

# BMN HIKE REPORT

## Mt. Gardner (September 12, 2015)

by Mark Johnston



The view from one of the helipads on the north summit of Mt. Gardner. It looks toward hazy Metro Vancouver; Mt. Baker, rising beyond the city, is visible on the horizon. *Terry Puls photo.*

At 8:00 am, thirteen of us boarded the *Queen of Capilano* and set sail for Snug Cove on Bowen Island. Our hiking objective was the island's high point, Mt. Gardner. Earlier, while driving to the Horseshoe Bay ferry terminal, we had encountered a few fog patches, but the low cloud was rapidly dissipating to reveal clear skies. Our club had last been to Bowen in February 1997. Since then, we had visited two or three of the other islands in Howe Sound but had never undertaken a return trip to Bowen. As on our trip eighteen-and-a-half years ago, we were blessed with brilliant weather.



The start of our hike up Mt. Gardner.  
*Chloe Tu photo.*

Disembarking by half past eight, we walked up Bowen Trunk Road, turned right on Cardena, and soon thereafter entered Crippen Regional Park. We passed first along the edge of a small lagoon which was sometimes visible through a screen of maple and alder. Beyond the lagoon we followed the course of Killarney Creek, initially on its right bank (river-right), but for much of the way to Killarney Lake on the left. We walked on nearly level ground through a beautiful forest of maple, cedar, and hemlock. Midway between our crossing of the creek and getting to the lake, we skirted a sunlit meadow ringed with alder. A path led into it but, for now, we continued straight ahead through the forest.



**Large tree that has been excavated by woodpeckers.**  
*Chloe Tu photo.*

Prior to reaching Killarney Lake—and just after crossing the creek a second time—we heard the unmistakable call of a woodpecker. The call sounded something like that of a flicker, but its loudness suggested it might belong to a pileated. Sure enough, when we reached the lake, we spotted a pileated woodpecker near the top of a shoreline snag. We didn't know it at the time, but this would be a harbinger of things to come, as over the course of the day we would encounter several members of the woodpecker family.

After a suitable break, we walked along the lakeshore for half a kilometre or so. In the early morning light the colour of the lake was muted and one could read the flotillas of pondweed as patches of ice. Then, turning from the lakeshore, we continued on Mt. Gardner Road until we could begin our ascent on the helpfully named Hikers Trail Road. While we could have gained most of our elevation on this driveable track, we decided to use old

skid roads and trails as a more interesting alternative. On aptly named Skid Trail we encountered the second of our woodpeckers, a red-breasted sapsucker. In the deep shade of the forest, we had difficulty seeing the bird's head and breast as red but we could clearly discern its long white wing patch.

Before long, our trail brought us out to the road again. As we rejoined the road, we took advantage of a short side-path leading to a rock bluff with a view of the southern half of the Britannia Range. By walking to the far right of the bluff, we could see along the range as far north as the Lions.

Around a bend of the road, we picked up Handloggers Trail, a mid-level route curving north, west, and finally south around Mt. Gardner to trailheads on the other side. Starting up the trail—another old skid road—we hadn't walked very far when we came across a large gap. Although a log had been positioned to bridge the gap, the log was too small in diameter, and the depth of the gully too great, to allow for a comfortable crossing.

**Well-marked trails.**  
*Chloe Tu photo.*

So, leaving the skid road, we descended off-trail to the bottom of the gully and then climbed out steeply on the other side. After this little detour we carried on without difficulty, gaining elevation steadily. But, as it turned out, we weren't through with problem solving. Just past a junction we began a downward trend. Not expecting to be losing so much elevation, we wondered whether we were still on the right track. We paused to



consult our maps, convinced ourselves that we were indeed on the right track, and in time found that we were regaining the elevation we had lost. As our trail (now more path than road) swung around to the south, we discovered a moss and lichen covered bluff with outstanding views to the west and north. We looked down on Pasley and its companion islands at the mouth of Howe Sound as if looking at a topographical map of land and sea. Lifting our eyes we could see much of Vancouver Island from the south-central peaks of Moriarty and Arrowsmith to the north-



central heights of Strathcona Provincial Park, especially Mt. Albert Edward. Trees bisecting our view blocked a clear prospect of Keats Island, but we were able to see the island's east end and the southwestern corner of Gambier. Also in view was the Sunshine Coast, Mt. Elphinstone particularly prominent. While most eyes were trained on distant islands and peaks, I glimpsed a falcon or small hawk very close at hand, but it wheeled behind trees before I could identify it with any certainty.

When we had had our fill of views, we pressed onward, soon departing Handloggers Trail and climbing via a very steep footpath to a wide draw and easier grade. Here we found a sunnier aspect and many large firs. We came upon



another rocky bluff, this one more open than the previous one. While our views were similar to those from the lower viewpoint, we could now see all of Keats Island and Mts. Liddell and Killam on Gambier. This would have made a good place to eat our lunch, but as we didn't have much farther to go to reach the summit we decided to make one final push for the top.

**The view from the open rocky bluff, which looks toward Keats and Gambier islands, with the Sunshine Coast behind.**

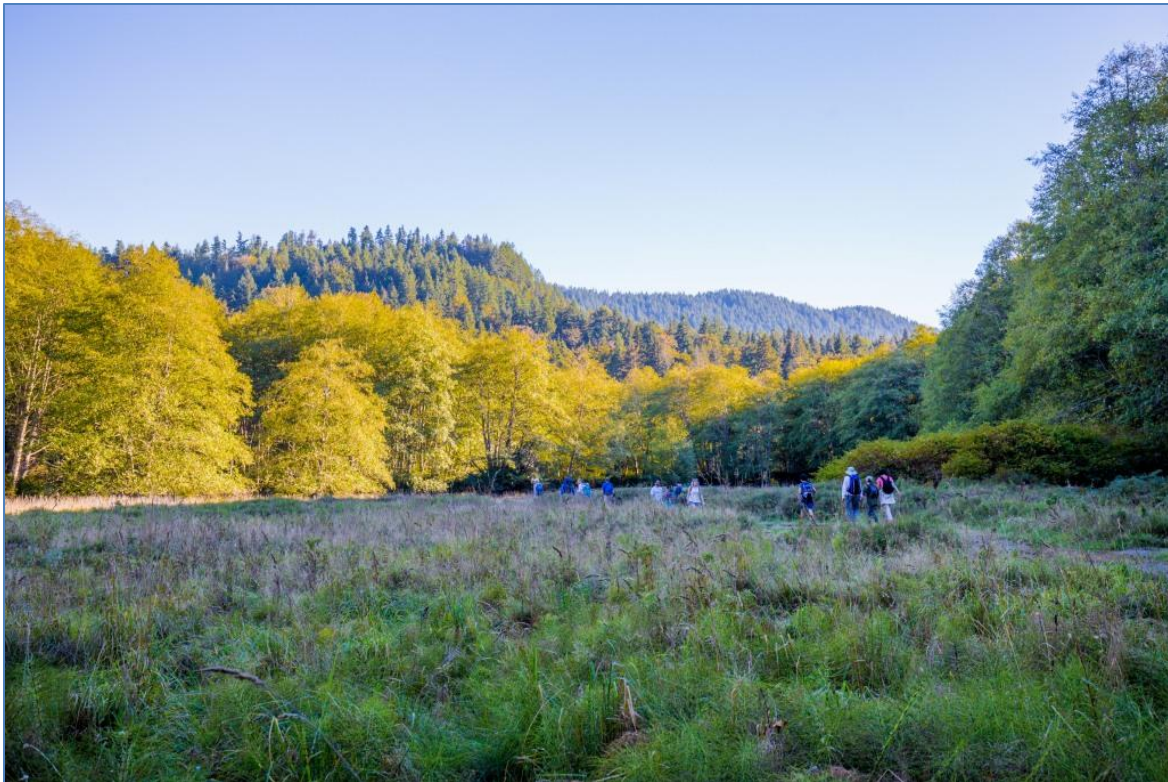
*Terry Puls photo.*

Leaving the bluff, we climbed out of the draw by the steepest trail yet, one sometimes requiring a hand for balance. But our effort was richly rewarded as we gained the north summit and its all-around views. Slightly lower than the treed south summit, the north summit has been cleared to support the installation of numerous communications towers. From the more northerly of its two helipads, we could look west toward the Sunshine Coast and north toward Gambier Island and the Tantalus Range; from the other, its southern and eastern orientation allowed for a sweeping view of Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, Metro Vancouver, and the Britannia Range (as far as Deeks Peak). Mt. Baker, rising beyond the city, was dominant on the horizon. We ate lunch at the latter helipad, which, besides having the more sweeping view described, afforded a bird's-eye view of the ferry slip at Snug Cove. It was immensely satisfying to know that we now sat atop the peak we had fixed our eyes on when our vessel had landed a few hours before. We relished the prospect in front of us, but the intense sun was having a soporific effect, and one by one our members lay down, with heads resting on clothing or packs, for a few-minutes' nap. Actually, the few minutes might have turned into an hour or more but for the distance yet to cover and return ferry to catch.

Rather than retrace our outward-bound steps, we chose to take a different way back. Prying ourselves away from the top, we descended into the hollow between the summits and began to make our way around the south summit. When we were between the summits, although the rest of us missed it, Ian, who was in the lead, spotted a second pileated woodpecker. Once around the south summit we began a steady descent back to Killarney Lake. Angling down a moderate slope, we passed through old burn areas; the trees were generously spaced and the understory was comprised almost exclusively of densely growing salal. We had the sense of being able to look downslope into the distance, although our view was primarily open forest. Eventually we touched down on an old logging road that ran along the base of imposing cliffs. In places, rock had broken off the cliff face and lay in jumbles at the edge of—or on—the road. Not wanting to tempt fate, we hurried along. We did pause long enough, however, to have a good look at another sapsucker, noting once again its long white wing patch.

Continuing our long descent, now on trail, we finally caught sight of Hikers Trail Road just below. But rather than dropping down to the road, we stayed above it and made our way to Skid Trail and so back to the lake. As we approached the lake, we talked about which sailing to try to catch. If we really hustled—maybe almost ran—we might make the 5:15 pm sailing. We decided it would be more reasonable to aim for the 6:20. Having settled on the latter, we had time to sit at tables by the lakeside and enjoy a few moments of respite. In the afternoon light the pondweed was a luminous red. A few ducks—I couldn't tell which species—moved quietly on the still waters.

Just as it had been difficult to tear ourselves away from the summit, so it was hard to leave the tranquil lakeshore, but with an eye on the time we shouldered our packs for the final leg. It was suggested that we take Mt. Gardner Road toward the village. We mulled it over and finally agreed on staying with the Killarney Creek Trail as far as the meadow, and then taking the Meadow Trail out to the road and so into the village. The meadow, which had tantalized in the morning, was equally beautiful in the afternoon.



Hiking along the Meadow Trail back to Snug Cove. *Chloe Tu photo.*

We stood on the bridge over Killarney Creek and gazed back at Mt. Gardner. As we passed through the meadow, we could also look in the other direction and see St. Mark's Summit in the Britannia Range poking up above the trees. On the far side of the bridge, we came across our fifth woodpecker of the day, this time a new species—a hairy woodpecker. There were also two or three dozen robins moving through low shrubs on either side of the path.

Although we thought we had plenty of time to get to the ferry, in the end we had to hurry to ensure we would make it. Still, there was enough time to spare for some to grab a drink or food in the village to carry with them onto the vessel. As we sailed from Snug Cove, most of us found our way to the upper deck, where we had clear views looking toward the mainland and up Howe Sound. Looking back toward Bowen, the sinking sun shone brightly just over the top of Mt. Gardner. Given the angle of the sun, it was all but impossible to behold the summit directly. Still, we had a climber's sense of the mountain engraved on our hearts. It had been a full and satisfying day, one that will live on in our memory for years to come.