

BMN HIKE REPORT

Cheakamus Lake (Saturday, July 30, 2016)

by Mark Johnston



Cheakamus Lake, looking south toward the Cheakamus Glacier. *Christina Johnston photo.*

Not having been to Cheakamus Lake for quite some time, I was surprised—even shocked—to see how popular the area has become. When we arrived at the parking lot at 10:00 am, it was already full; in fact, it was overfull. We had to park on the side of the access road, and by the end of the day, there were cars parked for a kilometre down the road.

Ten of us started along the trail. The day was sunny and warm, but never hot. For most of the hike we walked in shade, and whenever we ventured out to the lakeshore, we were further cooled by the strong breeze sweeping down the lake.

At the start of the hike, our path was open to the sun. As we walked, we could look across the Cheakamus River (invisible below us) to the dramatic Helm Creek gorge curving down toward confluence. But before

long, we entered the forest and our views became more circumscribed. Three or four large cedars, growing as if from a common base, signalled the change. Continuing on, we penetrated a little farther and found ourselves immersed in a magnificent grove of old-growth Douglas-fir.

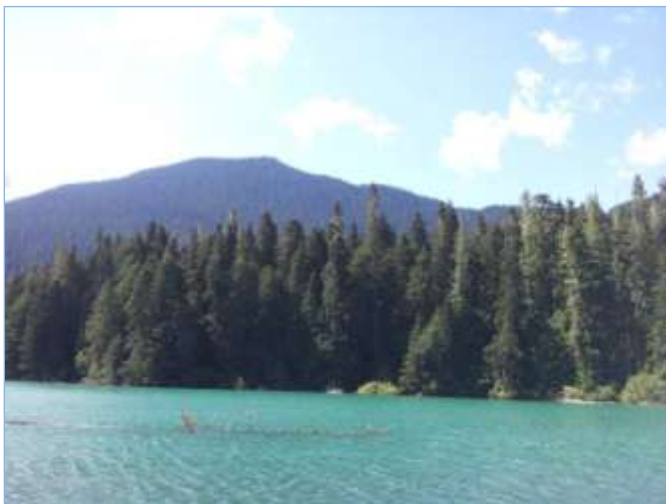
The trail above the Cheakamus River crosses many small creeks.
Shirley Serizawa photo.

While the lake is undeniably beautiful, the forest would be an equally worthy destination. Besides the large cedar and fir—some having trunks that are easily two metres in diameter—the forest here has many fine specimens of hemlock and spruce. Not all trees were large; in some places trees were younger. No doubt, wintertime avalanches, crashing down the steep slopes, fell many trees. But in one area we noticed a number of fire-scarred old firs surrounded by youthful trees, a clear sign that lightning also plays a role in ongoing “pruning.”



Our eyes were often on the understory. Devil’s club, with its spiny stems and large maple-leaf shaped leaves, was sporting its pyramidal cluster of shiny, bright-red berries. Foamflower, miner’s-lettuce, and—in avalanche-created open spaces—fireweed, thistle, and aster were all in bloom. Bunchberry bore its own bright-red “berries,” and some queen’s cup lilies had produced that species’ single, metallic blue berry. But we paid the most attention to the plants bearing edible fruit. We sampled thimbleberries, black huckleberries, and blueberries. In some cases, the sampling became downright gorging!

While always within earshot of the river, we walked quite a ways before being able to look down upon the swiftly flowing current. Although at this point we still had some distance to go to reach the lake’s outlet, the river already had something of the former body’s striking turquoise hue.



An early view of Cheakamus Lake, near the outlet.
Joanna Tong photo.

When we reached the west end of the lake, we left the trail and took a side path to the shore. From here we could look along the length of the lake toward distant peaks and the Cheakamus Glacier. A couple of us sat on a log that I noticed had been notched. I guessed it might be the work of campers with time on their hands, but in her book *Best Hikes and Walks in Southwestern British Columbia*, Dawn

Hanna mentions that a trapper's cabin was located here and says one can still find "a few trees cut with square notches used to keep marten traps from freezing." We didn't see any martens, but a chipmunk made its appearance. Judging by its larger size, I wondered if it might be Townsend's.

We didn't see a lot of wildlife, but somewhere between the lake's two campgrounds, we peered out through the trees to see two common loons swimming in the lake. Their black and white markings contrasted beautifully with the bright turquoise water. When we reached our goal—Singing Creek—and walked out on the alluvial gravel fan to have our lunch, we saw another loon (quite possibly one of the same ones).

We found seats on logs or rocks and enjoyed a leisurely lunch—but not a solitary one as there were many other people sharing the relatively small area. A few of our group thought to wade in the icy water, but no one swam, though a couple of young people in another party were brave—or foolhardy—enough to take a dip. My gaze was usually toward the lake and the mountains, but sometimes I focussed on a more delicate beauty close at hand. Growing in the sand between the creek's divided waters was monkey-flower with its beautiful yellow trumpet-shaped flower heads.

On our return journey we covered the same ground. But as we were faced in the opposite direction, we had the opportunity to view forest and lake from a different perspective. Some of us began to hone in on various fungi along the way. None of us could claim any expertise in identifying mushrooms, but one of our party photographed a number of specimens for later identification. I was able to recognize a few, including amanita, collybia, and, on tree trunks, polypore.

After leaving the lake we made one last stop. Reaching the junction of our trail with the trail to Helm Creek, we dropped down to the Cheakamus River, to the former site of the old cable car crossing.



The bridge over the Cheakamus River, and the view from the middle of the bridge. *Christina Johnston photos.*

The cable car is long gone, and now a bridge spans the river. We hastened out onto the structure to have a look up and down the valley. Some of us crossed the bridge to the other side, but others were content to turn back midway. When we regrouped, we sat down to enjoy a few moments in the sun. We had spent much of the day in the shade, and it was good to feel the sun's rays on our skin.

When we arrived back at the parking lot, we agreed to make a couple of stops on the way home. We stopped at Brandywine Falls Provincial Park to view the impressive falls, and we pulled off the highway at Squamish to visit a gelato shop for a well-earned treat. This meant that we didn't get back to the Tri-Cities until 8:00 pm, without having eaten dinner. Yet none of us seemed overly concerned, feeling satisfied in other ways, from having feasted on so much mountain beauty.