

Hiking Mount Benson

Many people have had the experience of trying to hike up Mount Benson, getting confused by the web of trails, getting turned around, and generally getting discouraged from trying again. In the past, this was often the case—but that was then; this is now.

If you haven't been up the mountain lately, now is the time to try again. You'll be amazed to find how much has changed about the hike up Mount Benson. The first thing you'll notice as you arrive near the end of Benson View Road is the gravel parking lot with back-in angled parking to accommodate many cars. On most weekends, this is full to overflowing and you'll still see cars parked alongside the road. An upside of so many park-users is that you will meet a lot of folks who know the way if you have any questions or concerns; and most are more than happy to assist. After you park, proceed to the kiosk at the trail-head. There is a map, information about the park and the hike, as well as recognition of the many donors who made the dream of a park become a reality. No longer does the trail skirt the far end of Witchcraft Lake across several private properties; now a floating walkway crosses the lake at its narrowest point and starts your hike off with a picture-worthy view. A couple of winters ago, the ice froze thick enough that the lake was full of impromptu games of shinny.



Throughout all the seasons, Witchcraft Lake is a beautiful beginning to the hike up Mount Benson.

After you cross the lake, your hike begins in earnest. Square orange trail markers and directional signage lead you along a flat path alongside the lake to the beginning of the Witchcraft Lake Regional Trail. This trail is a result of an agreement between the Regional District of Nanaimo and woodlot manager VIU, with approval by the Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations who hold title to this crown land. It provides the only public access to the Mount Benson Regional Park. I often joke with people at this point of the hike that “the fun is over.” That’s because the uphill climb begins here. At no point on the marked trails to the summit do you need technical expertise, nor will you find yourself on an exposed rock face; but it is quite an uphill grind, interspersed with a few short flat runs along the way. Another thing I tell folks after they’ve completed the Regional Trail and are inside the Park boundary is that “the first half is the worst half” – meaning that although there will still be stretches of steep uphill ahead none of it will be as unrelenting as what you have just conquered. There will be plenty of opportunities to catch your breath, and catch great views too.

From this point, you have a few different choices about which route or combination of routes to take you to the summit. Want the shortest distance between two points? Combine Straight-to-the-Top Trail with Rafe’s Way, then Gordie’s Trail to the summit. If you want to take a little more time, follow the Logging Road to Te’tuxw’tun Trail that leads to the summit from the east. Check NALT’s trail map for other options. These routes are all marked with yellow, orange or red trail

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markers corresponding to colour-coded maps located at each trailhead. All routes have their challenges and vistas—and quiet beauty too.

At the summit, take some time to enjoy the 360° views, pose for a few pictures for posterity, call a friend, eat some lunch, enjoy seasonal foliage such as glacier lilies, camas, flowering sedum, tiger lilies and penstemon, and soak it all in. Revel in the thought that it's all downhill from here.

Ugh! It truly *is* all downhill from here. If your leg muscles and lungs burned on the way up, your toes, knees and hips will feel the hike down. Allow yourself as much time going down as it took to go up. Enjoy your time, stop at view points to break the descent, and encourage the folks you pass on their way up. Allow yourself four to eight hours to complete the hike.



This area of older forest along the Te'tuxw'tun Trail is just one of the many trails to choose from while hiking in Mount Benson Regional Park



Fairy slipper orchid—*Calypto bulbosa*.

With the growing popularity of the park, there are some things we can do to lessen our impact on the natural areas we pass through. Number one is stay on the trails. Trail widening and braiding increases the width of the trail, and the compaction of the trailside soil—harmful to tree roots and the delicate flowers that spring up along the way (like fairy-slipper orchids). Bushwhacking a new way through the undergrowth fractures natural areas, and stresses the animal and plant communities in the park. Soon, a rogue path becomes an established trail, and the areas where nature can thrive unmolested start to shrink.

Hiking maps from NALT are available for just \$2 at the Backyard Wild Bird & Nature Store, at the Tourism Info Centre at Northfield Road and the Parkway, at Valhalla Pure Outfitters, and at the NALT Stewardship Centre, #8 - 140 Wallace Street. Happy trails to you!

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