

BMN HIKE REPORT

Elk-Thurston (Saturday, July 2, 2016)

by Mark Johnston



Hikers heading up the switchback trail at the west end of the Elk-Thurston ridge. *Terry Puls photo.*

We had hiked Elk-Thurston once previously, in October 2005. On that day we were often in cloud but also enjoyed some sun. Although views were limited, the fall colours were glorious, with the ridge between Elk and Thurston mountains awash in reds and yellows. For our present hike, the prospect once again was for mostly cloudy skies but we hoped for equally vibrant colour, this time provided by summer's abundant flowers.

Fourteen of us started up the well-established forest service trail. Since Elk-Thurston is one of the most popular hikes in the eastern Fraser Valley, we expected to have plenty of company. But as the day unfolded, we never felt as though we were in a crowd and often had the impression we were on our own. As we walked through mature forest, we delighted to hear the fulsome birdsong. We listened to the varied thrush's long, eerie, whistled notes, the Pacific-slope flycatcher's up-slurred call, and the Pacific wren's bubbling trill.

A kilometre into the hike, we found the trail to be interrupted by a bisecting logging road. Several years ago the lower part of the trail was included in a woodlot. At the time, it was uncertain what effect this would

have on the existing route. So, as we crossed the road, we were glad to learn that the logging operation to date has not interfered with the trail to any significant degree.

On the other side of the road, we re-entered the forest and soon left all signs of disturbance behind. In another kilometre we reached the rounded west ridge of Elk Mountain and changed direction, turning from north to east. The forest here consists of sizeable Douglas-firs but, curiously, a mostly shrubless understory. Which is not to say that the ground is bare, as it is carpeted in various herbaceous plants. Hiking in the Tri-City area, one is used to seeing foamflower and miner's-lettuce lining the path, but here these two flowers, both in bloom, intermingled in huge swaths, their appearance somewhat remindful of baby's breath, so favoured in floral bouquets.

On our left the slope fell steeply toward the Fraser Valley below, but our views were few and far between. At a level spot, however, just before our climb began in earnest, we were able to peer out between trees and look down on a checkerboard of agricultural fields and toward the mouth of the Harrison River. We could make out Mt. Woodside, which bounds the river on the east.

**A profusion of wildflowers -
paintbrush and tiger lily.
*Brad Spring photo.***



After starting up the steeper grade, we began to encounter an increasingly braided path. While we tried to stay with the main route as much as possible, it was sometimes hard to tell which was which. But near the top of the climb, as we emerged from the forest, we forgot about the disappointing appearance of the badly

eroded trail. We found ourselves not only in sunshine, but standing in the middle of a magnificent flower garden. From the rocky outcrop above us, and stretching far down the slope to our right, flowers were blooming in every hue imaginable. There were paintbrush and columbine in all their scarlet and red-and-yellow glory. There was small-flowered penstemon with its striking bluish-purple petals. In rockier places stonecrop's bright yellow was almost Technicolor in intensity. Especially down slope, there was a profusion of thimbleberry, the plant's maple-leaf shaped leaves and large white flowers adding to the beauty.

After a switchback, we achieved the rocky outcrop and sat down to rest. The outcrop consists of a number of angular slabs arranged in linear fashion like so many vertebrae. While we were paused here, a chipmunk came close, looking for handouts.

Hikers enjoying a rest at the rocky outcrop at the west end of the Elk-Thurston ridge.
Brad Spring photo.

From the rocks we had our first good views. Although the sun was playing peekaboo, most clouds were high enough that we could at least see valley floors if not the tops of their defining mountains. This would be our lot for the rest of the hike. Sometimes the clouds closed in, screening the sun; sometimes they lifted, revealing the tops of a few snow-clad peaks. But as we made our way along the southern side of the ridge top, we almost always had views of the Chilliwack Valley below and its occasionally meandering, sometimes rapidly flowing, river.



View from the rocky outcrop at the west end of the ridge, looking down toward benchland, the Chilliwack River, and across to the mountains opposite.
Christina Johnston photo.



The trail passes just below the top of Elk Mountain, and as it does it provides access to an open slope that pilots of paragliders use as a launch site. We noticed there is a good deal of kinnikinnick here. We didn't see any human flyers but there were a few of the feathered kind. Just above a wooden plank set between tree trunks to provide a seat, four gray jays came near to see what we might offer them. Some of our party held out a hand, hoping to entice a jay to feed on a nut, but the birds seemed a little skittish. Although they did swoop down, they hardly perched long enough for a really good photo.

Besides kinnikinnick, we discovered another plant that grows along the ridge in some abundance,

namely, sickletop lousewort (*Pedicularis racemosa*). The plant is noteworthy for its pink flower's sickle-shaped, downwardly curved "beak" and its foliage's deeply purple, lance-shaped, saw-toothed leaves. Also, besides gray jays, we came across other birds in the upland, including the dark-eyed junco and hermit thrush. In fact, as we toiled along the undulating ridge top, our labours were much the lighter for the thrush's "clear, ethereal, flutelike song." It is perhaps my favourite birdsong, and one I seek out just as I would a far-flung destination.

Farther along the ridge, but still some distance from Thurston, we sat down by the trailside to have lunch. We could look down upon the Chilliwack River below but did not have any views of the peaks opposite.

After lunch we decided to split into two groups: one moving faster and with Thurston as its destination, and one moving more slowly and with an open false summit as its goal. In the end all but two made it to Thurston. At the farther end of the ridge, we had more sun and a few glimpses of snowy peaks, but summiting Thurston proved anticlimactic, as the forested top affords no views. (One can walk farther east and, although lower, obtain views of the Cheam Range, but such views would not have been available today.)

Glimpses of snowy peaks from near the east end of the Elk-Thurston ridge.
Terry Puls photo.

Our return along the ridge gave us the opportunity to savour more fully the terrain that, in our determination to reach Thurston, we had passed over quickly. While much of the ridge is open, there are a few, fine, forested bits, the dominant trees being mountain hemlock and subalpine fir. We continued to enjoy the thrush's song, but the soundscape was not entirely empty. The bird's sweet melody was sometimes punctuated by the sound of distant gunshot, rising up from the valley below.

Exiting the ridge top, the trail is steep, with lots of loose gravel. Since the last time we hiked it, this section has been greatly improved by the addition of some fifty to sixty wood-framed earthen steps. Whereas before, one had to take considerable care so as not to slide, now the danger of slipping is minimal.

As we descended through the forest, we began to string out along the trail. We met up again at the logging road, where we stopped for a while to let our legs recover from the steep downhill and to relish a few last moments in the woods. It had been a full day, a good day, and while we were a little bit sad to see it end, we had many new memories to sustain us until the next time.

