

BMN HIKE REPORT

Tunnel Bluff (October 13, 2018)

By Mark Johnston



Bowen and Gambier islands viewed from the 4th viewpoint on the trail to Tunnel Bluff. Samina Tajwar photo.

Whenever I lead a hike, I usually have one or two concerns that keep me awake the night before. This time my worries were: (1) Would we find parking at the Tunnel Point Viewpoint trailhead, where there is a limited number of spaces? and (2) Would we be able to get everyone safely across the Sea to Sky Highway to access the trail, given that we would be crossing on a curve with limited visibility?

As for my first worry, we had made the decision to leave Coquitlam at 7:00 am and trusted that this would be early enough to secure parking spots. As it turned out, it was: The nine of us, in two cars, arrived at the turnout at about 8:00 am and, as there were only three or four cars parked there, had our pick of parking spots. Regarding the second worry, while it proved to be easier than imagined to cross the highway to reach the trail, we could see that it would be more challenging to come back

across in the opposite direction. When, at the end of the day, it was time to do that, we found that those first across were able to direct the rest of us, and so everyone got back safely.

We had a beautiful day for the hike, with the temperature eventually reaching the mid to high teens. In the morning coolness some of us wore a fleece or jacket. But as we snaked our way up the very steep Tunnel Point Trail (which gains some 500 m of elevation in its first 1.5 km or so), we soon generated enough body heat to render the extra clothing superfluous.



A portion of our steep ascent.
Samina Tajwar photo.

While some of our younger members scampered up the trail at a faster pace, they were willing to stop every so often to let the group collect again. And in fact there were many excuses to stop, for the trail passes half a dozen viewpoints en route to the pièce de résistance, Tunnel Bluff. The first four viewpoints offer increasingly expansive views of southern Howe Sound, its islands, and the Sunshine Coast mountains; the last couple of viewpoints look toward the north face of Mt. Harvey and its split-off pinnacle, “Harvey’s Pup.” We stopped briefly at the first viewpoint; bypassed the second; stayed a very short time at the third, as its sight lines are limited by trees; but were happy to spend an extended time at the fourth, where the wide-angle view is a harbinger of the panoramic view to come. We also stopped at the next viewpoint, the first with a prospect of Harvey and its Pup.



Looking from the first viewpoint toward Gambier and Anvil islands and beyond to the Sunshine Coast mountains.
Samina Tajwar photo.

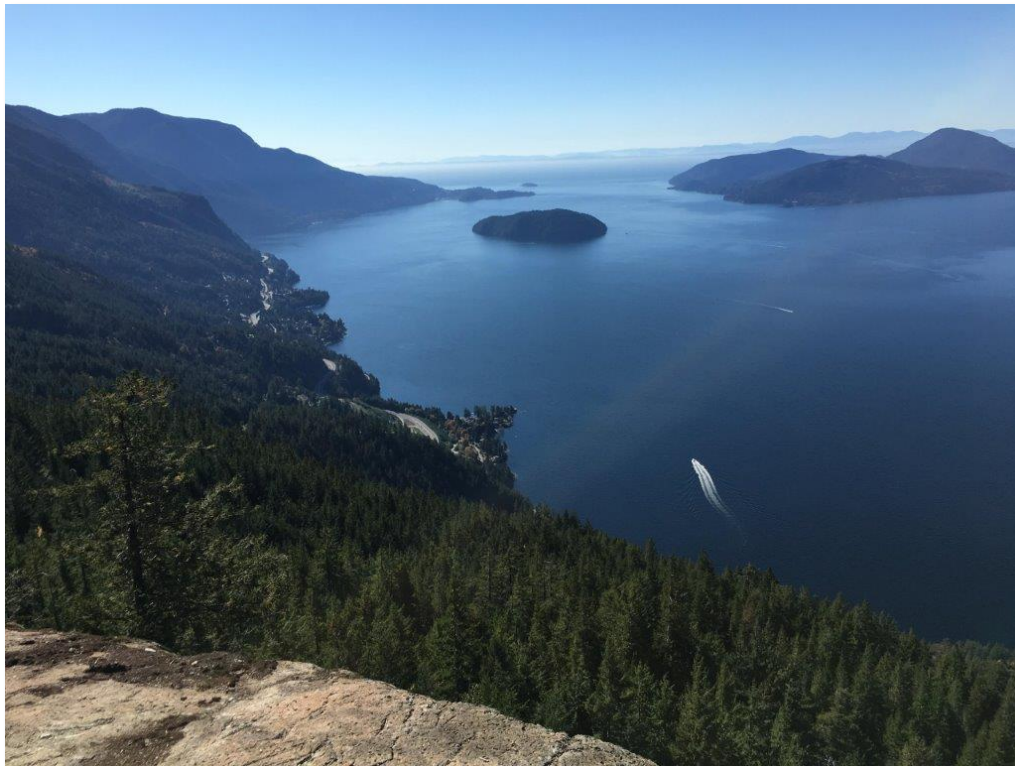
Given our measured pace, we had lots of time to bird and botanize. Coincident with our time at the fourth viewpoint, we heard the red-breasted nuthatch's "tiny tin horn." We also heard ravens and later chickadees.



An eye-catching clump of mushrooms. Species remains unidentified. Samina Tajwar photo.

As for flora, we were thrilled to see an abundance of licorice fern. In this location these ferns form large sheets growing, for the most part, on rock slabs. We also found a specimen of rattlesnake-plantain (*Goodyera oblongifolia*) on a moderately sized moss-covered boulder. I have seen this plant growing in humus on the ground, but don't remember observing it on rock. Although our eyes were often fixed on the rocky and sometimes rooty trail, we were also very aware of passing beneath arbutus, maple, and very sizable old-growth Douglas-fir trees. Particularly memorable were a pair of the latter growing very closely together, their trunks diverging as they rose.

At the first of the two viewpoints offering prospects of Harvey, the trail's grade eases, and we soon found ourselves walking on an old logging road. The guidebook *105 Hikes* calls it a "pleasant old road," and that is most certainly the case. The roadbed is earth, not gravel, and it is littered with brown needles. Mature alder trees line the margins, and these, as well as the encroaching evergreens, form a thick canopy that keeps the road well shaded. Eventually we doubled back on another road, this one having been subjected to a slide. We had to skirt the slide on tamped-down rocks, but this posed no major problem.



View from Tunnel Bluff Lookout, looking down on the twists and turns of the Sea to Sky Highway and out toward Bowyer and Bowen islands. Samina Tajwar photo.

When we reached the turnoff to Tunnel Bluff Lookout, we were back on trail again. After a few minutes, we crested the top of a rise and then dropped down to the clifftop viewpoint. And what a view! We could see the islands of southern Howe Sound laid out, map-like, at our feet: Bowyer, Bowen, the Pasley group, Keats, Gambier, and Anvil. In the distance, far and near, were the Olympic Mountains, Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and the Sunshine Coast mountains. Looking over our shoulder, we saw Hat Mountain, the west peak of Brunswick, Harvey, the north and south peaks of Unnecessary Mountain, and on down the Britannia Range to Black Mountain. We also had a good view of the twists and turns of the Sea to Sky Highway as it threads its way between the waters of Howe Sound and the base of the mountain range. As we took in the views, a bald eagle flew from sea to mountain, and later two eagles below us caught thermals to circle round and eventually ascend far above our heads.

There were a fair number of people who had made, and were continuing to make, their way to the bluff. But the bluff area is quite large and able to accommodate a small crowd. While we were aware of others all around us, it never seemed as though we were competing for space, and our various groupings enjoyed a certain amount of conversational privacy.

After an hour or more at the lookout, we decided to begin to make our way down. But before we set out, we ended up taking a few more photographs. Some previous party had left a plastic chair atop the viewpoint. We took a photo of one of our members seated in it with the view as a backdrop. Then we photographed another member seated in it. Then a third, and so on until pretty much everybody had a turn. Finally, a hiker from another party was pressed into service to take photos of our whole group gathered around our leader, who was seated in the chair!

The trip down took about as much time as the hike up, partly owing to the steepness of the trail, but also to a particularly long break at the second viewpoint. Although the view here is more limited, due to trees on either side, it is also more private, being some distance from the trail. We settled in and could easily have whiled away the rest of the afternoon. As we sat, looking out toward Mt. Artaban on Gambier Island, a golden arbutus leaf fell and fluttered across our field of vision before touching down on the ground. The leaf was a reminder of the time of year, but also a fit symbol of our carefree state of mind. As we completed our hike, we could certainly second the Scottish-American naturalist John Muir's proposal:

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”