

British Columbia

Vancouver- West Coast Trail- Bella Coola Valley



British Columbia is a region situated on the Canada's West Coast. I have visited it in autumn 2008. British Columbia (or 'BC' as is called) is a good destination for any mammal watcher. It harbors both terrestrial and sea mammals in large variety. Temperate climate, relative remoteness and beauty of the landscape provide enough attractions to keep any naturalist busy for several months. The place, of course, is not free of environmental problems. Deforestation caused by

unselected logging (in Google earth BC forest looks like spotted), overfishing, extraction of mineral resources, growing population and tourist traffic start to transform BC wild landscapes and drive some animals further deep into forest and finally, I'm afraid, into extinction too. Specific problem of the region is an outbreak of pine beetle, caused probably both by climate change and unsustainable forest management practices. Big stretches of dead forest and large clearances are sad reminders that even most remote places on earth are not environmentally trouble free.

Although BC and Canada national governments has set up a network of provincial and national protected areas it shall be much enlarged in near future in order to preserve BC natural resources. Anybody interested in BC environment issues and willing to support the protection cause shall visit the site web of Nature Conservancy Canada, NGO active in BC old growth forest preservation (<http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/canada/work/art14771.html>).



One of the most interesting places to visit in BC is the west coast of the Vancouver Island, preserved under Pacific Rim National Park. The Park is composed from three sections from which 'west coast trail section' is the biggest and probably most interesting. It protects narrow stretch of wild coast with temperate, old growth forests, meadows and several hundred salmon sprawling creeks. The only way of exploring the park is to walk entire and famous "west coast trail"- 75 km trek through most interesting park

landscapes. It is worth to remember that the trail is open from May 1 to September 30. It is also quite popular destination, both among Canadians and foreigners. Number of overnight trekkers allowed to enter the trail is limited to 50 (25 for each entry point). Therefore it is wise to book the trail in advance, especially in the summer time. Second thing to remember is that there is no log cabins on the trail so camping on the beach is the only option for accommodation.

Although I have seen a German family with 7 years old girl on the trail, it is advisable not to bring anybody younger than 12. Trail is difficult, slippery and very wet, especially after rains (remember you are in the rain forest). One's should be prepared for 4-5 days of tough hiking, climbing several hundred ladders, river crossings, strong winds, dangerous tides, log woods on the beach and other inconveniences.

Hikers cannot expect to see hundreds of mammals on the WCT. But some sightings are (almost) guaranteed. On the coast you are likely to see grey whales feeding very close to the shore (they are most predictably seen during the spring gray whale migration), steeler's sea lions (there are two colonies on the rocks close to Carrmanah and Pachena Lighthouses), harbor seals (on the beaches) and red squirrels (in the forest on higher elevations). With some luck you are also likely to see black bears (feeding on the shore during the low tide), otters (both marine and sea), killer whales, humpbacks and, very difficult to spot, cougars.



Anybody willing to increase chances of observing wildlife, shall start hiking early in the morning, (before other trail users wake up), especially along the shore where many animals feed during the low tide.

I have started my West Coast trail from the south (Port Renfrew) and walked up to Bamfield (north end of the trail). The trailhead in Port Renfrew is accessible in summer time by special bus from Victoria (capital city of BC). It is also possible to start the hike from Bamfield which can be reached from Port Alberni. It took me five days to complete the trail.

After my walk I have explored, with the help of hired boat, another section of the park- so called "broken Islands" waters. Those waters are very frequented both by kayakers and sea mammals. There is a large colony of the harbor seals on the island near Bamfield. I was also lucky to see humpback whale, harbor porpoises and sea lions around the islands. Views of Cape Beale with beautiful lighthouse were additional premium of the visit.

In total I have observed 9 species of mammals on the WCT:

- Red squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) close to Michigan creek and Pachena trailhead,
- American marten (*Martes americana*) on Trasher cove,
- American mink (*Mustela vison*) near Pachena lighthouse,
- Steeler's sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*), near Carmanah and Pachena lighthouses, and around Cape Beale,
- Harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*) close to Carmanah creek and in Trevor channel,
- Gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) close to Walbram creek, Bonilla and Dare points,
- Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaengliae*) in Broken Islands waters,
- Harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in Broken Islands waters,
- Black bear (*Ursus americanus*) near Pachena trailhead,

Travelling on the old steamer to Port Alberni (On the way back from Bamfield), I was lucky to see my first pair of killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) in Alberni Inlet.

My next stop on Vancouver Island was Port Hardy. Highway 19, which stretches from one end of the island to the other ends in Port Hardy, which explains the town's motto, "where the highway ends and the adventure begins".

Although my main reason to be there was to catch a ferry to Bella Coola (operated by BC Ferries-internal passage route), port Hardy is also a starting point to the Cape Scott Provincial Park. That region is famous for the large population of black bears. Unfortunately I had no time to visit CSPP and spend only a day exploring Port Hardy neighborhood. There is a nice estuary on the south of the town frequented by black bears feeding on sprawling salmon. In general it is not recommended to walk around without a pepper spray. I virtually walk on the big black bear boar (fortunately not aggressive) on the trail. I have also observed several interesting birds such as herons, bald eagles and geese.

I continued my travel from Port Hardy Terminal catching a ferry to Bella Coola. My intention was to observe whales and dolphins on the way but all nights and days were foggy. Bad luck.



My next destination was Bella Coola Valley. Situated in Central Coast of BC The Valley stretches 80 km from North Bentinck Arm, to the base of famous "The Hill" passage on Highway 20. It can be reached both by road from Williams Lake, and by BC Ferry from Port Hardy. The eastern end of the Valley is protected by Tweedsmuir Provincial Park. Famous Alexander Mackenzie Wilderness trail also ends in Bella Coola.

Bella Coola usually refers to the entire valley, encompassing the settlements of Bella Coola proper ("the townsite"), Lower Bella Coola, Hagensborg, Saloompt, Nusatsum, Firvale and Stuiie. The entire Bella Coola valley contains a population of 1900.

The Valley was colonized by Norvegians in the end of 19th century and today keeps strange half Nordic half Indian look. The place is most known for observing wildlife and fishing. Bella Coola river and its tributary Antarco are very important salmon sprawling rivers which attract large variety of wildlife in August-October period. It is probably one of the best places in BC for observing grizzly and black bears fishing together. Carcasses of salmon left by bears on the river banks also attract smaller animals such as eagles, foxes, wolves, martens and minks.



Few companies from Bella Coola organise bear viewing trips on the

drifting rafts (I have used Kynoch <https://www.coastmountainlodge.com/>). That method is an effective way of observing both black and grizzly bears from the very close. Bears in Tweedsmuir Park section of the Antarco river are neither aggressive nor afraid of humans and stay busy with their fishing activities all day. Also Bald Eagles are very easy to approach. In half a day me and three other tourist on the raft have seen not less than 10 grizzlies and 3 black bears, some of them for closer than 10 meters.

Apart of rafting experience I have also explored the valley by car, bicycle and on foot. That allowed me to observe red fox (*vulpes vulpes*) in silver coat, mule deers (*Odocoileus hemionus*) and red squirrels. High mountains surrounding Bella Coola are also good place to observe mountain goats (*Oreamnos americanus*), but I missed that because no guide was available for mountain hiking at the moment.

Bella Coola community maintains excellent network of trails in the valley (ask for the brochure in local supermarket). It is also possible to arrange multi days hikes in the close mountain ridges. That might be a real wilderness experience, as region is not settled at all. Wherever you walk, keep in mind that almost one hundred grizzlies are present in the valley during the sprawling season (August-October) including big boars and sows with young. That should convince anybody to bring a pepper spray even on the shortest walks. Some trails are closed in the sprawling season because of the potentially dangerous encounters.

At the end of my journey I spend two days in Vancouver town and made short trip to Grouse mountain, where I observed Townsend's chipmunk (*Tasmias Townsedii*) and Douglas squirrel (*Tamisciurus douglasi*). At night, in the middle of the busy crossroads of Vancouver suburbs I have also spotted a striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*).

Michal Polanski

michpol@wp.pl

Mammal list

	English name	Latin name
1.	Red squirrel	<i>Tamisciurus hudsonicus</i>
2.	Douglas squirrel	<i>Tamisciurus douglasi</i>
3.	Townsend's chipmunk	<i>Tasmias townsedii</i>
4.	Striped skunk	<i>Mephitis mephitis</i>
5.	American mink	<i>Mustela vison</i>
6.	American marten	<i>Martes americana</i>
7.	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
8.	Harbor seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
9.	Steller's sea lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>
10.	Black bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>
11.	Grizzly bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>
12.	Gray whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>

13.	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaengliae</i>
14.	Harbor porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
15.	Killer whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
16.	Mule deer	<i>Oreamnos americanus</i>