

BMN HIKE REPORT

Brae Island and Derby Reach (April 29, 2017)

By Mark Johnston



View from Tavistock Point, looking across the Fraser River.

From the left, are Burke's north summit and Widgeon Peak and (to the right of the pylon) the heights within the UBC Malcolm Knapp Research Forest. Canada geese were nesting on the pylon in the foreground. *Brad Spring photo.*

Our second hike of the year was, in many respects, a “stroll in the park”—or, more accurately, *two* parks: Brae Island and Derby Reach. In addition, we walked most of the Fort-to-Fort Trail as a means of connecting the two. Our pace was exceedingly measured, and we stopped frequently to observe a bird, examine a plant, or take in the changing views.

Upon dropping off a couple of vehicles at Derby Reach’s Houston Trailhead parking lot, we drove in our remaining cars to Brae Island. Located close to Fort Langley, Brae Island is bounded on the northeast side by the main channel of the Fraser River, on the east side by the narrow Squalets Channel (which separates Brae from larger McMillan Island), and on the west and southwest sides by Bedford Channel.

After parking our cars and making last minute adjustments to our packs, the twelve of us started along the wide gravel trail that leads to Tavistock Point. Although it was a cloudy day, the clouds were bright, and it seemed as though the sun might poke through. We walked through a beautiful greening forest, mostly deciduous. The forest consists largely of black cottonwood and red alder, with Pacific willow profuse along the riparian edges. We took note of a number of understory plants, including common snowberry, red-osier dogwood, salmonberry (in bloom), and red elderberry (also in bloom).

BMN group hiking through greening forest toward Tavistock Point. Brad Spring photo.



While the forest was filled with birdsong, we only identified a few species. Among those we saw or heard were American robins, orange-crowned warblers, black-capped chickadees, and Pacific wrens.

When we reached Tavistock Point, we paused for a while. Whereas in the early going we could only look west across Bedford Channel toward urban development, at Tavistock Point we could gaze north and east across the main Fraser River toward the Kanaka Creek estuary and the mountains beyond. We were able to pick out Burke's north summit, Widgeon Peak, and some of the heights within the UBC Malcolm Knapp Research Forest (adjacent to Golden Ears Provincial Park). But it was hard to look past the Canada goose perched on a pylon just offshore and possibly keeping watch over a nest.

To return, we walked the Tavistock Point Loop Trail back to the main trail. This loop allows for further views of the Fraser River and its northern shoreline. As we came to a viewpoint along Russel Reach, we were surprised to see McBarge (from Expo 86 days) tied up near the former Albion Ferry slip! Last time I had seen the barge, it was sitting downriver, at the foot of Capitol Hill in Burnaby. According to one of our group, a wealthy businessman has purchased McBarge and is in the process of fixing it up. Can it be that McBarge will have a second life?

As we approached the parking area, we had the first of what would prove to be a trio of good bird-sightings. We spotted a red-breasted sapsucker on the trunk of a dead tree, and stopped to follow its progress as it made its way to the top.

After using the park washroom facilities, we crossed the Jacob Haldi Bridge to Fort Langley. We crossed slowly, watching dragon boats and racing sculls, which were travelling up and down Bedford Channel. Then, on the far side the bridge, we picked up the Fort-to-Fort Trail. A turn to the left would have taken us to Fort Langley National Historic Site, but we headed right (west) toward the fort's original location in present-day Derby Reach Regional Park. As we walked along the mixed-use trail, we found ourselves distracted by new home development on one side of us and river traffic on the other. Still, at times, we did zero in on a bit of nature. Hence, it was along this stretch that we had another couple of fine birding moments. We observed an Anna's hummingbird that was perched atop a small tree growing near the water's edge. We watched it for the longest time, and only noticed later the feeder which must have attracted it. Farther along, we spotted a yellow bird and were able to identify it as a goldfinch.



Sword ferns unfurling along the Fort-to-Fort Trail.

Brad Spring photo.

Past the houses, we paralleled the Fort Langley Golf Course. On this leg, while most of us continued on toward Derby Reach, three of our party (all one family) turned back with plans to visit the national historic site.

Shortly after parting ways, our larger group spilled out onto Allard Crescent, which we would walk for about 700 m.

This section turned out to be more interesting than we had imagined, as we passed by a few hobby farms and some large estates with names like “Derby Manor.”



Fertile shoots of horsetail along the Fort-to-Fort Trail. These are the spore-bearing parts of the plant and are seen only in the early spring; the more familiar horsetail stems are non-fertile.

Brad Spring photo.

By the time we got to Derby Reach, we were definitely thinking about lunch. The clouds had thickened and there was rain in the air, so as we turned off Allard Crescent toward the shoreline, we began to look for a suitable place to stop. Although we were quite close to the water, we were

behind a screen of vegetation and views were limited, so we kept walking, thinking that we would eventually

get to the perfect spot. We noted a few heritage apple and pear trees, definitely nearing or at the end of their life, and then, before we knew it, we had reached the historic cairn, which marks the site of the first fort (1827-1839). Since, from here, we would be heading back into the forest, we decided to make this our picnic spot. Sitting in a circle on slightly dampened grass, at a place where a rail fence guards against too close an approach to the undercut bank, we had a nice view of Golden Ears Mountain, its peaks shrouded in cloud. We were also well situated to keep an eye on a nearby oak tree, where three Steller's jays rested.

After lunch we had a look at two or three heritage structures: the Houston House, the tiny milk house (used for refrigeration), and the Karr Mercer Historic Barn. These structures postdate the fort by many decades, and, in fact, the barn was moved here from its original location in the Chilliwack area.

When we had had our fill of history, we set out on the Houston Trail. As we entered the forest, we felt the first drops of rain and were happy for the tree cover. Our walk along the Houston Trail provided us with nice variation. Up to this point we had been walking on level ground, but now we proceeded uphill and down. On Brae Island, we had walked through deciduous woods, but now we were in a forest consisting of mature evergreens, with some *very* large cedar and Douglas-fir trees. In wet areas there was a generous growth of skunk cabbage.

When we arrived at the Houston Trailhead parking lot, it was raining steadily. As we piled into our vehicles for the drive back to Brae Island to pick up our remaining cars, we were thankful to have been able to complete most of the hike in dry conditions. While for many of us it was the first time we had visited one or both of these Metro Vancouver parks, I'm sure it won't be the last. In fact, one of our members was already thinking about a return trip to Brae Island and combining it (as had the one family) with a visit to the national historic site (which, in this year of Canada's hundred and fiftieth birthday, is offering free admission).