

PHOTOGRAPHING THE HIGH AND THE LOW IN BRITISH COLUMBIA'S PROVINCIAL PARKS

A Photo Essay

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PHOTOGRAPHY HAS PLAYED an important role in shaping environmental attitudes and policies in North America.¹ In British Columbia, photography has been involved with the provincial parks from the beginning. The government-sponsored expedition to Buttle Lake in 1910 (described in Paula Young's article) included Frank Ward of Victoria as official photographer. Ward made dozens of photos during the month-long excursion, and many of his images of scenic grandeur and adventure – often in the high country – captured the lofty ideals that inspired the park movement. A selection of these images was presented to the premier and key cabinet ministers in handsome leather-bound albums, and helped to win support for the establishment of Strathcona Park. But Ward also took a handful of more prosaic pictures – usually at lower elevations – that foreshadowed how most people would actually use parks in the years to come. They portrayed expedition participants socializing and laughing, sitting around smoky campfires, and cramped into campsites festooned with damp clothing hung out to dry.²

* Several historians who have studied British Columbia's provincial parks suggested images and themes for this photo essay, although regretfully not all of their suggestions could be incorporated. The author thanks David Brownstein, Jenny Clayton, Jonathan Clapperton, Mica Jorgenson, Tina Loo, Samantha Morris, Sandy Phillips, Rick Rajala, Zac Robinson, Rick Searle, Jeff Slack, Phil Van Huizen, and Paula Young. Chris Gergley provided feedback on an early draft of this essay and valuable technical assistance with the colour images.

¹ See, for example, J. Keri Cronin, *Manufacturing National Park Nature: Photography, Ecology, and the Wilderness Industry of Jasper* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

² One surviving album is held at BCA, MS-0249, Ellison Family Correspondence and other papers, 1868–1973. Another is held at UBC Library Special Collections, A.E. McPhillips Fonds. As Graeme Wynn has pointed out, albums of Ward's images were also given to a number of expedition participants. See Wynn, "Shall We Linger along Ambitionless?: Environmental Perspectives on British Columbia," *BC Studies* 142/43 (2004): 12–13. Many of Ward's photographs have recently been reproduced in Philip Stone, ed., *Strathcona Journals: 1910 Discovery Expedition* (Quadra Island: Wild Isle, 2011).

The implicit division between “high” and “low” in Ward’s photographs deserves further commentary. Ward’s high images and their circulation among political decision makers were part of a wider trend that began in the late nineteenth century, in which North American parks were valourized by boosters, artists, outdoor enthusiasts, government agencies, tourism promoters, and environmentalists. Although these groups had different goals, they almost always represented parks as places that were beautiful, recuperative, educational, and exceptional. High photographic images played an important role in building and reinforcing popular expectations of parks – think of William Notman and Canada’s national parks in the Rockies or Ansel Adams and Yosemite. High landscape photographs, often taken in or of “high” places, have been used for a variety of “high” purposes, from prodding governments to establish parks, to luring outdoor recreationists, to building a sense of shared identity (sometimes around slogans like “Super Natural British Columbia”). Professional and “serious” amateur photographers have treated park landscapes with a degree of reverence, seeking to capture their most appealing, unusual, or essential characteristics. Their images of sublime or picturesque scenery, iconic or unusual flora and fauna, and solitary figures (whether climber, boater, or angler) engaged in contemplative activity in seemingly pristine nature are at once evocative and familiar. However, as a genre these images provide a rather narrow window onto park history.

Most of the photographic images of parks held in the provincial archives were made by or for the provincial government, and were produced and circulated to present a visual argument in favour of parks and the agency responsible for them. They show magnificent scenery, rustic facilities, and attractive places for people who are seeking respite from the modern world. They are legacies of the Parks Branch’s important role as a province-building agency – a role that helps explain why it was incorporated into the Department of Recreation and Conservation alongside the government photo service, tourism bureau, and *Beautiful British Columbia* magazine. In all of these high images, parks appear as problem-free (and to a large extent people-free) landscapes. One does not see power transmission lines, protesters, or campsites strewn with broken beer bottles. Pictures of people labouring inside the parks are also rare.

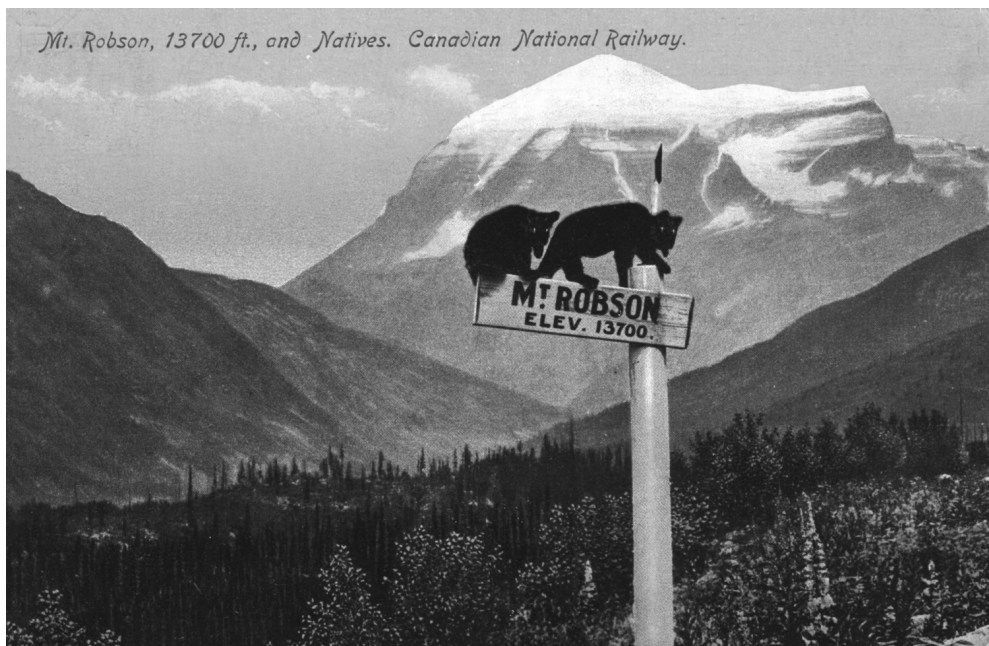
When all is said and done, such idealized and purposeful images are a small fraction of the photographs made in parks. “Low,” or common, photographs of British Columbia’s parks can allow valuable insights into how these places were managed, how they were sometimes troubled landscapes, and how they were used by most British Columbians.



Mount Assiniboine Park, established in 1922, was sandwiched between Banff and Kootenay national parks, and so closely associated with them that many visitors failed to realize it was a separate provincial park.

Museums and archives located near major provincial parks often have images of local residents' activities in and around the parks. The BC Ministry of Forests Library holds many early park reconnaissance reports and development plans that contain photographs produced for internal circulation – images that show people working, sometimes at mundane tasks, and problematic situations inside the parks. Former Parks Branch employees have also donated personal photo collections to museums and archives: several images included in this photo essay are drawn from the Chester P. Lyons collection at the University of Victoria Archives and the Davey Davidson collection at the Bowron Lake Museum.

In addition, an enormous quantity of “snapshot” images made by ordinary park users who used photography to record their experiences are scattered around the province in albums, boxes, and slide trays tucked away in attics and basements. Digital scanners, image-hosting websites, and a growing enthusiasm for sharing old photos online may eventually allow historians to survey large numbers of the images that British Columbians and visitors from afar made of their activities in the parks. This, in turn, may encourage those writing about British Columbia's provincial parks and protected areas to produce less institutional, less high-minded, and more popular “histories from below.” The selection of images that follow are offered as a sampling of the kinds of high and low photographs made in British Columbia's parks: they show high and low places and themes, were made for high and low purposes, and represent high and low photographic genres.



As the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies, Mt. Robson was a popular subject for photographers. A.O. Wheeler of the Alpine Club of Canada made the panorama at top in 1911, a year before Mount Robson Park was established. Passenger trains paused at Mt. Robson station so that travellers could view the mountain, and countless photos were taken from the same perspective as the 1920s postcard above.



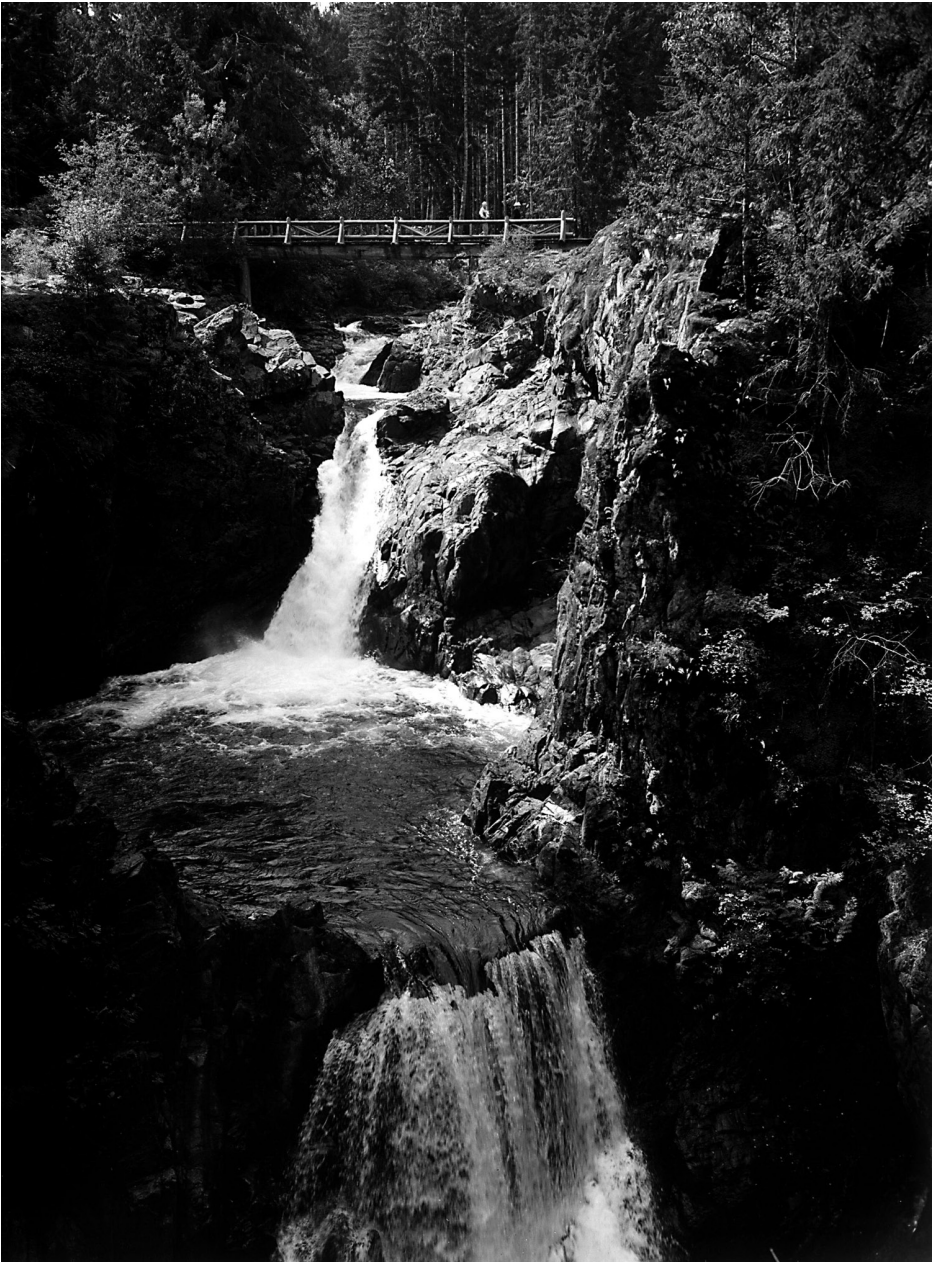
Garibaldi Park was established in the Coast Mountains north of Vancouver in 1927, after lobbying by alpinists and members of the Vancouver Natural History Society. Their campaign was aided by a sense of camaraderie cultivated on glacier fields and in subalpine camps.



Hiking, horseback riding, swimming, and boating have long been popular recreational activities in the provincial parks. Boating enthusiasts like the party shown at top helped spur the establishment of Bowron Lake Park in 1961. Big game hunting was – and continues to be – permitted in many of BC’s provincial parks, and, as shown above, was one of the key attractions in Wells Gray Park, established in 1939.



Parks with beaches, like Cultus Lake (top), attracted many visitors during the summer months. Although most parks saw little winter activity, ski hills were developed at Mount Seymour, Cypress, Garibaldi, Manning, and Silver Star. Concessionaires were responsible for day-to-day operations, like the ski class seen in Cypress above.



During World War Two, gasoline rationing led to heavy use of Vancouver Island's easily accessible parks like Little Qualicum Falls (above). This popularity helped set the pattern for the postwar expansion of the park system.



In the late 1940s the Parks Division set out to acquire properties along major highways and learn more about the existing parks. Its staff examined great swathes of the province, including the Thompson River valley (top) and Manning Park's alpine areas (bottom).



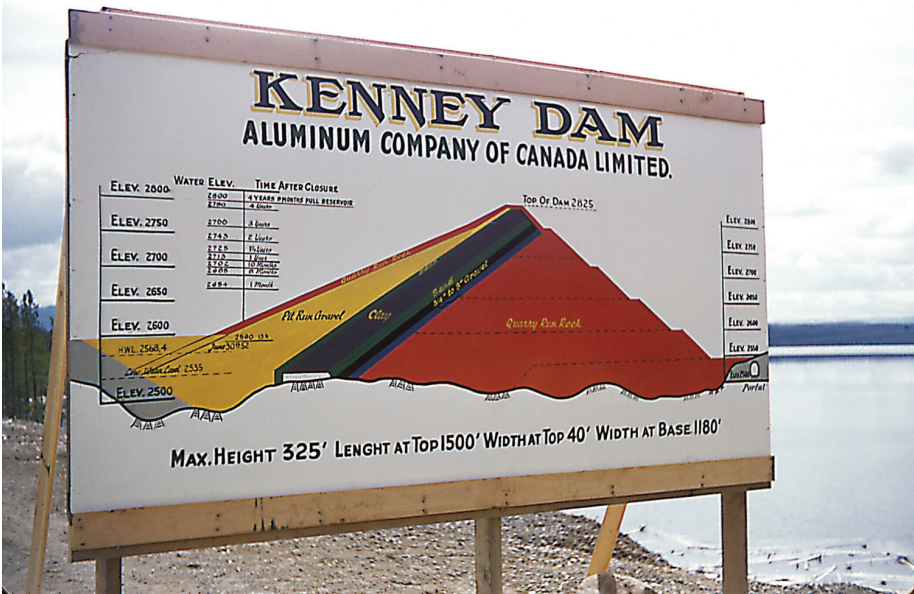
Most of the 175 provincial parks and hundreds of recreational reserves established between 1945 and 1965 incorporated roadside pullouts, like the one seen above in MacMillan Park (Cathedral Grove), viewpoints like the one seen top right near Silverton, and campgrounds like the one at lower right in Okanagan Lake Park.





After 1957, the Parks Branch was responsible for several signage programs, including the Stop of Interest plaques and Garbage Gobbler anti-littering campaign. Some of the fruits of these efforts are seen in the image above, taken in the Fraser Canyon, and at top right, taken at Craigellachie. The Branch was also charged with transforming the dilapidated townsites of Fort Steele (seen lower right in 1959) and Barkerville into historical parks.





Several parks were affected by postwar megaprojects. In the late 1950s Tweedsmuir (top) was cut up so that Alcan could build the Kenney Dam to power its smelter at Kitimat. In 1961 Hamber was reduced by 2.3 million acres (945,000 ha) to make way for logging ahead of the Mica Dam, which flooded large sections of the Columbia and Canoe river valleys, as seen in the aerial photo above.



The 1970s saw increased use of parks' backcountry areas. Some trekkers set out on their own path, as the hikers in Tweedsmuir Park appear to be doing at top, but the Parks Branch also made basic backcountry improvements, like clearing primitive campsites and building footbridges and corduroy boardwalks like the one at the Kibbee portage in Bowron Lake Park, seen above.



Much of the work in provincial parks occurred behind the scenes. Those who laboured on the ground, like the Youth Crew and Parks Branch staff shown at top in Bowron Lake Park in 1976, were supported by experts and managers headquartered in Victoria. Park advocacy groups also worked hard, often relying on volunteers to put on events like the 1987 “Voices for the Wilderness” festival seen above, organized by the Lytton and Mt. Currie Indian bands to raise support for a park in the Stein Valley.

IMAGE CREDITS

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- p. 162-65: University of Victoria Archives, Chester Lyons fonds, 6.6.1.
- p. 166 top: University of Victoria Archives, Chester Lyons fonds, 6.6.1; bottom: Courtesy of BC Hydro.
- p. 167 top: Image I-05211 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives; bottom: D.K. (Davey) Davidson collection, courtesy of Sandy Phillips, Bowron Lake Museum.
- p. 168 top: D.K. (Davey) Davidson collection, courtesy Sandy Phillips, Bowron Lake Museum; bottom: Courtesy of Western Canada Wilderness Committee.