The Southern Chilcotin Mountain Wilderness

The Southern Chilcotin Mountains, relatively undiscovered by British Columbia's outdoor recreationists, lie only 215 km north of Vancouver. The nearest community, Gold Bridge, can be reached year-round through the Fraser Canyon via Lytton and Lillooet, or by the Squamish Highway via Pemberton, Bralorne and Lillooet, depending upon snow conditions. Both alternatives require approximately equal driving time (5 hours) to the primary trail heads (see maps). Located on the eastern side of the Coast Mountains, the region is bounded by Chilco Lake to the west, the Chilcotin River of the Fraser Plateau to the north and the Yalakom River to the east. Carpenter Lake and the Bridge River demarcate the southern boundary. Numerous mountain peaks punctuate the broad plateau, including Mt. Tatlow (3,076 m), Taseko Mountain (3,064 m), Big Dog Mountain (2,864 m), Shulaps Peak (2,882 m) and Mt. Warner (2,835 m).

WILDERNESS AND RECREATION VALUES

Most recreational use of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains occurs within the Charlie Cunningham Area, which encompasses 112,784 hectares surrounding Spruce Lake. An excellent trail system links the adjacent valleys, alpine meadows and mountain passes to Spruce Lake, with access gained normally along either Gun, Tyaughton or Relay Creeks. The area is ideally suited to both summer and winter recreation, including horseback riding, hiking and mountaineering, camping, backpacking, cross country skiing and snowshoeing, hunting and fishing, photography, snowmobiling and nature study.

In spite of the region's proximity to population centres of British Columbia, including Kamloops, Williams Lake and the Lower Mainland, the Southern Chilcotin Mountains still provide a wilderness setting. Wildlife is plentiful and easily seen, particularly mule deer, black and grizzly bear, hoary marmots, spruce and ruffed grouse, eagles, ptarmigan and coyotes. California bighorn sheep, rocky mountain goat, moose, wolverine and wolves can also be viewed during specific seasons or within localized habitats.

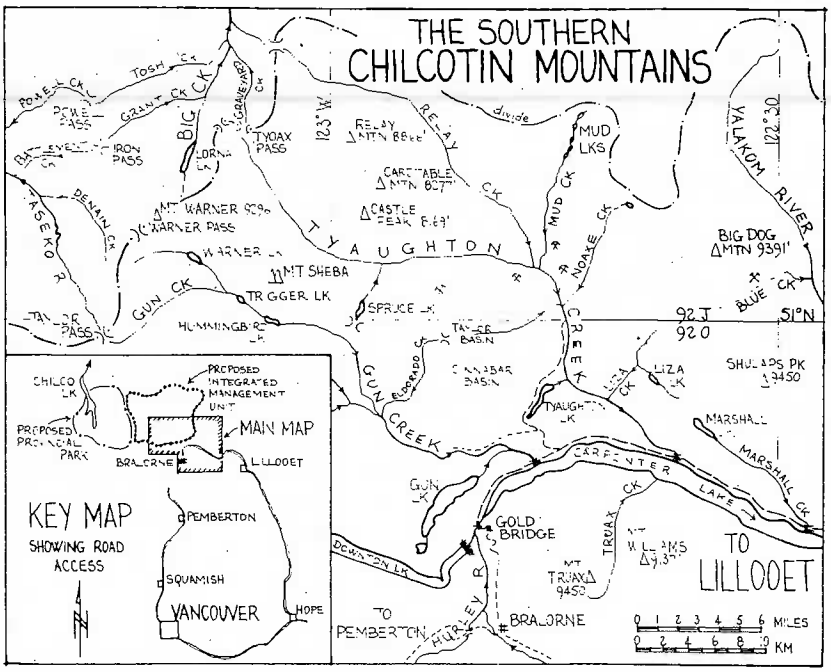
Geologically, the Southern Chilcotin Mountains provide an interesting diversity of formations, including coastal granitics, volcanic basalts and mineralization zones rich in valuable ores. Highly fossilized sedimentary deposits, of which Castle Peak offers a spectacular and notable example, consist approximately 90% of ammonites and trilobites. Most peaks in the region however, exist as erosional remnants of volcanic rock extruded 30-40 million years ago during the Tertiary Period. Some of these peaks remained above maximum ice level during the last glaciation, thereby offering refuge to local plant species. Recent botanical investigations on these peaks located a poppy *(Papaver lapponicum)*, fleabane *(Erigeron purpuratus)* and buttercup *(Ranunculis gelidus),* all of which occur between 350-450 km from their nearest known botanical equivalents. Although none are currently considered endangered, all three species are classified as rare in British Columbia.

The Southern Chilcotin Mountains reside in the lee of the Cascade Mountains, which creates a climate substantially drier than normally associated with coastal regions or wet zones such as in Manning Park. The flora reflects this climate, and contains plant species characteristic of both coastal and continental vegetation. Moreover, because the mountain peaks rise above a broad, centrally located plateau, plant species representing both temperate vegetation to the south and boreal vegetation to the north commonly occur in close proximity. The region is perhaps unique in British Columbia for its floristic diversity, representing ecological transitions along north/south and east/west transects. For example, on steep, south-facing slopes above Gun Creek, bluebunch wheatgrass *(Agropyron spicatum)* and spring sunflower *(Balsamorhiza sagittata),* two plants normally associated with sagebrush vegetation of the Kamloops area, grow luxuriantly at 1,550 m. Yet only a few metres away, on moister sites, spring beauty, *(Claytonia lanceolata)* and yellow avalanche lily *(Erythronium grandiflorum),* both of which are commonly found in alpine areas throughout British Columbia, literally carpet the slopes with a profusion of snow-white and golden blossoms immediately following snowmelt.

HISTORICAL USE

Prior to European settlement in British Columbia, native peoples penetrated the Southern Chilcotin Mountains along travel routes between Taseko Lake and Bridge River. One of the most active of these trading and hunting trails originated in the Nemaia Valley, east of Taseko Lake, climbed east over the Warner Pass, then proceeded down Gun Creek to Bridge River. The present hiking trail on the east side of Gun Creek overlaps this historical route, meandering through splendid grasslands clothing the southwestern shoulder of Mt. Sheba. Spring displays of floral colours rival those found anywhere in southern B.C., including Garibaldi and Manning Parks. Graveyard Valley also provides historical interest, as local lore attributes the valley's name either to the site of smallpox deaths of native Indians in 1919, or in reference to a skirmish between Europeans and native people. Unfortunately the exact truth remains uncertain.

The alpine/subalpine grasslands of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains provided impetus for exploration and cattle graz-



ing early in British Columbia's European settlement. Livestock use continues to the present day, although the kind of grazing activities have varied over the years. Beginning in 1939, sheep were driven annually to summer pasture from Kamloops to Graveyard and Paradise Valleys, crossing the Fraser River at Big Bar Ferry. As many as nine thousand sheep, in three bands, participated in these epic drives, occasionally with what can now be considered humorous side effects. One hot summer day, during a crossing of the highway at Cache Creek, sheep manure on the road became so slippery that vehicular traffic could no longer negotiate the steep hill just north of town! Current livestock use of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains includes only cattle, with rotational grazing controlled by Coordinated Resource Management Planning.

MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCE CONFLICTS

Because of these important recreational, ecological and historical values found throughout the Southern Chilcotin Mountains, the Outdoor Recreation Council of B.C. conducted a public inventory of preservational sites in the Chilko, Tchaikazan and Charlie Cunningham areas during the summer of 1976. The Council submitted its Chilcotin Wilderness Park Study to Parks Branch in December 1976, which regrettably took no further action on the proposal to designate the region as a Provincial Park.

Soaring gold prices in the late 1970s quickened the rate of mineral exploration throughout the region, with record numbers of Free Miner's Licenses being filed in British Columbia. Simultaneous timber depletion close to regional mill sites heightened the forest industry's interest in logging 3.39 million cubic metres of mature timber allocated within the Yalakom Public Sustained Yield Unit, located primarily among the watersheds of Gun, Tyaughton and Relay Creeks.

Faced with these extractive uses, 14 B.C. outdoors groups created the Coalition to Protect the Southern Chilcotin Mountains in 1979. The Coalition's request to preserve the core Charlie Cunningham Area was rejected by the Environment and Land Use Committee in 1980, which recommended that the area continue to be managed for multiple use because of significant timber, mineral and grazing values. The Spruce Lake Integrated Resource Management Planning Committee subsequently formed in 1981 to develop guidelines and criteria for resource use within the area, including mineral extraction and timber harvesting.

THREATS TO WILDERNESS

The Spruce Lake Integrated Resource Management Plan designated three zones of resource extraction based upon potential conflicts with other resource uses, including wilderness and aesthetic quality. In reality however, this management plan tacitly condones the eventual elimination of a wilderness environment in the Southern Chilcotin Mountains, as all merchantable timber is earmarked for ultimate logging. Zone 1, where timber harvesting can begin immediately under existing Ministry of Forests' regulations, includes Mud Creek West, Lower Tyaughton, Lower Gun Creek, Relay Creek West, and portions of both Slim and Leckie Creeks. In preparation for logging slated to begin this summer, a new road is currently being constructed along the west side of Gun Creek.

Zone 2, scheduled for logging in the 1990s, includes Bonanza Creek, upper Relay Creek and portions of Paradise Creek, with an additional commitment that logging in visually sensitive areas of Paradise Creek may also be considered following input from a landscape architect.

Zone 3, which includes 29% of all mature timber volume in the plan area, is located primarily within high value recreational categories, as identified by the management planning committee. Nonetheless, the plan still maintains an option for logging of Eldorado Creek/Taylor Creek, Upper Gun Creek/Warner Creek, Spruce Lake and Upper Tyaughton Creek beginning in the year 2000.

Mining poses additional threats to the wilderness integrity of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains. Moreover, zones 1, 2 and 3 for mineral extraction differ geographically from those for timber harvesting, thereby compounding the combined impacts of mining and logging. For example, some zone 1 mining, which requires the least amount of restrictions on extraction activities, corresponds with some zone 2 logging, which ostensibly dictates greater care for visual and aesthetic values. Silver deposits at Trigger Lake, copper and tungsten in the tributaries of Warner Lake, and arsenic and zinc in uper Tyaughton Creek are all classified as moderately sensitive class 2 mining even though all three areas are considered prime visual and recreational zones. A mining road has already been built to the Bonanza Creek claims near Eldorado Mountain, while intensive mining survey work has been undertaken throughout lower and middle Gun Creek during the past 8 months.

In conjunction with mining and other extractive uses, proposed access routes also threaten the pristine serenity of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains. Plans for an industrial level road linking Gun Creek with Taseko Lake would follow the traditional migration route of native peoples over Warner Pass. This road would efface an historical heritage as well as jeopardize the fragile meadows above upper Gun Creek, a site which the Spruce Lake Integrated Resource Management Plan recommended as an Ecological Reserve. This potential Ecological Reserve would be threatened not only by direct road building activities, but also from susceptibility to increased motorized traffic, particularly all terrain vehicles and trail bikes. With no restrictions regarding offroad vehicular use, access to these meadows would inevitably result in their destruction, as evidenced previously by numerous examples throughout British Columbia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Logging, mining and road construction all threaten the continued de facto status of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains as a year-round wilderness experience for the citizens of British Columbia. The Spruce Lake Integrated Resource Management Plan represents an objective but undesirable compromise of recreational values within a predominantly resource extraction framework. Pristine or wilderness values can not be preserved, in spite of good intentions, if all merchantable timber is harvested, including that found in subalpine zones. Extraction of mineral deposits, however carefully planned and monitored, inevitably leaves scars upon the landscape for several generations. Consequently, Park Status, plus concomitant restrictions on resource extraction, provides the best administrative mechanism by which to preserve the Southern Chilcotin Mountains in their present, relatively pristine condition.

In an independent report recently prepared for the Southern Chilcotin Mountains Wilderness Society, Dr. J.P. Kimmins recommended that a park be created which encompassed most of the core Charlie Cunningham area, with logging permitted only on the lower portions of Gun, Slim, Leckie, Relay, Taylor, Paradise, and Tyaughton Creeks.

Even these proposals, however, represent undesirable concessions, as the Southern Chilcotin Mountains constitute the only region in British Columbia, within reasonable travel distance from the Lower Mainland, where one can explore three adjacent watersheds, from low elevation to alpine, in an aesthetic environment still relatively undisturbed.

No other park in southern B.C. offers similar opportunities, particularly in such a dry climate, with open forest and terrain so easily traversed. Logging the

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lower portions of these watersheds would eliminate such potential. Indeed, Dr. Kimmin's report concluded that "Of the three recreation-resource use conflicts that I have had some contact with in the past three years, the South Chilcotin Mountains Park Proposal . . . (has) . . . the greatest merits for a resolution in favour of parks and recreation." The report further noted that a South(ern) Chilcotin Mountains Park would complement Manning Park, where remaining wilderness values are declining in response to very heavy use.

The preservation of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains requires immediate action. Timber harvesting scheduled for this year will likely proceed. All future logging must be reviewed carefully to ensure its financial justification. Reduction of existing botanical, wildlife and wilderness values for potentially smaller offsetting timber revenues is economically unacceptable in today's society where recreational benefits are known to yield tangible, longterm, economic value. Mining for short term profits, benefiting only a relatively few British Columbians, is similarly inappropriate whenever significant, longterm reduction in recreational values ensues.

The Southern Chilcotin Mountains embody the heritage of all British Columbians, regardless of financial or social position. Preservation of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains protects this heritage for future generations. Let these future generations not complain that our relatively blessed and wealthy society considered immediate financial return too important to maintain this uniquely beautiful and accessible area. Join our efforts to create the Southern Chilcotin Mountains Wilderness Park before it is too late by giving your support to the Federation of B.C. Naturalists, by becoming a member of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains Wilderness Society and by expressing concern to your representatives in Victoria.

In 1986, British Columbia will host a gathering of visitors from throughout the world. Expo 86 provides an opportune moment to demonstrate publically our commitment to the slogan of "Supernatural B.C." Creating a Class A Park in the Southern Chilcotin Mountains during 1986 not only would promote B.C.'s tourism industry, but also would bequeath a gift to ourselves — a permanent gift of enjoyment and pride in British Columbia's heritage and beauty.

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WILDLIFE VIEWING GUIDE – UPDATE

June 28th, 1985 — Osoyoos, British Columbia. I had just finished checking out the last wildlife viewing sites on my list. I was heading home the next day, completing my sixth week spent in the field, and ending the last of my long distance trips throughout southwestern British Columbia.

After dinner I divorced myself from my camera equipment. Armed with just a pair of binoculars, I decided to make one last visit to the marshy area next to Haynes Point Provincial Park. Upon my arrival at the marsh I was again greeted by the male California quail and his family, which consisted of 18 youngsters. As I walked slowly along the trail through the grass, I thought about the places visited over the past few days and about the wildlife observed. My first Northern (Bullock's) oriole, my first sage thrasher, my first brewer's sparrow, my first bobolink, my first catbird . . .

That reminded me of the first long-billed curlew I had observed near Armstrong some two months earlier. However, today I had the best opportunity yet to photograph this bird in the Osoyoos Oxbows Fish and Wildlife Management Reserve. I still remembered driving to White Lake near Salmon Arm and catching a glimpse of a yellow figure on a stump in the distance. Another yellow-bellied marmot colony to add to the growing list of viewing sites. I remembered by first Northern Pacific rattlesnake. Thank goodness the one picture I took turned out! And I remembered my first yellow-headed blackbird, who together with more than 150 of his male friends, created the most amazing din. Then there were the Western painted turtles in Sutherland Hills Provincial Park just southeast of Kelowna. All crowded onto one log in the sun they provided one of the bestopportunities for both group and individual photographs. On this last trip I visited Englishman Lake, located on a backroad out of Aspen Grove. I remembered sitting all alone one afternoon as the call of a male common loon echoed over the lake.

I was lost in my thoughts when I suddenly became aware of the Eastern kingbird circling and calling overhead. I looked up to find myself staring directly at a nest containing his mate. Nearby treees were alive with the sounds of orioles, cedar waxwings and catbirds, while the long-billed marsh wren chattered loudly in the marsh. The quail were still running about when I approached the car, wile a Western painted turtle stood his ground on the path in front of me.

Upon returning to the motel I began to produce a list of the bird species I had seen while conducting field work. Just over 100 bird species were written down when I turned the last page of the field guide. About one-half of these species I had never seen before I embarked on my travels.

July 8th, 1985 — Burnaby, British Columbia. I have so many people to thank for all that they have shared with me. The past two months and almost 5000 miles have been very special, not just for the numerous wildlife species viewed, but also for the many fellow naturalists I have come to know and to call friends.

At this moment I am struggling to separate in my mind the details of approximately 250 viewing sites and to put all of this information down on paper. After I include the viewing sites between Hope and Vancouver, I am sure that the total will reach well over 300. By the time you read this in the B.C. Naturalist fall issue I will have sorted out all of the paper work and will be well on the way to completing my research and to writing my thesis before Christmas 1985. The work will begin on producing a guide to the wildlife viewing sites identified.

I am deeply grateful to the Federation of British Columbia Naturalists for its support, and to the naturalists and naturalist clubs throughout southwestern British Columbia for their assistance.

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