

BMN Trip Report

Burnaby Scenic Trail (March 28, 2009)

by Mark Johnston



Mark and Don on 'The Heights Trail'. Photo by David Mounteney.

The BMN Hikers got off to a somewhat inauspicious start. We planned our initial outing for the first full week of spring, but on hike day (Saturday, March 28) found it necessary to endure a wintery cold and steady - if light - rain. But all was not lost. Whereas few humans were out moving about, the birds seemed relatively unperturbed. Over the course of our four-hour walk, we saw and/or heard 22 species!

Beginning at tiny Bates Park, next to the Second Narrows Bridge, the three of us brave souls walked east along the Burnaby Heights and Scenic trails to the far side of Capitol Hill. We travelled mostly through second-growth woods, with deciduous trees being most numerous. While the woods continued to have a barren look, the signs of spring were unmistakable. Indian plum had leafed out and was sporting a few white blossoms; salmonberry was just beginning to leaf; and the alders were red with catkins.

Along the Burnaby Heights stretch we had a number of views looking across Burrard Inlet to the various industrial and ship-loading installations on the other side. We also had great views of the Maplewood Flats area, the expansive mudflats particularly visible in the ebbing tide on our return. As we walked, Don remembered how before the Second Narrows Bridge was built, automobile traffic had crossed the inlet on the railway bridge. He also recalled how people had lived along the waterfront just below in a kind of shanty town. According to a trailside sign, this habitation was known as “Crabtown.”

After passing the Chevron Refinery, we skirted Confederation Park’s miniature-railway compound on its north side and, utilizing the Penzance Nature Trail and a long stairway of closely-spaced steps, descended to a beautiful little pocket beach on the inlet. Two Canada geese kept watch at one end of the beach as half a dozen gadwalls swam just offshore. At the opposite end of the beach, a large number of mallards cavorted both in the water and out. A gull on the wing cried just overhead, and a couple of song sparrows foraged among the pebbles and in the mud close by. Back on the nature trail, we watched a brown creeper’s upward ascents of tree trunks and noted chickadees and possibly kinglets on the branches above. Farther along, we were stopped short by the cacophony of crows engaging in mobbing behaviour and fixed our eyes on a hawk, seemingly glued to its perch. As we watched, the big bird lifted its wings and flew away. Our initial impression was that it was a Cooper’s, but comparing it in size with the mobbing crows and a “tiny” Steller’s jay silhouetted on an upper branch left a trace of doubt.

Upon reaching the terminus of the Scenic Trail at Hastings Street, we used quiet residential streets and the odd bit of informal trail to attain the top of Capitol Hill. Even on a clear day, views at the top are limited, but there are splendid vantage points on either side of -- and a little below -- the summit. From Bessborough, north of the end of Ellesmere, there is a wonderful view looking up Indian Arm. Unfortunately, we were only able to see the lower part of the arm, which was otherwise shrouded in mist and cloud. Then from the Cambridge Street substation there is an even more striking view of downtown Vancouver, the inlet and harbour. Again, unfortunately, we were only able to see so much, as the inlet was for the most part clouded-in.

I had hoped that we could enjoy a leisurely lunch on the benches or grass in the substation linear park with the city and harbour at our feet, but given the wind, rain, and cold, we headed instead for the covered picnic area in Confederation Park. Curiously, although the park boasts three sizeable roofed shelters, two of them had no tables at all and the third only a lone table. We made our way to the third shelter and sat down at the lone table. While we ate, we listened to starlings chattering away and counted robins searching for worms.

After lunch, as we re-walked the Heights Trail, the sky brightened a bit and before we were through we snapped a picture or two just to prove that we were there! Despite the inclement weather, it had been a good day.

NOTE: Other species of birds seen and/or heard: cormorant, eagle, rock dove, northern flicker, bushy-tit, winter wren, varied thrush, spotted towhee, dark-eyed junco.