

Hiking Vancouver Island BC Alpine: Mount Arrowsmith and Strathcona Provincial Park

“In more ways than one, you get an entirely different view of the world from a mountaintop” say scientists Richard and Sydney Cannings in *British Columbia, A Natural History*. Rugged valleys, icy streams, and sloping meadows of wildflowers undulating in the subalpine wind: these are what catch the eye when hiking Vancouver Island’s mountains.

Like lower elevations, the Island’s ranges have vistas enough for photographs, but they also have geological oddities, unique plant and animal communities, and trees so determined to survive that they bend themselves into all manner of contortions. Life in and around the timberline can be a challenging affair, but for hikers keen on seeing a different perspective, nothing parallels an alpine adventure.

Since this is one of the snowiest places on earth, hiking the Island’s mountains means being prepared. Temperatures fluctuate rapidly, reminding hikers to pack insulating layers that can be easily donned or shed. Covered by snowpack until late July or even August, the alpine landscape emerges for a brief season before diving back into winter.

Thankfully, there is still time to take in some of that short-lived brilliance. Late summer is one of the best times to visit Vancouver Island’s mountains, and on mid-Island peaks like Mount Arrowsmith and Mount Cokely, wildflowers still paint the hillsides along with a bumper crop of black huckleberries and blueberries and their stunning red leaves. Paradise Meadows in Strathcona Park offers day-hikers the chance to stroll along a level boardwalk, viewing subalpine plants a stone’s throw from the parking lot. The same location gives overnight hikers a glimpse of what’s ahead on their trek into Forbidden Plateau and beyond.

The following hikes offer something unique to the alpine explorer. Keep to the trails to avoid trampling sensitive plant and don’t forget to bring your camera. With careful preparation, a day in the alpine could be your peak experience.

Mount Arrowsmith: Located off Highway 4 west of Qualicum Beach and east of Port Alberni, the mountain known as Arrowsmith is actually comprised of multiple peaks, the most prominent being Arrowsmith and Cokely. A network of logging roads provide good access to a series of trails in the vicinity, some ascending gradually to the mountains’ slopes with others climbing sharply to their summits. A decommissioned ski resort located on the south side of the peaks marks the start of a historic trail that once saw guests of the Canadian Pacific Railway carried on horseback from the Cameron Lake Chalet.

To get to the alpine today, hikers commonly take the saddle route that ascends the slope between Arrowsmith and Cokely gaining 450 metres in elevation. Highlights of this hike include alpine and subalpine wildflowers—aster, harebells and pink monkey flower are currently blooming—huckleberries and lowbush blueberries, and a side trail down to Emerald or Jewel Lake. View aficionados will appreciate vistas of the Gulf Islands, the Strait of Georgia, and neighbouring peaks.

Commonly known as the largest and most accessible alpine area on Southern Vancouver Island (1,819 m), Mount Arrowsmith is currently the focus of a park proposal

encompassing the massif's peaks and lakes. For more information, visit www.mountarrowsmith.org or contact the local visitor information centre at www.chamber.parksville.bc.ca/ (250.248.3613).

Paradise Meadows/Forbidden Plateau:

Mountain peaks dominate the landscape of Strathcona Park, the largest and oldest park on Vancouver Island. Created in 1911 by a special Act of the Provincial Legislature, Strathcona is named for Donald Alexander Smith, or Lord Strathcona, a Canadian pioneer who drove the last spike into railway that united Canada from west to east in 1885. Even before Lord Strathcona's time, the area has been home to a vast array of plants and animals unique to Vancouver Island. Hikers interested in visiting the alpine without climbing hundreds of metres can drive to the park via the Strathcona Parkway off of Highway 19, following signs to the Mount Washington Ski Resort. Paradise Meadows is located just before the Nordic ski area, on Nordic Lodge Road.

From the trailhead, a gravel pathway leads to the Paradise Meadows boardwalk. Routes through this subalpine wonderland are well-signed to a number of day-hike destinations, including Helen MacKenzie, Battleship, and Kwaii Lakes. In addition to other superlatives, the hike offers views of snow-capped mountains, as well as visits from the ever cheeky Whiskey Jack (a relative of the common Stellar jay). Watch for blooming aster, berry bushes, and sections of low-lying fen. Hikers looking to stay overnight can rest assured that the forty-four backcountry sites in this section of the park will offer innumerable choices.

For more information, visit the Strathcona Park web site at wlapwww.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/strathcn/forbid.htm. To contact the local visitor information centre, call 250-334-3234.

Tips for Hiking in Alpine Areas (Sidebar)

Above the timberline, plants struggle against harsh conditions to grow a few millimeters. Animals scope out meager supplies of food or spend a good deal of the year in hibernation. To lessen your impact in these fragile areas, keep the following tips in mind when hiking the alpine.

- Trails are not always evident in alpine areas, but when they are present, follow them.
- When blazing a route across what seems like an unmarked area, look for signs on surrounding vegetation as well as on the ground. Odds are, someone has been there before you and has left flagging or rock cairns pointing the way.
- If travelling in a group, walk single file to avoid braiding the trail.
- Avoid picking wildflowers. Given that they have a longer shelf-life, photographs are the best souvenirs.
- Avoid leaving behind evidence of your trip. Food scraps, garbage, and toilet paper are all easily packed into plastic bags for the return trip.
- Refrain from dumping anything into alpine lakes. The cold temperature means refuse takes longer to break down. In areas with camp sites, lakes may be the only water source.
- If you plan to cook anything, bring a camp stove. Wood is a precious commodity at high elevations. Strathcona Park does not permit campfires in backcountry areas.

Recommended reading:

Hiking Trails II: South-Central Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, Richard K. Blier.

Hiking Trails III: Northern Vancouver Island including Strathcona Park, Richard K. Blier.

Hiking Vancouver Island, by Shannon and Lissa Cowan.

Alberni Valley Trail Guide, Alberni Environmental Coalition.

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