduct across Nelson Creek. There is ample parking here, but we were amazed to see that already at 9:00 am the lot was nearly full. Apparently, just as we who live in the Tri-Cities have our favourite places to walk, like Colony Farm and Buntzen Lake, so

West Vancouverites flock to this spot to access a multiplicity of trails radiating west, north, and east.

We began our hike under cloudy skies—in fact, on our drive to the trailhead, we had experienced some drizzle—but we were cheered by the forecast which called for clearing beginning about noon. We left the parking lot and walked along the gravel service road that passes underneath the highway viaduct. As we did, we could look out from beneath the span toward the Strait of Georgia. Then, on the other side of the viaduct, we began to climb steeply. As we climbed, we enjoyed the “breezy, flutelike” song of Swainson’s thrush and took note of roadside wildflowers, including buttercup and Queen Anne’s lace. We soon joined the Trans Canada Trail which, starting at Horseshoe Bay, is routed along the former railway right-of-way and the abandoned 1956-vintage highway bridge over Nelson Creek. At a water tower we stayed with the TCT as it leaves the road and is now a proper trail running along the rim of Nelson Creek canyon through an ancient forest of Douglas-fir and western redcedar. We noticed a couple of Millennium-project signs such as one finds along the TCT at Moody Inlet or on Hoy Creek. The first provides information about black bears and the second, about *Thuja plicata*, western redcedar.

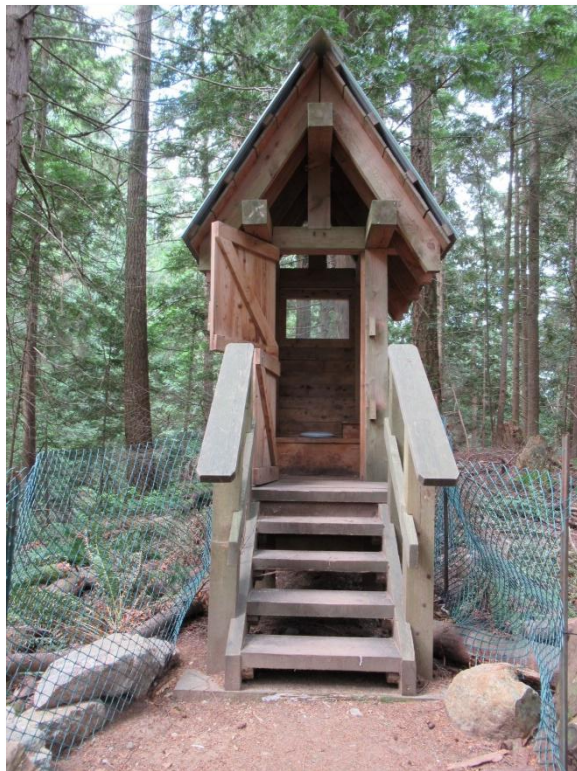
Before long we turned off onto the Whyte Lake Trail and crossed over Nelson Creek. The Whyte Lake Trail is nearly level as it parallels Whyte Creek in a narrow draw. This trail is a work of art, with rounds cut from logs and laid flat across muddy sections for “stepping stones,” rail fences to keep walkers safely back from the canyon rim’s precipitous drop, sturdy footbridges over Nelson and Whyte creeks, and a lengthy boardwalk through the marshy area at the south end of the lake. We continued to marvel at the many large old-growth fir trees along here, as well as at the profusion of ferns and other understory plants. Adding to our reverie was the Pacific wren’s bubbling trill.

When we reached Whyte Lake, we turned aside to visit the brand new dock which juts out into the lake and sports a non-slip surface and pool-style metal ladder to aid swimmers in entering and exiting the water. We sat on the dock for some time, just the two of us, and took in the sights and sounds. Although not large, the lake appeared to have good depth for swimming. It is dark in colour, such as is caused by an abundance of organic matter. It is ringed by dead trees, their bleached trunks contrasting with the brown water in front and the evergreen forest behind. Between the dock and the shore, we also noted what I believe to be a large patch of tufted loosestrife, with its bottlebrush-like clusters of yellow flowers. As we sat, the sun came out; a heron flew by just overhead; and, higher up, an eagle soared. We saw a yellowish bird alight on one of the dead trees, but without binoculars we were not able to identify it with certainty. I wondered if it might be a female western tanager, and, later, not far from the lake, we did hear a tanager’s call note.

Before leaving the lake area, we visited its “lovely outhouse.” That’s how the new hiking guide, *105 Hikes In and Around Southwestern British Columbia*, describes it. And it really is! One climbs half a dozen steps to a raised platform. The outhouse has a peaked metal roof, a Dutch door for access, and a back window to boot. A wall-to-wall wooden bench supports the toilet seat, and on one side there is a wooden box containing toilet paper. I didn’t detect any odour at all!

The "lovely outhouse" at Whyte Lake.
Steve Giannopoulos photo.

Just before the outhouse there is a trail junction. The guidebook seems to direct to the right, but signage at the place says go right for "Whyte Lake View," left for the Baden-Powell Trail and Black Mountain. It was toward the latter that we wanted to travel. So, after walking some ways to the right on what seemed to be a deteriorating path, we decided to play it safe and go back and take the left-hand route. We had to lose a little bit of elevation, but once we turned onto the Baden-Powell Trail—here a steep gravel road—we quickly regained it. We came to a side trail with a small yellow marker bearing the words "Whyte Lake," figured it was probably the right-hand route we had rejected earlier, and resolved to follow it on the way back. In this vicinity the Baden-Powell Trail levels and becomes quite pleasant. The roadside trees are stately and the roadbed's gravel surface is covered in crushed brown needles.



After a few more minutes, we left the open road and our route became more trail-like. Soon we were climbing steeply again, following the course of upper Whyte Creek. At times it seemed that we were walking in the creekbed, and in fact we crossed from one side of the creek to the other on more than one occasion. A lone hiker overtook us and continued past us. While he was still within our sight, we heard him begin to sing in a soothing voice. A moment later we spotted what was eliciting his song: a young black bear several metres ahead in a clearing. The bear scampered a little ways up slope but continued to watch us; it vocalized in a moderate tone once or twice. We kept our distance and slowly passed by, stopping only to take a photograph or two.

The young bear. *Steve Giannopoulos photo.*

Farther up we stopped for a breather at a level spot. We had a snack and some water as we listened to a red-breasted nuthatch's call, sounding, as some have said, like a "tiny tin horn."

When we resumed hiking, we began to climb even more steeply, the trail ascending in tight switchbacks. The forest here is very



dark, consisting of young densely packed trees. Not much light penetrates the canopy and there is very little undergrowth. We found ourselves walking in narrow draws, feeling closed-in, and wondering when we would come to the turnoff for the Donut Rock Trail and so the route to West Knob. We had been alerted by the guidebook to look for “an old metal plate on a tree indicating ‘Eagle Ridge.’” This would be the marker of the Donut Rock Trail. We had passed by one such metal plate already and had convinced ourselves that it couldn’t possibly be the intended marker. Still, as we walked farther and farther up the trail, we began to wonder if maybe the plate we had seen was indeed the one that we wanted. But at last we did find the right marker and a little later the side trail to West Knob, the latter path at first very steep and then levelling to access the fine rock bluff viewpoint.

At the lookout there is a large open area for sitting and though trees, mostly pine, interfere with the view of Bowen Island in Howe Sound, views looking out over the Strait of Georgia to the Gulf Islands and Vancouver Island are panoramic. Immediately below us we noted a couple of terraces of evergreens, and to our left, above us, the heights of Eagle Bluff. The waters of the strait were in sun, but cloud was drifting toward and over us and at the same time lifting up toward the top of Eagle Bluff. As we lunched we studied some of the nearer features such as Point Grey, the Fraser delta, Passage Island, Bowen Island’s Snug Cove, and Langdale and Gibsons on the Sunshine Coast.



View from the West Knob viewpoint, looking toward Passage Island. *Steve Giannopoulos photo.*

We saw and heard a junco singing at the top of a pine. It sang for some time, first at one perch and later at another. We also heard a Townsend’s warbler singing and a raven croaking.

There was a cool wind blowing and we found it necessary to wear an outer layer, but eventually the clouds drifted past and we too were bathed in sunshine. Although we had started to pack up, when the sun came out, we sat or lay down again to prolong our enjoyment of our own lofty perch.

On our return we followed the trail we had seen on the way up, signed Whyte Lake. We got to the place where we had given up before, and a little past that turned off on a side path to upper Whyte Creek. We followed the creek to where it empties into the lake and then walked along a rough path parallel to the lakeshore to “Whyte Lake View,” an opening in the forest that provides access to the water. From here we could look across the lake toward the dock, now populated with many people who were sunbathing. Two young men dove into the water and swam across the lake to where we were sitting. They said the water was nice!

We sat for some time and it was with reluctance that we finally stood and resumed the trek home. We passed along the boardwalk, our eyes on the many ferns, especially deer and lady ferns, growing on either side. Our walk back along lower Whyte Creek was pure joy, the sun now shining through the canopy and dappling the woods. At the bridge over Nelson Creek, we paused to watch robins flying at and plucking ripe salmonberries.

All in all, this proved to be a wonderful hike, and while the guidebook gives it a rating of only two stars, we would be quick to say that we had had a five-star day. Highly recommended.