

A blanket of fog where Nanaimo should be— photo Paul Chapman



ABOVE THE FOG

On this Saturday morning in February, I set off to hike up Mount Benson with Gabe, a dog borrowed from a friend, for company. The morning starts out cold and foggy—a far cry from the weather forecast of clear skies—but the dog doesn't seem to mind.

There is a thin skiff of ice on Benson View Road as we approach the new parking area at the official trail-head access to the Mount Benson Regional Park. I manage to keep the van out of the ditches, easing into an angled parking space between the vehicles of other hikers. It used to be that the only time you would see other vehicles parked here was on a summer's day when, in the days before the parking area, they would line the upslope side of the street. Now, even on a mid-winter weekend morning you can expect to see half a dozen cars parked here. It is a sure sign of the improved way-finding due to NALT-installed park trail markers and signs, as well as increasing community use and familiarity with the popular hike. Soon, the lower slopes will be similarly marked once the Regional District of Nanaimo and Vancouver Island University agree on an access route through the University's woodlot.

What to pack for a hike in the changeable conditions of a February day? I am rarely accused of under-packing. This day, I have on my back not one but two first aid kits, two cameras, a book of birds and another of animal tracks, a dry change of clothes tucked into a dry bag, a large garbage bag, my lunch, the dog's lunch, a litre and a half of water, a folding saw, a multi-tool, an air-horn, two flashlights, my slip-on ice-grips, a pair of snowshoes, and a cell phone. It is good to note that most of the trails get pretty decent cell coverage, a handy resource should it be needed—and it's also fun to call a friend from the summit to gloat. So, seemingly packed for a month long stay on the tundra, we start up.

The hike begins by crossing a floating foot-bridge across Witchcraft Lake. The view from the bridge is quite unique—haunting, flooded dead trees roiling in mist. And, today, fragile ice covers the lake. Reaching the other side, we face a choice of three trails: Trail 3 to the left, Trail 2 a short distance to the right, and Trail 1 a little further along. The trails were named (numbered) when access to the mountain was gained by Hiking around Witchcraft Lake. Back then, Trail 1 was the most well-used of the three; now it seems like more and more folks choose Trail 2. After a short discussion, Gabe and I decide on Trail 1.

Very quickly, we start heading UP. No matter what time of year, I have yet to hike up Benson without breaking a sweat. Today, my sweaty, gasping efforts are quickly rewarded as we climb above the fog into a clear, crisp winter day. It isn't always this way. Sometimes the trail ascends from fog into cloud, only to descend into fog again. On those days, well-known paths can look unfamiliar; the view from the summit may extend only as far as an arm's reach, and the moist air slowly soaks through. After a fresh snow, trails are hidden from view and it is easy to get off trail—especially on the lesser-marked woodlot trails on the lower mountain. Today, it's easy to follow a well-worn path tromped through the snow.

The slushy snow turns icy as we climb. I slip on the ice twice before I think to put on my ice grips—webs of rubber with metal-spiked treads that make an icy hike both enjoyable and safe. The snow conditions are quite changeable on the hike. Elevation and exposure to sun (or lack of) can cause you to slip, slide, and sink as you go. By the end of this hike, I will have switched from bare boots, to ice-grips, and snowshoes—all the while leaning heavily on my hiking poles. Gabe seems unaffected by the changeable snow.



Gabe in repose— photo Paul Chapman

Trail 1 not only affords a view of a waterfall, it is also the most direct route to the Park. Soon we are at the Park boundary. You know you have arrived at the park by the uniform trail signs mapping the various routes to the summit, and bright plastic squares marking the trails as you go. Since NALT crews installed the markers four years ago, many have been broken by vandalism, weather, or the expanding trunks of trees. I make a mental note to come up this spring and replace the missing markers. The signs themselves are faring well, despite the occasional bullet wound and some posts whittled thin by people carving their names into them.

After another discussion about the various merits of the different routes of ascent, Gabe and I decide to take the Te'tuxw'tun Trail to the top. This route avoids a steep scramble or two, and will probably be easier on both the dog and me. We set out on the Old Logging Road Trail that was once used to access areas for logging. The

most recent logging, in 2003 and 2004, sparked the community to rally, and to raise awareness and funds used to purchase the land that is now the Mount Benson Regional Park. As we walk this road, I notice the tops of young cedar and fir trees emerging from the snow—planted by a NALT crew a couple of years back as part of a reforestation plan. Where the old road meets the Te'tuxw'tun Trail, a sign indicates a re-routing of the trail to protect a seasonal stream. This same NALT crew decommissioned the logging road route, dragging fallen trees across the route and planting willow whips and coniferous trees, as well as deepening a pool to enhance habitat for red-legged frogs and other amphibians. We climb the trail, passing over water-bars and log steps—also built by NALT and RDN crews—unseen beneath the snow.

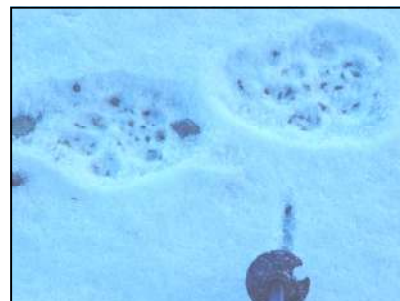
The wide-stance gait necessitated by snowshoes starts to wear me down much faster than the easier ascents of summer; but just as I begin to wonder what I was thinking when I decided to do this hike, the trail levels off and I glimpse blue sky through the trees ahead

Soon we are at the summit, our hard work rewarded. In the bright sun reflecting off the snow and in a stiff, cold breeze, we take in the view. A thick bank of fog stretching from the mainland across Georgia Strait shrouds Nanaimo from our view. The distant peaks of the Arrowsmith Massif in one direction, and Mount Baker in the other, dominate the west and east horizons. The southern view from the summit offers a fog-free winter vista over-looking Blackjack Ridge. I typically don't take many pictures on these hikes (I have a hard-drive full of pictures that began as breathtaking panoramic views, reduced to blurry, mundane images by the click of my camera shutter) But today I take a couple of pictures—one of Gabe reclining on the snow and another of the fog-veil covering Nanaimo.

Soon, the wind is cutting through my damp clothes. I swap them for a dry layer in my pack, and Gabe and I tuck into our lunches. As I crunch down on my hastily-prepared repast of carrots and celery I turn an envious eye to Gabe's homemade stew—but she doesn't seem to be in a sharing mood. After some more time spent enjoying the views and the bright day, I strap on my snowshoes and we begin our descent.

As we retrace our steps down Te'tuxw'tun trail, it seems as if Gabe's pads are starting to be bothered by the icy edges of the snow's crust. Soon, she follows close behind me, stepping only where my snowshoes have compacted the snow. Sensing her discomfort and trying to take a route that will be easy on her feet, we head out of the park towards the Hubcap Trail. This takes us near to a spur line logging road NALT decommissioned and replanted with native grasses. It is also turns out to be near the route recently walked by a cougar—as evidenced by the fresh tracks in the snow. Mount Benson and its surroundings are home to many animals. Usually you'll see only squirrels and ravens, but you might also come across the occasional elk or cougar—or most likely a bear. I can't help glancing over my shoulder as we continue down the trail.

We are quickly out of the deeper snow and Gabe's feet seem none the worse for wear. As we approach Hubcap Trail, there are signs of active logging just below the trailhead. This is Island Timberlands property and, for awhile now, road maintenance and boundary flagging has augured the resumption of harvesting activities. Even though the trail hasn't yet been affected, it is quite likely that it will soon be unusable—and certainly too close to active logging for safe hiking. At the bottom of the Hubcap Trail, we join the Outer Bypass Trail and head back towards Witchcraft Lake.



Cougar prints in the snow

Soon we are back in the van and descending into the thickening layers of fog. Total trip time: 4.5 hours.

Each season presents a different mix of challenges for hiking up Mount Benson. It is a good idea to go with a knowledgeable guide the first few times. During the summer months, NALT offers guided hikes up Mount Benson for a modest fee, and we also have route maps available for purchase at the NALT office and at various retailers around town. If you are thinking about hiking up Mount Benson for the first time, feel free to call the NALT office (250-714-1990) with your questions.
