

BMN HIKE REPORT

Mt. Elphinstone

Saturday, September 20, 2014

by Mark Johnston



Panoramic view from rock bluffs. *Chloe Tu photo.*

Early in the week we put out the word that we would attempt one of our “more strenuous” hikes, Mt. Elphinstone, on the weekend. Five of us had an open calendar and were able to sign on. We met in early morning darkness and carpoled in a single vehicle to Horseshoe Bay. We boarded the 7:20 am ferry to Langdale, the *Queen of Surrey*, and obtained front row seats, from which we could look out in the direction we would sail. The sky was clear, though some low fog persisted. As we waited to sail, we watched two herons fly by in front of the bow. Soon we were underway, passing north of Bowen and Keats islands and south of Bowyer and Gambier. As we approached Langdale, we slipped into a fog bank for a few moments but soon emerged into glorious sunshine, our mountain objective rising above us.



Out of the sunshine into the dark forest.
Chloe Tu photo.

Disembarking from the lower vehicle deck, we walked alongside the ferry-queue lanes, then along the wide right-hand shoulder of the bypass highway, and finally up short Stewart Road to our trailhead. By this time we had walked for about forty-five minutes and gained about 200 metres in elevation. The trailhead is marked with a beautifully crafted wooden sign bearing in routed letters the words: MT ELPHINSTONE SUMMIT TRAIL 8 Hours Return. We paused for a drink in front of the sign and then stepped out of the sunshine into the dark forest.

Initially the trail follows old logging roads on the eastern edge of the Sprockids Bike Park. Although there are multiple trails here, our route was never in doubt, being well-marked with yellow aluminum diamonds and, wherever there was a turn to the right or left, half-diamonds serving as directional arrows. We rose steeply in the attractive second growth, mostly hemlock and Douglas-fir. The forest appears to have been logged selectively, as the fir, especially, are very mature, with many specimens having trunks a metre in diameter.

There is also a substantial understory. Stopping for some refreshment, we listened to a varied thrush singing its quavering, whistled notes.

For much of the hike we followed the curve of Langdale Creek, but along the upper edge of its steep-sided ravine. As we penetrated deeper into the forest, we found the understory becoming more and more luxurious. One could almost think he or she was walking in old growth, save for the presence of stumps here and there. On another of our breaks, a middle-aged man caught up with us and we chatted a bit. He was extremely enthusiastic about the trail and said he hiked it once a week. He expressed relief there were no wasps on the trail, which, he implied, can be problematic. He went on to give us some advice about not stopping at the first truly panoramic viewpoint but continuing on to the summit communications tower and helipad, where we would have still other views not previously attainable.

Still following the edge of the ravine, the trail levels a bit and eventually crosses the creek. Once across, we started up the other side of the stream and were soon high above it. We crossed a couple of more creeks (tributaries?), came out into an area that has been logged more recently, and finally achieved our first views. We looked out over young trees toward Gibsons Landing, across the Strait of Georgia, and over to Vancouver Island. As most of us had eaten breakfast very early in the morning, we stopped here for a partial lunch. Sitting on an old roadbed, we enjoyed the view and also paid attention to one or two grey birds high up in the trees behind us. Were they grey jays? We couldn't tell for sure.

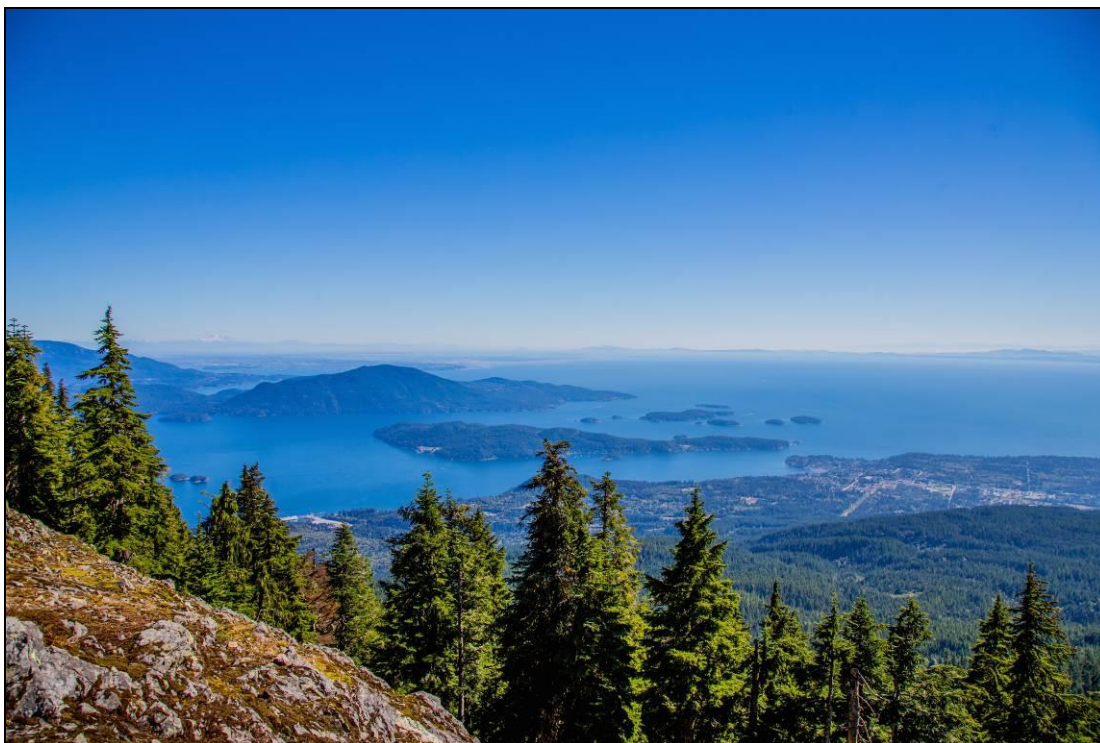


Open rock bluffs with a panoramic view. Here, looking toward Gibsons Landing and across the Strait of Georgia to the Gulf Islands and southern Vancouver Island. *Chloe Tu photo.*

When we resumed hiking, we crossed another creek in its rocky declivity and continued to climb. Now clearly in old growth, we marvelled at stout specimens of yellow cedar (cypress) and mountain hemlock. We took time to point out identifying features of amabilis fir to some of our party less familiar with the species. Despite the lateness of the season, we found many blueberries good to eat. In open forest we saw a small

flock of juncos flitting among the coniferous trees. We passed by small ponds and stepped carefully through damp areas. As we continued slowly up, we ran into the man we had talked with before, now on his way down. He assured us that we were only fifteen minutes from our objective and reiterated that we shouldn't settle for the first summit view only but continue on to the very top.

At this point the trail turns sharply to the right and ascends steep rock. There are a couple of routes, each offering the aid of a fixed rope. We chose the right-hand route and, after another short rise or two, came out into the open on rock bluffs with a truly breathtaking panoramic view.

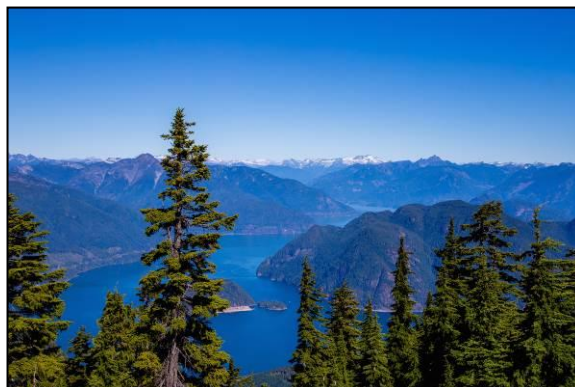


Looking down on Keats Island, Bowen Island behind. *Chloe Tu photo.*

We looked down upon Gibsons Landing, Keats Island, and the other islands at the mouth of Howe Sound, all laid out map-like below us. Zeroing in on Keats, we could trace the journey we made across the island a couple of years ago: from The Farm to Plumper Cove Provincial Marine Park, up Lookout Peak, and on to Keats Landing and Salmon Rock. Lifting our eyes, we looked out toward Vancouver and all the way to Mt. Baker, also across the Strait of Georgia to the San Juan and Gulf islands, and the southern half of Vancouver Island. We could even make out the distant Olympic Mountains. Pockets of fog lingered in the distance but were dissipating rapidly. We stayed at the bluff for some time, unable to tear ourselves away from the eye-popping view. And while we looked out over city, islands, and sea, we were treated to yet another wonder: we saw five or six birds flying by, and then several more, and then still others—maybe two dozen in all—their wings flashing in the sun: were they flickers? They were about that size and had long decurved bills. But we couldn't identify them for sure—that would come later.

Looking northeast over Gambier Island toward Garibaldi park's glacier-clad peaks.

Chloe Tu photo.



Heeding the advice of the middle-aged man, we at last tore ourselves away from the bluff viewpoint, proceeded past another outcrop that faces more or less the same direction, and came at last to the somewhat bushy summit. Now we could see to the east pretty much the whole length of the Britannia Range, from Black Mountain to Sky Pilot, its peaks etched in sharp relief against the clear blue sky. We could also look northeast toward Garibaldi and even Whistler Mountain. From the helipad, where we ate the rest of our lunch, we had an outstanding view of Tantalus and its glacier, while closer at hand Panther loomed and we could look northwest across Dakota Ridge and along the length of the Sechelt Peninsula to the mountains of Jervis Inlet. Also visible to the northwest and west was much of the rest of Vancouver Island, with the Comox Glacier and the peaks of Strathcona Provincial Park being particularly prominent.



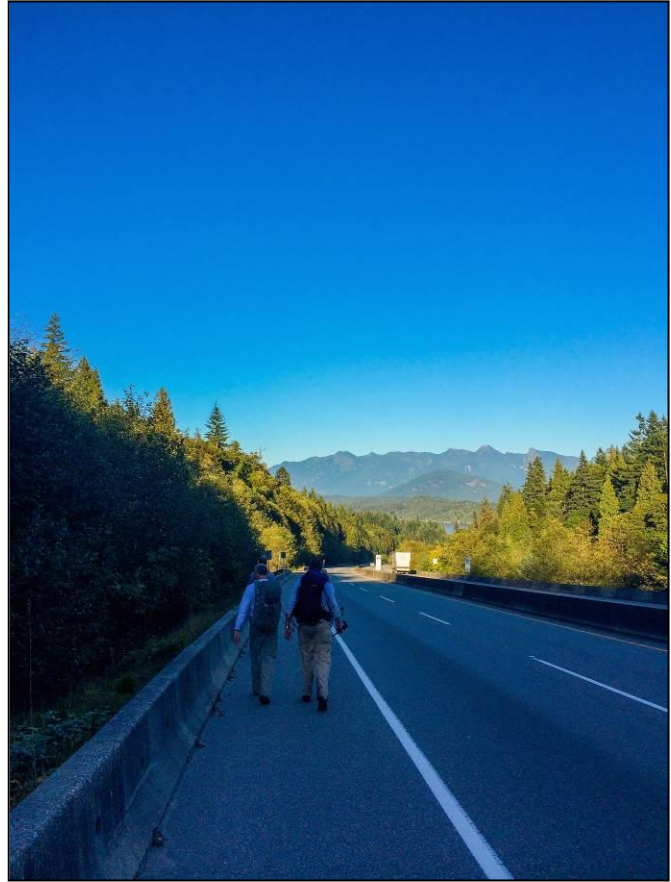
Looking northwest across Dakota Ridge. *Chloe Tu photo.*

Before we left the summit, Terry pointed out a couple of birds perched in treetops—Clark’s nutcracker. Suddenly, as we watched, several nutcrackers rose into the air, and then a second later the sky was full of nutcrackers—two, three dozen of them! I don’t remember seeing this bird on the coast before—the Cascades, yes, but not on the coast.* It was such a remarkable sight, and then, as quickly as the birds rose up into the air, they were gone. But this fortuitous sighting cleared up any mystery about the birds we’d seen earlier at the logging road and bluff viewpoints—they were nutcrackers!

Once again tearing ourselves away, we began the long descent to the ferry landing. In the late afternoon sun the forest understory was a luminous green. We hiked at a faster pace but still couldn't resist stopping from time to time to enjoy the forest's ambience. We spilled out onto Stewart Road at about 5:30 pm and then walked down to the highway to retrace our morning route back to the ferry dock. We had plenty of time before the 6:50 sailing, so walked at an easy pace and enjoyed the enticing view of the Britannia peaks spread out before us. When we were just steps from the waiting area, we observed several female common mergansers in the water near the Keats/Gambier water taxi berth.

**Enticing view of the Britannia peaks.
*Chloe Tu photo.***

On the return voyage it might have been nice to plant ourselves on an outer deck and take in the views, but we were hungry after a full day on the mountain and opted to eat in the cafeteria instead. Visiting the cafeteria also gave us an opportunity to see Ian's older brother Duncan, who works in the kitchen. After the rush had passed, he was able to come out and chat with us a bit.



When we got back to Horseshoe Bay, it was getting dark. Having begun in darkness and now ending in darkness, the day seemed, in some ways, "but a dream." But our tired muscles knew otherwise.

* I have since come to understand that it can wander irregularly to the coast. Audubon's field guide describes the nutcracker as "an erratic winter wanderer, [its] periodic irruption in great numbers, bringing it all the way to the Pacific Coast . . . related to the failure of the pine seed crop." *Stokes Field Guide* is more specific about the frequency of such migrations: "Irruptive movements occur about every 15 years, when pines fail to produce many seeds. May venture all the way to the Pacific Coast at these times."