

PART TWO

THE CLEARWATER VALLEY

The following pages are excerpted from the 2nd edition of Nature Wells Gray: A Visitors' Guide to the Park, by Trevor Goward © & Cathie Hickson (1995). Most of the text is current, though a few important changes should be noted:

p. 74: The Canyonlands trail is now signposted as the "Flatiron trail", though in fact the Flatiron trail is only a five minute spur trail on the Canyonlands Trail. Why BC Parks persists in confusing people on this point surpasses understanding.

p. 80: The Grouse Creek trail now joins the park road at km 20.5.

Note: Road and trail conditions in the Clearwater Valley are subject to change. Please check with the Wells Gray information Centre (250-674-3334) for current conditions. The authors cannot accept responsibility for any inconvenience or damages incurred through the use of this posting.

29.9 km
(18.6 miles)

- FISHING
- CANYON PROBING
- CREEK FORDING
- HOODOOING
- WARBLING

HEMP CREEK CANYONLANDS TRAIL

2.5 – 8 hr (8 to 13 km) return.
Elevation change: 20 to 275 m.

AN inauspicious pulloff near the top of Mailbox Ridge marks the trailhead to Hemp Creek Canyonlands. From here, it would be hard to guess that only a few kilometres distant are waterfalls, hoodoos, mesas, precipices, hogback ridges, and narrow defiles – some of the most engaging hiking terrain in Wells Gray Park.

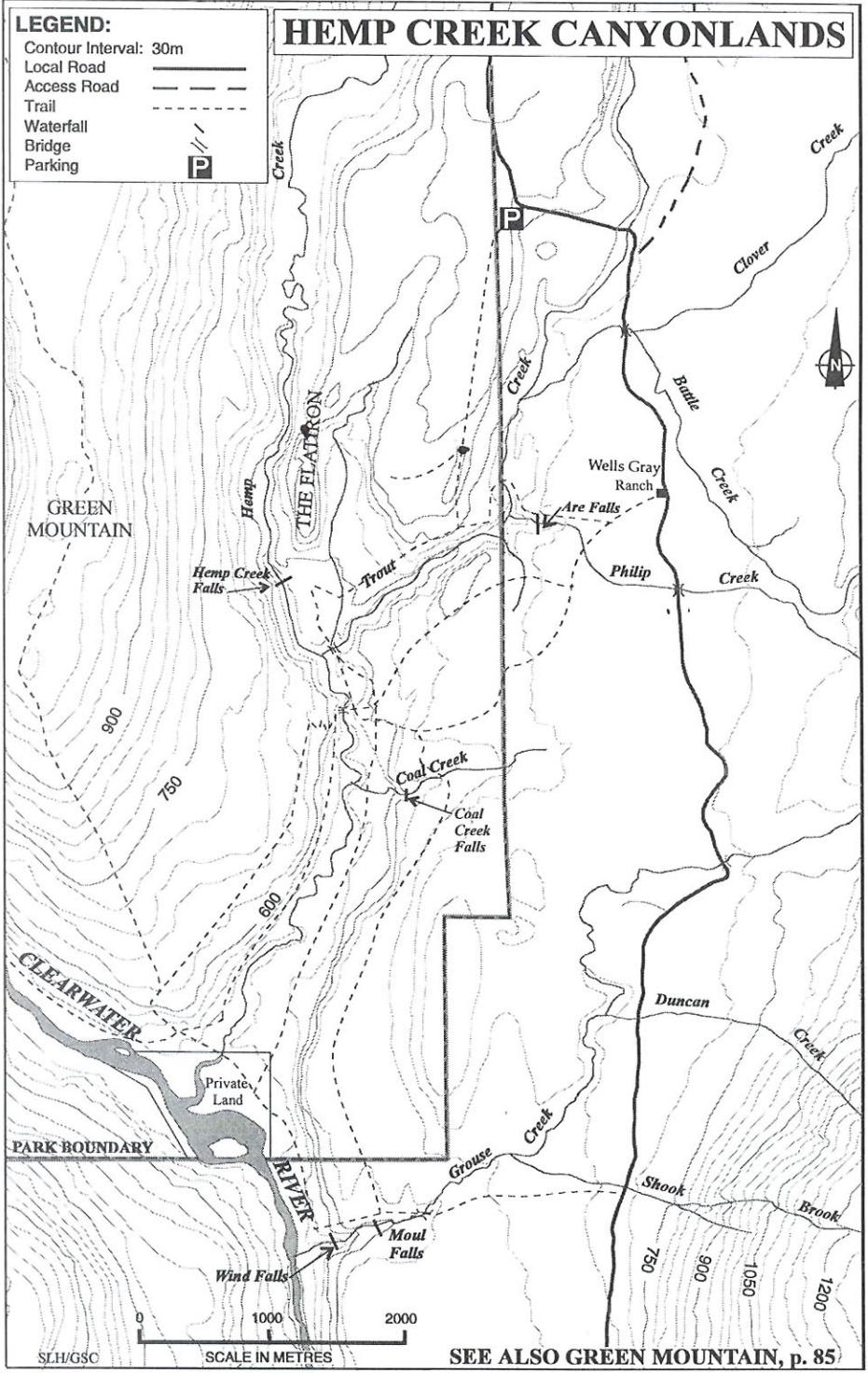
This is a land of Paper Birch and Trembling Aspen. Treat yourself to a hike here in early October, when the leaves are hanging apricot.

You can reach the Canyonlands from three places along the park road: at km 22.2; at km 27.0; and here. The km 27.0 access is through the Wells Gray Ranch. At time of writing, the Ranch managers encourage visitors to explore the Canyonlands by this route – an offer which enormously enhances the accessibility of this area to the average hiker. They request, however, that hikers check in at the office.

The Canyonlands trail system is intricate. You will probably prefer to select your own route from among the many possible hiking circuits. Here are some pointers:

Autumn in Hemp Creek Canyonlands (TG)







The Flatiron is an outcropping lava flow distinctive for its long, symmetrical columns.
(CH)

The walls of Trout Creek Canyon are composed of a soft metamorphic rock called phyllite. In some places phyllite is blue in colour, and in others pink.
(TG)



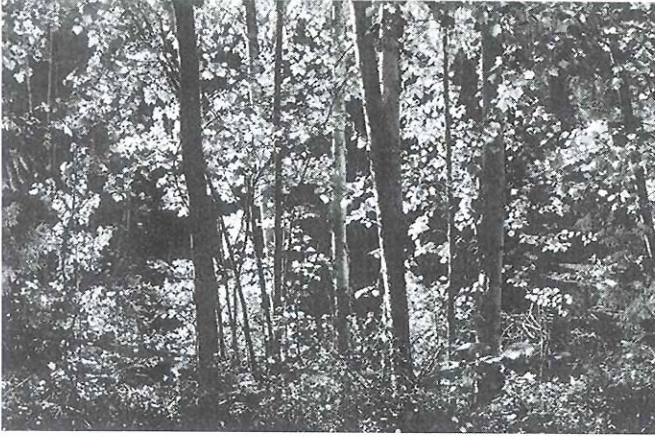
- From the Canyonlands trailhead to the Moul Creek trailhead (km 22.2), allow approximately six hours; to this add another 90 minutes for the 5.6 km road walk back to Mailbox Ridge.
- The hike from the Canyonlands trailhead to the Wells Gray Ranch can easily be completed in under three hours; to this, however, add another 30 minutes if you intend to walk the road back to the trailhead.
- Not all creek crossings are bridged (see map). Ask about stream conditions at the Wells Gray Ranch.
- Unmarked trails make it is easier to come out at the Wells Gray Ranch than to go in that way.

After an hour's walk through Lodgepole Pine and Douglas-fir, a view of the Clearwater Valley opens to the south, with the dome-like summit of 2600 m Dunn Peak occupying centre stage on the horizon.

Here take the short spur trail to the right for a first view of the Flatiron. The Flatiron is a remnant of an ancient lava flow that once filled an earlier version of Hemp Creek Valley. One million, four hundred thousand years in age, this flow is roughly three times older than most of the park's other lava flows. Hemp Creek has cut deeply into the flow to the west of the Flatiron, whereas to the east the lava was similarly eroded away by an earlier version of Trout Creek. The Flatiron is what remains in between. Most of the downcutting occurred as receding Pleistocene glaciers were unleashing huge quantities of meltwater. Since then, Trout Creek has removed to the next valley east of here, leaving its original valley high and dry.

The intricate pattern of columns in the massive flow that forms the Flatiron suggests that the lava here cooled very slowly. These columns are among the most slender and best developed in the park. Some of them are 20 m tall, though only 10 to 15 cm in diameter. They have been peeling off the cliffs ever since they were exposed, thus building up an apron of talus at the base.

As you gaze across the valley at the Flatiron, you may notice that the talus at its base is distinctly lobed – as though it had once actually flowed. And so perhaps it did.



Only in the lowlands do deciduous trees really thrive, and nowhere more so than in the Hemp Creek Canyonlands. Listen here for warblers and vireos of many kinds. (TC)

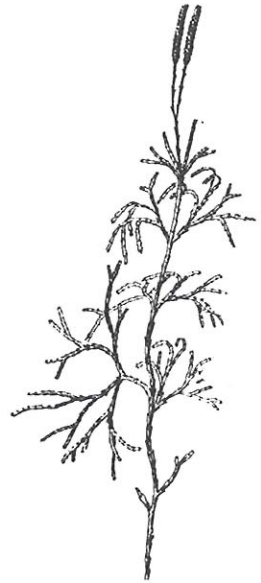
Talus made up of broken basalt columns tends to be very open. In winter, the interspaces become filled with cold air which, because it is relatively heavy, is not soon displaced by the warmer, lighter air of summer; this is called Balsh ventilation. During the Little Ice Age of 150 years ago, the air in the talus slope may never have warmed at all. Any ground water trickling through the rocks would have frozen, filling in the cracks with ice. When enough ice had built up within, the talus would have begun to flow: a rock glacier!

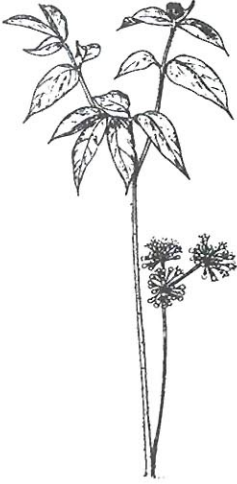
Head back now to the main trail, and follow it off the south end of Mailbox Ridge until it branches. Here a left turn leads, in succession, to Trout Creek Canyon (breathtaking views), to Trout Creek crossing (no bridge), to Philip Creek Canyon (more fine vistas), to Are Falls (a miniature Helmcken), and finally to the park road at the Wells Gray Ranch. If you have only three hours to spend exploring the Canyonlands, spend them here.

A right turn at the fork leads you deeper into the Canyonlands. Notice that the rocks along the canyon rim are foliated, like the pages of a book. These are a kind of metamorphic rock called phyllite (after the Greek "phyllos"—leaf); they belong to the Kaza Group.

The Kaza Group phyllites began perhaps 750 million years ago as mud at the bottom of an ocean. Later the mud was buried, and changed into rock called mudstone. The mudstone, in turn, was subjected to tremendous heat and pressure which, over time, transformed the grains within it into leaf-like minerals such as mica. It's the mica that imparts the layered look to the rock.

As you hike the Canyonlands, watch for four different kinds of club moss, each with its spore-filled clubs (strobili). Pictured here is Ground-cedar (Lycopodium complanatum). (RBCM)





Wild Sarsaparilla
(*Aralia nudicaulis*) is
widespread in mixed
forests throughout the
park. Though somewhat
resembling *Poison Ivy*, it
is entirely harmless.
(NONC)

These slopes are a favourite wintering grounds for some of the park's 820 Moose and 650 Mule Deer. Here the snows come late, usually not until the latter part of November, and disappear early, often in March.

Also at home is the Ruffed Grouse, a chicken-like bird favoured by the relatively warmer (and drier) climate of the Canyonlands. The precocial young leave the nest within a few hours of hatching, and so are especially vulnerable to cold and wet. They remain with the mother until autumn; watch for family groups.

Descending farther, the trail passes close by the south end of the Flatiron, providing a convenient point from which to explore its basalt columns. Should you decide to proceed cross-country, beware! Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron rydbergii*) lurks among the talus boulders here – one of only two localities in the park. You'll easily recognize this low, semi-shrubby, rash-producing plant by committing to memory the old adage: LEAVES IN THREE; LEAVE IT BE!

Now about 90 minutes from the park road, and having descended into a narrow gulch, the trail finally crosses Trout Creek on a sturdy footbridge. Below the bridge a rough sidetrail leads to Trout Creek's confluence with Hemp Creek, only a few metres downstream.

The ground here is wet in places, and supports lush colonies of two wetland species more common farther north in the park: Skunk Cabbage (*Lysichiton americanum*), recognized by the tropical-rain-forest proportions of its leaves; and Devil's Club (*Oplopanax horridus*), whose spine-covered stems and leaves will surely need no introduction.

Words to Warble by

In these woodlands, dominated by Paper Birch, warblers find insect pabulum aplenty with which to feed their young. From late May through mid July, the woods ring with their singing. Listen for:

- the Orange-crowned Warbler: a descending trill, often rising at the end.
- the MacGillivray's Warbler: a methodical "Sweet-sweet-sugar-sugar," or the reverse.
- the Nashville Warbler: "SibibiSibitititititi."
- the Yellow-rumped Warbler: "Chory-chory-chory-chory-chee-chee," and other operatic warbles.
- the American Redstart: "One-two-three-four-five-six" or "See-be-See-be-See-be" or other similar songs.
- the Magnolia Warbler: "One-two. One-two-three."
- the Northern Waterthrush: "Wheat-Wheat-Wheat-Sweet-Sweet-Sweet-chew-chew-chew." (The breakfast cereal song.)
- the Yellow Warbler: a bright, sunlit "Tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee-Titi-wee," or other similar songs.

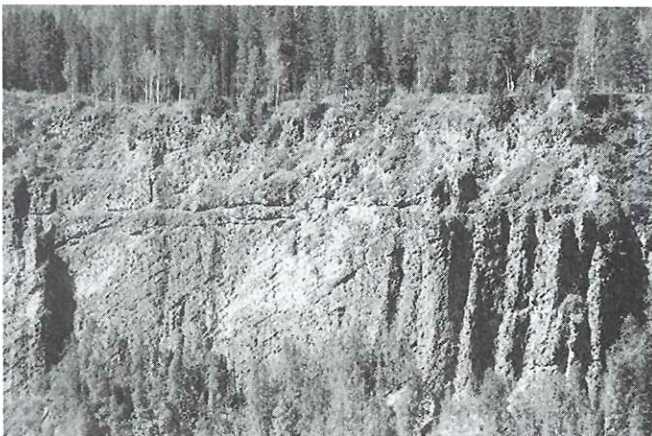
South of Trout Creek bridge, the trail becomes a maze of intersecting pathways (see map). To get to Moul Falls, choose here among four possible routes: two lower, and two upper. The two lower trails roughly parallel the east and west banks of Hemp Creek. The latter is more scenic. Having briefly hugged the east bank of the creek (dramatic country, this), the trail crosses on a bridge to the other side, then continues down creek for another hour, past talus slopes, pillow breccia pillars, and open Douglas-fir woodlands unique in the park. Watch for Mule Deer, or possibly even White-tailed Deer.

More scenic still are the Coal Creek and Hoodoo Rim Trails, which climb, respectively, to the east and west volcanic rims overlooking the valley. At any of several lookouts along both these trails, you are standing on 150 m of pillow lava: evidence that the lake that once occupied this valley was briefly transformed into a steaming cauldron. At Coal Creek Falls, the lava is much older than elsewhere in the Clearwater Valley, perhaps dating from the Eocene, roughly 45 to 50 million years ago. This was a period of widespread volcanic eruption in western North America.

Both the West Hemp and the Hoodoo Rim Trails intercept the Green Mountain River Trail (see page 90) at the south end of Green Mountain; here turn south (left), and continue downhill to the mouth of Hemp Creek. En route the trail passes through a riverine forest of enormous Black Cottonwoods. Excellent habitat, this, for Black Bear: watch for their telltale claw marks on the trunks of the trees, not to mention in the sandy beach at riverside.



If it's a Warbler with a "window" on its tail, it's either an American Redstart or, as above, a Yellow-rumped. (TC)



The dipping beds of pillow lava pictured here tell of a lake which once filled Hemp Creek Valley. (CH)



Strange to relate, the cabin at the mouth of Hemp Creek now belongs to the Catholic Church of Canada. (TC)



Moul Falls offers abundant opportunity for getting abundantly soaked. (TC)

You'll find no bridge at Hemp Creek: to continue south, either ford the creek (which can be tricky) or cross on a log – assuming you can find one. Again, check with B.C. Parks or the Wells Gray Ranch for an update of conditions.

South of Hemp Creek, the West Hemp Trail joins the East Hemp Trail at an old fisherman's cabin, once owned by H.R. MacMillan (now of Vancouver Planetarium fame). Here you may wish to loop north either back to the Hemp Creek Canyonlands trailhead at km 29.9, or to the Wells Gray Ranch: should you decide in favour of the latter route, be prepared to ford Philip Creek. In either event, allow at least three hours for the return.

The trail to Grouse Creek (and km 22.2 of the park road) turns east from the cabin toward an impressive line of basalt cliffs. Turn right at the next intersection, and follow the trail south along the base of the cliffs. You are now crossing private land; please obey the signs. The owners particularly ask that hikers not approach the Clearwater River Chalet, located below the trail, and overlooking the river. For more information, call 1-800-667-9552, or else write to Clearwater River Chalet, 250 Lansdowne Street, Kamloops, B.C. v2c 1x7.

Now begins the long, steady ascent to the Hemp Plateau, some 250 m above; follow the signs to Moul Falls. To help make the climb less arduous, listen for Townsend's Solitaires, holding forth in long, warbled soliloquy.

Should the day be young, consider making a half-hour side trip to the base of an oh-so-refreshing waterfall. To do so, turn right (downstream) on the south (far) side of the Grouse Creek bridge, then follow the trail five minutes to the brink of Moul Falls. There are no safety fences here, so take care. Another ten minutes later, and you're standing at the base of a 35 m column of falling water – with the heady option of proceeding *behind* the falls to a grotto on the far side, plush-carpeted in leafy liverworts.

Back at the brink of Moul Falls, budget about 45 gradual uphill minutes to the park road. Keep to the south of the creek.