

HIKE REPORT

A Challenging Pilgrimage to Mt. Gillespie (September 2021)

By Brian Wormald



Panorama photo of Seed Peak (left) and Mt Gillespie (right). *B. Wormald photo.*

There are very few times in life that one gets an opportunity to undertake a journey to honour and pay respect to someone, while challenging your own self at the same time. This pilgrimage was one such time.

When Ian McArthur sent out a note to the group to say he was planning a trip to the Squamish area, with a goal to climb Mt Gillespie, my interest was piqued. With Don Gillespie (after whom the mountain was named) having passed away recently, the opportunity to honour his legacy and replace the original summit sign that Ian had made and carried up there 24 years ago, was too good to pass up. This would be no ordinary hiking trip, as there is no trail to the summit, and the trip requires experience in navigation and route finding through challenging terrain. The plan was to leave on Monday Sept 6th, returning on Wednesday Sept 8th.

On Monday September 6th, Ian and I left for Squamish, getting to the Mamquam River Forest Road turn-off late in the morning. After driving for quite a while, we arrived at our destination: the end of a small

spur road that had been covered in large gravel that had then been rolled flat into the soil, making it ideal for a campsite.

It was around midday at this point, so we wasted no time in getting our hiking gear ready so as to make it to Seed Peak and back before dark. This was Ian's plan and it worked out well. Not only was this mostly the same trail that we would be following to Mt Gillespie the next day but it gave me a sense of how I would survive a hike of that level of difficulty. After all, I had not been mountain hiking for at least 40 years, though I maintain my fitness other ways.

Without going into too much detail, the afternoon hike was just fabulous. There were challenges, and although there was an official trail (of sorts), we took some opportunities to investigate alternatives and they worked out well. Although our camp was at around 1,400 metres elevation and Seed Peak was at just over 2,000 metres, the trail involved much ascent and descent which at times tested me. I had to stop on occasions to take a breather and Ian was a great mentor in allowing me to take my time. In fact, according to my hiking smartphone app we had done 5.18 km of ascent and 5.42 km of descent for a total distance of 11.69 km. A highlight of the day was crossing the 'border' between crown land and Pinecone Burke Provincial Park!



Pinecone-Burke Park Boundary with Mt Gillespie in background. *B. Wormald photo.*

The slog to get to the top was well worth it though. After seeing the leftover snow drifts and some amazing vistas of November Lake, Pinecone Lake and gorgeous (albeit receding) glaciers, we finally reached the top of Seed Peak. After taking photos, resting up and adding our names to the summit register, we headed back down. Reliving the ascents in reverse on the way back was not exactly fun but the stunning change in the views as the sun was setting made up for it. I started to get a minor right thigh cramp on the way back but was able to continue. After letting Ian know, he recommended I drink more water that evening and for the next day pack extra water and food for energy.



Pinecone and Little Pinecone Lakes. *B. Wormald photo.*

We made it back to camp just as the sun was almost gone and we hurriedly set up our tents and got started on a well-deserved camp feast. A great sleep ensued, although Ian did tell me in the morning that he could hear strange animal noises coming from my tent at times. Apparently, I snore loudly, but on the positive side, it may have kept the bears away!



Our campsite. *B. Wormald photo.*

After a hearty breakfast on the Tuesday morning, I made sure I had packed much more water and food for the day. We had been gone for around 8 hours yesterday, but this was going to be a longer hike.

We headed off, starting on the same trail as yesterday with the same fabulous weather. After a couple of hours, we arrived at the pass between Seed Peak and Mt. Gillespie where we diverted into a more easterly direction to Mt. Gillespie, whereas Seed Peak was more north-east from here.

The hike to Gillespie took us on a few different paths as we discovered the various routes that others had taken and some of it was a hard slog for me. My drive to complete the hike was strong though and I mentioned to Ian that if I was unable to make it to the summit, I would stay and wait for his return. Ian would never allow us to separate though, and if I bailed, he would too. This is a difficult route, and hikers need to be ready to alter their plans if circumstances (weather, exhaustion) change. Perseverance was the word of the day however, even though we came across some challenging and technical parts as we neared the summit. Then, suddenly, Ian looked back at me and said something to the effect that "We're here!" We were now at 2021 metres!

Everything else suddenly didn't matter. The feeling was hard to describe; there was absolutely no wind at all, just eerie reverential silence. We looked at the weather-beaten sign that still stood after 24 years and moved towards it, both putting our hands on the very summit rock of the peak together. Not only was the sign still there, but the original stand was also still partially hidden under a pile of rocks where it was placed in 1997. The sign was not connected to it anymore; it was tied with string to the bolts for an old communications tower that once stood on the peak.

After resting for a few minutes to enjoy our accomplishment, Ian set about changing over the sign to the new one he had made. The name was also changed from 'Gillespie Mtn' (old sign) to 'Mt Gillespie' (new sign). And with chocolate being one of Don's favourite foods, Ian had brought along a chocolate bar to share in his honour.



Original and NEW signposts. *B. Wormald photo.*



Atop Mt. Gillespie. *J. McArthur photo.*



New Mt Gillespie sign in place. *J. McArthur photo.*

That completed, photos were taken, the old sign was safely tucked away in Ian's pack, we added our names to the summit register (including an inadvertent wrong date!) and we headed back down. On the way down we skirted the edge of one of the glaciers and used the glacier water to replenish our water supply – so very cool and refreshing!

It had been a long day and we had by this time been hiking for over 10 hours. It was getting quite dark by the time we got back to the campsite – a full 12 hours after we left this morning! Luckily Ian had a headlamp, and I used the flashlight on my phone. (Note to self: remember to always pack a headlamp!). We made it back to the camp for a well-earned dinner. And again, according to my hiking smartphone app we had done 5.87 km of ascent and 6.5 km of descent for a total distance of 14.39 km. My feet certainly knew they'd had a workout!

We met several groups of people both days on our trek. Some had camped overnight on some of the peaks; one group of guys actually camping on the slopes of Mt Gillespie.

On the Wednesday, we were supposed to explore some other forest roads to see if Ian could identify where the trail started for the original hike in 1997 when many of the Gillespie family made the trek to the summit for the inaugural raising of the 'Gillespie Mtn' sign.



Don Gillespie (far left), with Gillespie family & friends at the Summit in 1997. Ian McArthur at very back (blue shirt).

It started raining in the early hours of the morning, so that put a damper on things for start. However, we decamped and packed the truck to see what adventures lay ahead. Ian found the road where the original trail started at the end, but we could not drive any further due to the alder-choked road. This

will have to be another trip as we did not have the time to investigate just how far the road was choked – let alone start clearing it. This is the road that leads to November Lake and the Fool's Gold Route, so Ian is keen to revisit the trail that was used in the 1997 'Gillespie expedition'.

All in all, a fabulous couple of days that I will remember for a long time. The feeling on top of Mt Gillespie was surreal. I knew the man, but not very well. I was aware of his accomplishments and passion for the environment, specifically the Pinecone Burke area. It was only fitting that a substantial peak in that park was named out of respect of his accomplishments. And testament to that is that the peak was named during his lifetime – what more needs to be said?

And as for my hiking partner? I could not have asked for a more patient, respected and experienced mentor.