Wild Isle Guide

Backcountry Skiing • Snowboarding • Snowshoeing

Second Edition

Island Turns & Tours

Philip Stone

A Guide to Backcountry Snowsports in the Vancouver Island Alps

Island
Turns & Tours

We acknowledge that the mountains of Vancouver Island are the traditional, territories of the Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Coast Salish peoples.

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Horseshoe Mountain.

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Cover Photo: Andrew Schissler earning turns in the Bonanza Range.
Back Cover: clockwise from top: Last run at Mt Cain; Spring snowshoeing on Mt Tom Taylor; Tobin Leopkey on Alexandra Peak.
Opposite: Ryan Stuart, North Col, Mt Colonel Foster.
Photos: Philip Stone

Caution!

Traveling in the backcountry can be dangerous with real risks that can lead to serious injury or even death. These risks can never be completely eliminated but may be reduced, to some degree, through proper training, use of suitable equipment, consulting weather and avalanche forecasts, and acquiring experience assessing terrain, weather, snow-pack, potential for avalanches and other mountain hazards.

While a reasonable effort has been made to present accurate information herein, mountain conditions are constantly changing and there are unpredictable factors including, but not limited to: weather, avalanche conditions, river levels and wildlife that can never be accurately predicted or completely accounted for.

By using this book you acknowledge that the information is provided on the understanding that the author/publisher, any distributor or retail outlet **can not be held liable whatsoever** for any personal or third-party damage, injury or fatality that may be caused by its employment, including, but not limited to any omissions or mistakes found herein. **You enter the backcountry at your own risk.**

In case of emergency call 911.

Philip Stone touring up Kaipit Peak. Photo: Andrew Schissler

In the almost twenty years since the first edition of Island Turns and Tours was published a lot has changed in the realm of Vancouver Island backcountry skiing. There have been physical changes in the form of the ongoing logging of old-growth, with roads pushing ever higher up the mountain sides, remnant glaciers have continued to recede, with many now only a matter of years away from melting altogether. The warming climate is bringing changes to vegetation and extreme weather events seem to increase in frequency and intensity every year.

There have been big changes in the Island's backcoutry skiing community as well. An activity that a few decades ago was a fringe pursuit practiced by a very small number of people has exploded in popularity. The availability of equipment and the advances in technology both underfoot and in the pocket, have made it easier than ever to participate in backcountry snowsports.

With all this as a backdrop it is high time for an update to **Island Turns and Tours**. Not that I have been shying away from the project, but a quick comparison between this book and its predecessor will show that the scope has increased significantly which has taken a lot of effort and time to complete.

There are a few things I would like to mention here to put some of the content and some of the omissions into context.

Firstly, if you're new to backcountry skiing on Vancouver Island, and especially if you have dreamy experiences from other classic locations like Roger's Pass, then my advice is not to kid yourself about the endless days of bottomless powder you'll be shredding here. Ski touring on Vancouver Island exacts a steep price. It is hard work and even though on paper the region isn't especially large, the access is notoriously challenging. There's a reason that the Raven Lodge and Mt Cain parking lots are full each and every weekend with everyone from newbies to old-timers: there simply aren't that many places where ploughed & maintained road access into the Island Alps is available during the winter.

With that in mind I put a special effort into including some places that, until now, have flown a bit under the radar, where there is reliable winter-time highway access.

On the omissions side of the ledger, in part to avoid this book ballooning larger than it already is, I had to eliminate some areas that you might otherwise expect to be included. Those include some of the more remote parts of the island and some of the more accessible. Experienced backcountry skiers looking for remote and ambitious trip ideas aren't going to lament any omissions in a guidebook and there are other sources to seek inspiration and beta. However, a few eyebrows might be raised as to why the Beaufort & Boundary Ranges et al have been left out. The answer is simple: private land.

Reading through Island Turns and Tours it will become apparent that in many cases there is a paucity of detail on specific descent terrain and that no first descent details are provided. This is intentional for reasons surrounding safety and culture.

Claiming 'firsts' is fraught with contemporary complications. There have been people travelling across Vancouver Island since the land emerged from the last ice age and I don't just mean telemark skiers. Indigenous people have a 14,000+ year history that we have little chance of ever fully understanding and the least we can do is to respect that by keeping our current social window in perspective and avoiding claims of 'firsts'. I know I have personally played a major role, locally, in documenting and claiming 'firsts' but I feel we are, as a society, learning and evolving, and enacting positive change is best done right at the point that such realizations take hold.

Safety-wise, embarking on missions with specific goals, and especially upping the stakes seeking first descents, in avalanche terrain adds unnecessary, additional risk to the risk-management matrix. It is my personal feeling that I don't wish to contribute to a culture where personal notoriety influences decision-making in the field. This view might seem contradictory when compared to the culture of climbing where documenting ascents is deeply embedded in the community's fabric but I feel that the scenarios, risks and potential consequences are different enough to warrant a distinct approach.

With that all said; I hope that this new edition of **Island Turns and Tours** will serve the winter backcountry community on Vancouver Island well and build significantly on the first edition. Play safe out there!

- Philip Stone

Contents

Day Trips

Overnighters

Ratings apply only to immediate area of destination. Remember to evaluate all terrain & conditions in the field and make decisions accordingly. See pages 14-15.

Blue skies, great snow!

Introduction

Picture this: it's mid-January, by some accounts the most depressing time of the year. On British Columbia's south coast and especially for many Vancouver Island communities that gloom is overlain by a thick blanket of grey cloud that hangs overhead day after day. But those in the know have a secret, that way above that clag is a land of sunshine, blue sky and glittering snow, a land of stunning beauty and endless fun, in the Island Alpine.

Vancouver Island has a wide variety of terrain suitable for backcountry skiing. There are places to go on day trips, weekend tours and multi-day backcountry expeditions. There are mellow areas like Forbidden Plateau with little objective hazard, ideal for foul weather days or for novices starting out, and there are wild, remote places like the Haihte Range which only the hardy or wealthy will find possible to reach. **Island Turns and Tours** aims to inspire its readers by illustrating the alluring alpine terrain of Vancouver Island with a combination of high quality visuals and a written narrative.

Describing some of the best places on the Island for backcountry skiing is obviously at the core of this guidebook, but another key objective is to provide background context and a degree of communal consistency as a preliminary aid to planning safe backcountry experiences.

A guidebook may be a catalyst in drawing attention to a certain destination, but its content should always be treated more as an example of what might be encountered than definitive directions showing the way. Ultimately each skier must take responsibility to bring their own knowledge, experience and perspectives to their group's decision making. Conservative, consensus driven risk assessment can be foundational to the pursuit of many stoke-filled days of mountain adventure.

The huge annual snowfall that blankets the Island Ranges, with as much as eight or more metres, for much of the year, means that travel on snow is inevitable, and for many, preferable. Travelling in mountain terrain on skis or snowshoes (from here on 'skis' will serve as shorthand for: telemark skis, alpine touring skis, split snowboards and snowshoes) has certain advantages over summer time:

the deep snowpack completely buries the understory vegetation all but eliminating the presence of the dense Island bush, the notoriously intricate and rugged micro-terrain becomes smoothed over with a full snowpack making travel fast and route finding arguably easier than in summer and, there are no biting insects in winter!

On the whole, winter in the alpine has greater challenges and generally demands a higher level of skill, commitment and acceptance of risk than in the warmer seasons. The intensity of being amongst the winter wilderness adds an edge to the mountain experience that more and more people are seeking. This intensity can be heightened further by the thrill of a great descent and the inherent risk and rewards in that.

To counter the risks and make these adventures safer, the backcountry skier must be appropriately equipped, educated, and ultimately, experienced. The greater the understanding of the terrain, snow, one's own limitations and so on, the better armed we are to make sound decisions in the field.

Other aspects of ski touring essential to a safe and successful trip are: winter camping skills, the ability to navigate with map and compass in 'whiteout' conditions, avalanche awareness (of which one can't have too much instruction, information and experience in assessing) and appropriate fitness and skill level of all group members to undertake the trip in question.

The Island ski touring season lasts between December and early-June depending on the year. Any later than this and the overall coverage of snow usually becomes too patchy and the surface becomes pocked with deep suncups making travel cumbersome and descents unpleasant. But skiing can, and has been done 12 months of the year, see **IBA** 2022 p.24-29.

Fresh snowfalls may be expected at anytime of year but generally expect that by early May precipitation will fall in the alpine as rain. Snow returns anytime after mid-October.

Spring trips do have a distinct advantage in that many logging roads and trail access points become easier to reach as the snow melts at lower elevations forming a distinct, steadily rising snowline. Longer, warmer days make May a choice month for Island touring.

Island ski touring means frequently strenuous approaches up steep trails, boot-packing skis or snowboard to reach a high snowline, skins gummed up with conifer needles and bark bits, rain storms and incredibly deep dumps of fresh snow taking brutal effort to break trail through.

But the rewards are worth the toil when breaking past the treeline the alpine reveals a landscape of deep, deep snow, magical vistas and almost guaranteed solitude among the spectacular Island mountains. Now go get after some of those Island Turns and Tours.

Sarah Hauser on the north slopes of Mt McBride. Photo: James Rode

Classic Island alpine approach through the Strathcona old-growth.

Capulet Peak snowcave.

Checking the beta on Elk Mountain.

Using This Guidebook

Guidebooks have been a staple in the mountain-recreation community for more than a century but their utility and role has evolved with changing times and technology. Once upon a time the printed page reigned alone. Books, club journals, magazines and the like were the primary source of information on mountain areas but today we have a dizzying array of information sources and digital tools at our disposal.

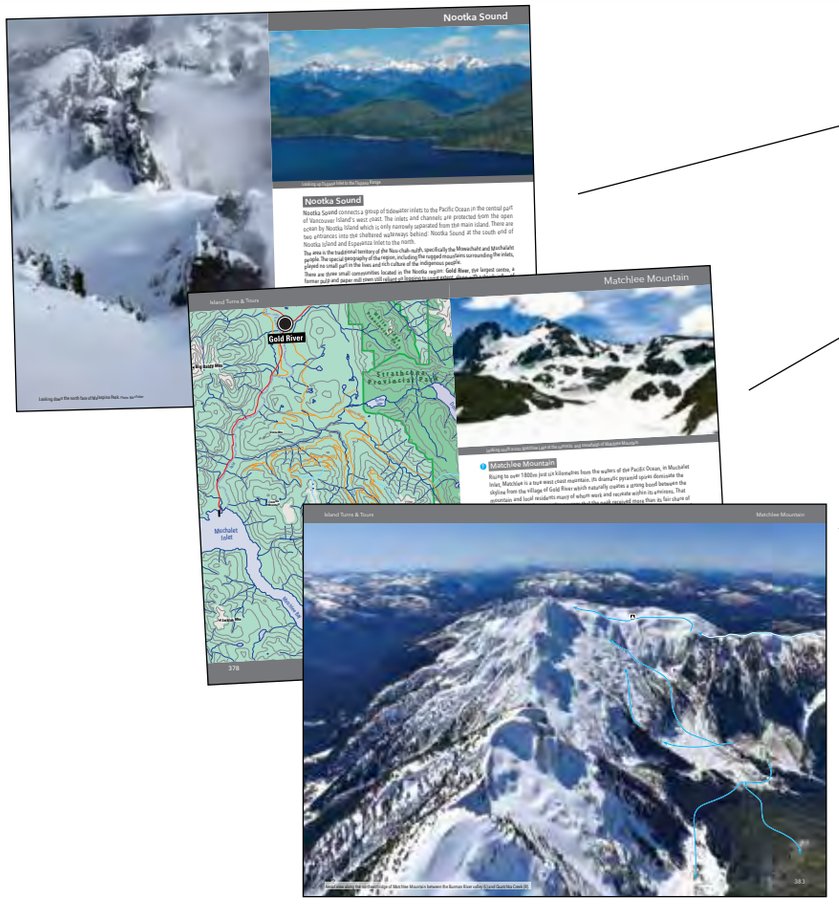
Island Turns and Tours aims to describe some of the places on Vancouver Island, where suitable terrain for backcountry descents and touring on skis, snowboard or snowshoes may be found. This guidebook is intended to provide inspiration and to highlight as much about what we, as a community, do know about our mountain playground as what we don't know on any given day from season to season.

This is far from a definitive list of all the turns and tours possible on Vancouver Island, that would take several more books and several more lifetimes to uncover. What **Island Turns & Tours** does describe is a wide selection of suggested destinations, illustrating what makes up a good Island ski tour, how to plan one and in general what to expect.

This guidebook is best used in conjunction with several other titles including: **Exploring Strathcona Park** (ISBN 978-0-9938772-0-9) **Island Alpine Climbing** (ISBN 978-0-9938772-9-2), **Island Alpine Select** (ISBN 978-0-9680766-8-2) and **Hiking Trails III** (ISBN-978-0-9697667-6-6) which cover many additional mountain routes, access options and local mountaineering history.

Older books in the Wild Isle Guide series, like the original **Island Alpine** (ISBN-09680766-5-3) and the first edition of **Island Turns & Tours** (ISBN 0-9680766-6-1), provide useful background reading, helping with a more comprehensive overview of the Vancouver Island Ranges along with photographs taken in a variety of seasons and from different perspectives to supplement those contained in this edition.

Information is crucial for sound decision-making. Online forums, satellite imagery, first-hand observations, avalanche and weather forecasts, are all invaluable sources of prevailing and anticipated conditions that should always be consulted when possible.



In a familiar format to other Wild Isle Guidebooks, Island Turns and Tours divides Vancouver Island into distinct regions. This book covers three areas Mid-Vancouver Island, Strathcona Park and Northern Vancouver Island. Southern Vancouver Island has been omitted due to the complications and potential issues with public use of private land.

Each regional section begins with a map and an introduction giving a brief overview of the area covered.

The **Strathcona Park** section is further divided into five chapters East, North, Central, South and West Strathcona Park. **Northern Vancouver Island** is divided into six chapters: Prince of Wales Range, Sutton Range, Nootka, Genesis Range, Tsitika area and Woss Lake. Each of these chapters also begins with a map and an introduction describing the area covered.

Within each section or chapter the individual destinations and ski tours are then detailed. Each destination, whether a specific location or a tour includes a topographical map illustrating the access roads, trails and route of local tours. The destination is then described in detail with an introduction, list of facts, access details, descriptions of the potential turns and tours and additional information sources.

Note on nomenclature: It is worth pointing out that some of the names used for peaks, passes and creeks etc... are unofficial. Some of these are in use to varying degrees by locals and others are just suggestions to help develop and clarify the descriptions.

Look for updates, sample chapters, corrections, web links & more info www.wildisle.ca

Island Turns & Tours is divided into regional chapters. Each chapter describes the major access roads, trails and/or backcountry routes in that region. Each of these chapters is clearly distinguished by an opening spread with bold title, introduction and most areas include a small scale regional map.

Each destination includes some basic facts about the area such as the character of the terrain and a description of highlights likely to be encountered. A '**beta block**' of quick facts gives vital statistics including relevant map sheets, major access roads, trails, elevation range of the area etc...

Access describes the highway and logging roads needed to reach the destination area and in some cases may extend to cover the trail or approach route to start each tour.

Route Details gives an overview of the touring and potential descent terrain along with details of highlights of the area, route specifics and cautions concerning some of the hazards and obstacles. Specific tours are highlighted with a colour-coded title and in many cases a reference number that links to the maps and photographs for that section. The trail and route numbers in Strathcona are the same as employed in **Exploring Strathcona Park**.

Additional resources are listed at the end of each destination description.

Maps In This Guide

There are three types of maps included in this guidebook.

1) **Regional Maps** showing the location of communities, highways, main logging roads and the approximate location of major mountain peaks.

2) **Small Scale Topographical Maps** based on the National Topographical Series at varying scales. Each map has its own specific scale indicator.

3) **Larger Scale BC TRIM Series** excerpts reproduced herein at 50% magnification to give an approximate but consistent scale of 1:40,000. **Important:** see data source, copyright and disclaimer notice over leaf.

The maps contained in this guidebook should not be used for navigation in the field.

Map & Photo Legend

- Paved Highway
- Gravel Road
- Gravel Road — Deactivated or condition unknown
- Maintained Trail
- Unimproved Hiking Route
- ATES Class — Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale Rating
- Ski Tour Route
- Marginal Ski Route — eg: lake crossing, untested line
- Ski Descent Route
- Parking
- Trailhead
- Toilet
- Group Campsite
- Boat Ramp/Launch
- Caution
- Designated Camp
- Backcountry Camp
- No Camping
- Backcountry Hut
- Drive-In Campsite
- Potential Helicopter Landing
- Trail
- Backcountry Tour — colour coded by chapter
- Route Option
- Ski Tour Reference — tours and uptracks
- Descent Reference
- Ski Mountaineering — Skills & Equipment May Be Required

Beta Blocks

At the start of most destination sections is a **Beta Block** with a summary of some of the key information for that place.

NTA Sheets: Lists the individual map sheets in the National Topographical 1:50,000 series covering that area.

TRIM Sheets: Lists the individual map sheets in the British Columbia Terrain Resource Information Management (TRIM) 1:20,000 series covering that area. See notice below.

Access: Lists the major highway and any subsequent mainline logging roads needed to reach the trailhead.

Trailhead(s): Parking location for start of each tour.

Elevation Range: The lowest and highest elevation points across the *skiable* terrain of the tour. Intended to aid assessing the likely snow coverage relative to the average prevailing snowline at the time. This differs from elevation gain & loss which is not provided as it is too variable.

Duration: Describes whether the destination is typically visited as a day trip or overnight. Where multiple destinations are described in each section various trip durations may be listed.

Difficulty: Gives the Trip and Ski Rating (defined opposite) for the destination. Where multiple destinations are described in each section various trip durations may be listed.

Max. Vertical: Gives the maximum vertical drop for a ski descent possible at this destination. The vertical for individual runs are given throughout the text.

A.T.E.S. Range: Lists the range of Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale ratings that may be encountered on a typical tour through the destination area. This should not be taken as definitive as specific routes will vary.

For more details and definitions of the A.T.E.S. rating system see pages 14-15.

TRIM Map Sheets

Excerpts from the Province of British Columbia TRIM series maps appear throughout this book. All excerpts are reproduced at 50% of the original sheets resulting in a ~1:40,000 scale.

All users must be aware of the following Data Source identification, License and Ownership, and Disclaimer and Warning notice.

DATA SOURCE

This map is produced by GeoBC of the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations. It is based on the most current TRIM (Terrain Resource Information Mapping) data available. TRIM data is generally accurate to 10m. This map also contains BC Hydro transmission lines, FLNRO repeater tower locations and various public building locations derived from the Digital Road Atlas. For more information on the data, the TRIM specification or other base mapping products, please visit the GeoBC website at www.geobc.gov.bc.ca.

LICENSE AND OWNERSHIP

DISCLAIMER AND WARNING

The Province of British Columbia makes no representations or warranties regarding the accuracy, merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose, or completeness of any information contained in or otherwise comprising this map. Without limiting the foregoing, you are warned not to use this map for navigational purposes. This map may be generalized and may not reflect current conditions. Uncharted hazards may exist.

Times, Distances & Difficulty

Categorizing anything as complex as backcountry skiing is notoriously difficult. The mountains are a dynamic environment and every individual and group brings different skills, fitness and ambition to the equation. While distances and elevation might be constants, fluctuations in snow conditions add an unpredictable variable.

This guidebook uses several methods for grading and measuring the ski tours and descents included: an approximate time commitment, an estimate of a typical distance, a subjective description of overall difficulty and the standard ski terrain classification.

Application of each of these systems may differ from other regions but what is important in practice is the consistency employed herein.

Time Commitment

Described generally as: half-day trip, day-trip, weekend (1 or 2 nights) or a range of days.

Note: For the scale of Island terrain trips requiring one night out almost always make a better experience by planning for two nights. One day to get out there, one day to have fun and one day to get back.

Distances

Given in kilometres, must be considered approximate. Even with diligent GPS use it is challenging to accurately measure trips consistently.

Difficulty

Described in four categories

A - a moderate, generally straightforward outing, little elevation gain/loss, <250m.

B - difficult, requiring solid effort and good fitness, elevation gain/loss ~600m /2,000ft.

C - a strenuous day or multi-day trip with valley to peak elevation gain/loss ~1400m /4,500ft or more on steep terrain.

D - an arduous multi-day expedition in remote and complicated terrain.

Ski Terrain

Defined by the standard symbol convention:

- Moderate - Beginner
- Difficult - Intermediate
- Most Difficult - Expert
- Extreme - Experts Only

A.T.E.S.

Details and examples of the interpretation of the **Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale** employed are given on pages 14-15.

Photographs In This Guide

The photographs used throughout this guidebook are chosen to illustrate the character of each area described as clearly as possible. In some cases photographs are selected just for inspiration because they show a peak or area from an interesting perspective.

I have tried to use only photographs taken during the typical ski touring season (December to June) but in a few instances only a later summer photo was available. The huge variation in seasonal snow cover creates widely varying conditions in the alpine throughout the year. This should be taken into consideration when looking at the photographs.

The month each picture was taken is mentioned in most captions to help put the photos into seasonal perspective.

All photos are by the author unless otherwise noted.

GPS Coordinates

To complement the increased use of GPS units by backcountry enthusiasts, coordinates for important waypoints are included in the route descriptions, highlighted with the symbol 🔍.

Latitude-longitude coordinates are given in **WGS-84 datum, decimal degrees** to facilitate ease of input. They are provided to four or more decimal places giving an approximate accuracy of <10m/35ft.

Note: longitude figures include a '-' symbol (minus) to indicate a westerly coordinate. Check with your GPS unit/software to enter values correctly. The letters 'N' & 'W' may not be required and are not included herein.

The most reliable way to navigate is visually, by reading the terrain, comparing it to a map, and using a compass to determine position and keep to a course. Over-reliance on electronic navigation is a proven factor in many accidents.

Please take the availability of latitude-longitude coordinates provided in this book only as a supplement to these fundamental skills.

Assessing the exposed slopes at the top of the southwest cirque of Mt Colonel Foster.

Avalanche Risk

Avalanche risk is present wherever there is snow-covered, mountainous terrain. Vancouver Island has both, which means that avalanches pose a very real risk to those who explore and play in the backcountry. To date, there have been countless near misses and a number of incidents that have resulted in serious injury on Vancouver Island. As the number of backcountry users increase, so do incident rates.

During the winter of 20/21, the island's outdoor community saw a significant rise in avalanche involvements, including three full depth burials. While, thankfully, there have been no avalanche fatalities on Vancouver Island at the time of writing, it is not a question of *if* it will happen, but *when*.

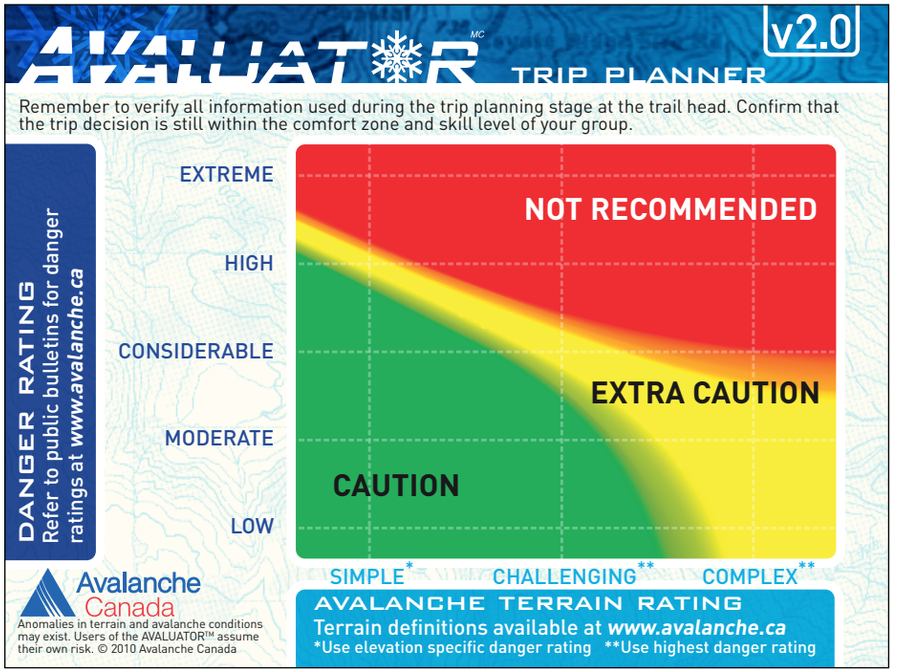
This guidebook offers route suggestions for turns and tours in the Island Alps, but it cannot be a complete guide to the vast complexity of the avalanche phenomenon. Instead, highlighted below are a few fundamentals which cannot be ignored:

1. Get appropriate training

Regardless of experience, everyone who enters the winter backcountry will benefit from a careful, systematic approach to understanding and managing avalanche hazard. In Canada, we are lucky to have one of the most extensive and successful recreational avalanche training programs in the world: the "**Avalanche Skills Training**" program.

Developed by Avalanche Canada with input from the country's leading avalanche professionals, the **AST** curriculum is a highly recommended, if not essential, resource for anyone entering into mountainous backcountry terrain.

Taking an introductory **AST1** is an excellent place to start. If possible, the more advanced **AST2** course is also recommended, along with mentorship from certified Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) Ski Guides or Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA) certified Avalanche Forecasters.

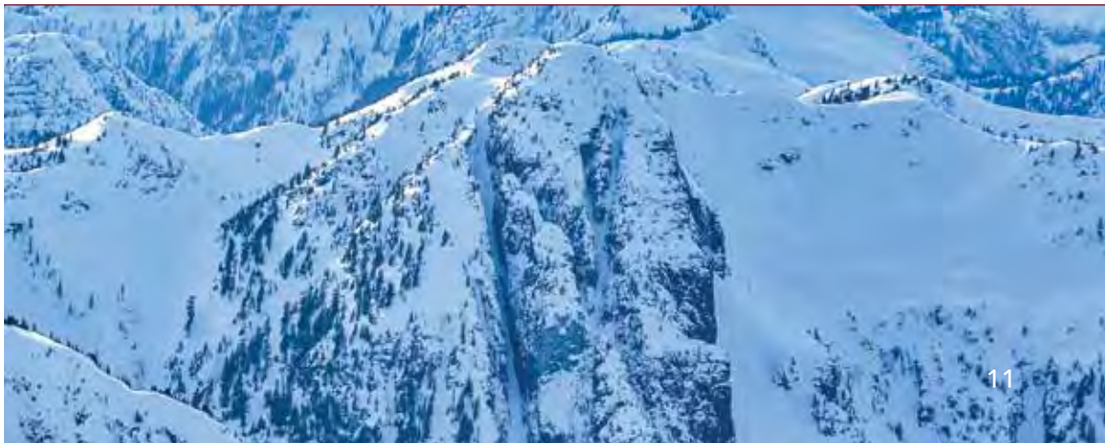


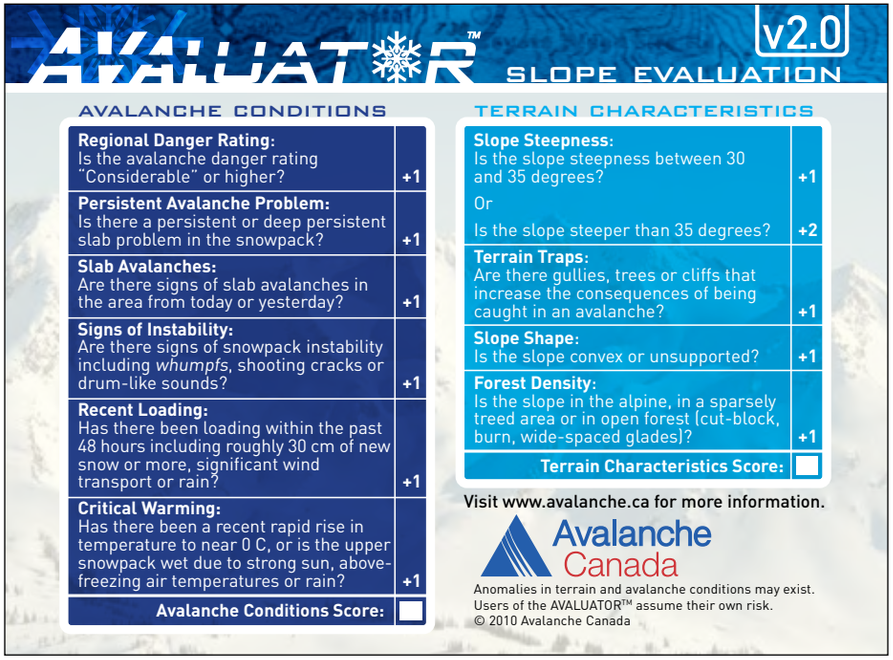
Use the **Avaluator™ Trip Planner** to cross reference the severity of different routes with the current avalanche hazard to choose destinations that fall within the acceptable risk zone for each and all skiers.

2. Plan trips carefully and systematically

Trip planning is perhaps the most important thing a backcountry user can do to prepare for safe travel in the winter backcountry. This means learning to use local avalanche forecasts (found at avalanche.ca), getting up-to-date weather forecasts (links below right) and choosing appropriate terrain based on conditions and individual/group risk tolerance.

The **Avaluator™ Trip Planner** (above) is a very useful tool in this regard, allowing users to cross-reference the severity of avalanche terrain using the **Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale** (ATES) presented by various trip options with the current and forecast avalanche hazard. To assist with the former we have endeavoured to provide **ATES** ratings for most of the major routes presented in this guide (see definitions, deployment & disclaimer pages 14-15). Understanding the ATES, hazard ratings, and other information found in the avalanche bulletin are among the many skills gained in an AST course.



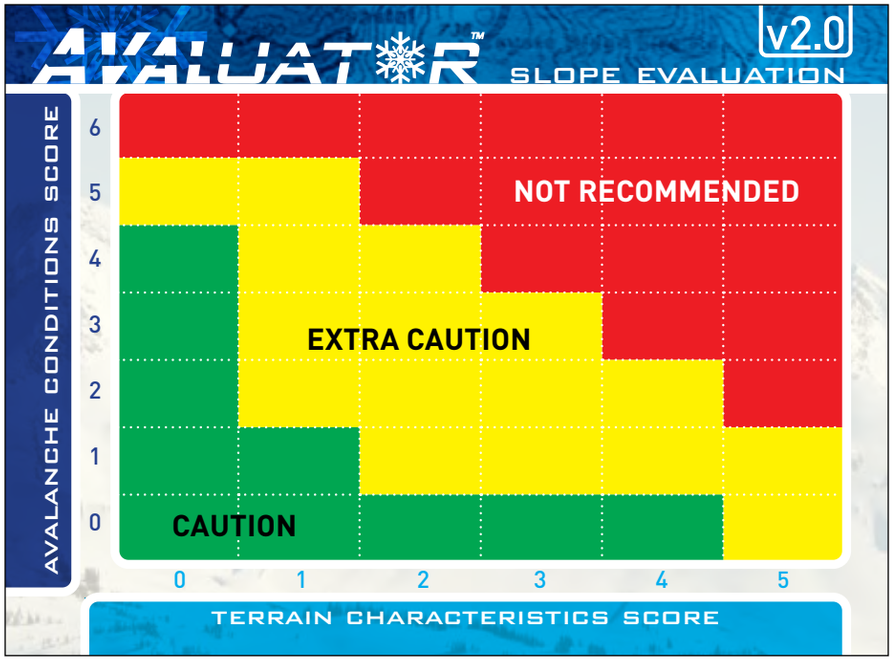


3. Be hyper-observant when travelling in the field

Regardless of how meticulously a trip is planned, there will always be a level of uncertainty when entering backcountry terrain. During the trip planning process, make a list of anything that is uncertain, or requires ongoing verification and observation in the field.

Keen observation, and knowing how to interpret the many clues offered up by the mountains, is critical to safer travel in the winter backcountry. The **Avaluator™ Slope Evaluation** tool (above & right) is a decision-making tool which can aid this process, allowing the user to continuously monitor the many condition and terrain variables and assess the risk of any given slope. Trip plans should have at least two, if not more, route options, providing safe alternatives in the event that infield assessments suggest the plan needs to be adjusted.

Paul Laperriere dropping the Dream Chute.



Use the **Avaluator™ Slope Evaluation** in the field for finer-scale terrain & avalanche conditions assessment. Learning to use the **Avaluator™** is part of AST courses. The full **Avaluator™** is available at Avalanche Canada: www.avalanche.ca/avaluator

4. Be equipped with the proper tools & know how to use them

It should go without saying that it's foolhardy to travel in the backcountry without the proper equipment. From an avalanche risk perspective, **the essentials include**: a transceiver, a shovel, a probe, and (of course) the skills to use these tools effectively. But being properly equipped goes beyond avalanche rescue capability; there are other basic tools and skills that you'll want to have with you in the backcountry. This includes sufficient warm clothes, improvised shelter, fire starting capability, sufficient food and drink, a trip plan, navigation tools (map and compass before GPS!), emergency communications capability, an emergency plan, first aid and a repair kit to manage gear malfunctions.

Online Resources

Following are excellent resources for improving avalanche risk management, weather and trip planning:

Avalanche Canada - an amazing and essential resource including: daily avalanche forecasts, an online trip planner, weather forecasts written by professional meteorologists, Mountain Information Network (MIN) user-reports and learning from the AvySavvy tutorials: **avalanche.ca**

Know Before You Go - a US version of AvySavvy: **kbyg.org**

SpotWX - compares Canadian & US weather models: **spotwx.com**

Windy - weather forecasting from European models: **windy.com**

Copernicus - European Space Agency image browser: **dataspace.copernicus.eu**

As Vancouver Island's primary avalanche course provider and guiding outfit, **Island Alpine Guides** employs certified ACMG guides and Canadian Avalanche Association professional members. They are always happy to answer questions and share information on trips and/or conditions: **www.islandalpineguides.com**

- Jan Neuspiel

Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale - Definitions

The Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale (ATES) rates and categorizes mountain terrain based on its exposure to avalanches. It is a tool that backcountry travellers can employ in conjunction with in-field observation, weather & avalanche forecasts, group-experience, other factors and skills to help determine and mitigate against avalanche risk. Critically it must be understood that ***ATES only rates the terrain*** which is the sole consistent element of the avalanche risk equation. It can provide additional context for assessing variable factors like weather and snowpack but ATES does not include these in its definitions.

ATES was developed by Parks Canada in response to several tragic, fatal avalanche accidents that occurred in the early 2000s as part of their efforts to raise public awareness of the hazards of travelling in avalanche-prone areas within National Parks. In the following years ATES has been refined, improved and adopted by additional organizations and agencies. It is now a standard component of Avalanche Skills Training courses and avalanche forecasts.

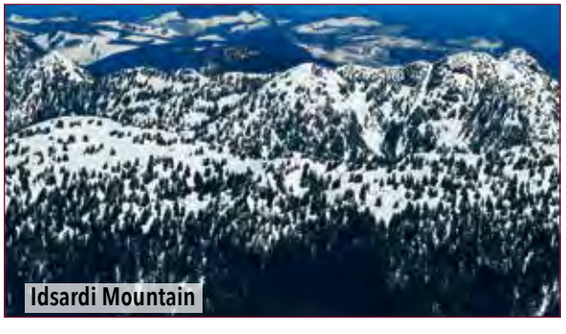
0 - Non-Avalanche Terrain


Crest Mountain

Class 0*
Non-Avalanche Terrain

No known exposure to avalanches. Very low angled or densely forested slopes located well away from avalanche paths, or designated trails with no exposure to avalanches.

1 - Simple Terrain


Idsardi Mountain

Class 1
Simple Terrain

Exposure to low angle or primarily forested terrain. Some forest openings may involve the runout zones of infrequent avalanches and terrain traps may exist. Many options to reduce or eliminate exposure.

Deployment - Use of the Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale in this guide

The majority of the destinations in this guidebook include an Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale (**ATES**) rating to assist with pre-trip planning. Ratings appear in the text like so: 'Sample terrain, **ATES X**', where 'X' is the terrain class.

ATES ratings are also placed on some of the terrain photographs and the TRIM series map excerpts. These appear as an icon, for example: **ATES 2**, the rating class only applies to the terrain in the vicinity of the rating icon.

Generally ATES ratings are given as whole integers eg: **ATES 1**, but in some cases they are provided as either a range of two or more classes ie: **ATES 1-2** meaning that the terrain varies from **ATES 1** to **ATES 2**, or as a rating between two whole classes ie: **ATES 2/3** meaning that the terrain class rating is somewhere between class 2 and class 3. In some cases a rating is given emphasis ie: **ATES 2+**, in these cases the terrain is firmly within the class definition but may contain factors that elevate the exposure.

2 - Challenging Terrain


Consort Creek

Class 2
Challenging Terrain

Exposure to well defined avalanche paths, starting zones, terrain traps or overhead hazard. Options exist to reduce or eliminate exposure with careful route-finding.

3 - Complex Terrain


Tlakwa Mountain

Class 3
Complex Terrain

Exposure to multiple overlapping avalanche paths or large expanses of steep, open terrain. Sustained exposure to overhead hazard. Many avalanche starting zones and terrain traps with minimal options to reduce exposure.

4 - Extreme Terrain


Matchlee Mountain

Class 4*
Extreme Terrain

Exposure to very steep faces with cliffs, spines, couloirs, crevasses or sustained overhead hazard. No options to reduce exposure and even small avalanches can be fatal.

*ATES Class 0 & 4 are specialized additions to to the ATES rating system and may not appear in all products or uses.

Disclaimer - Limitations of the Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale ratings in this guide

The technical model for the **Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale** (ATES) is a complex system which uses a range of distinct criteria to rate avalanche terrain. This model can be used for both small, specific areas such as a single slope, or for much larger areas, like a mountainside, in a generalized context. The ratings employed in this book are at a larger, more general scale. Some ratings may have been arrived at from extensive ground-truthing while others may have been simply extrapolated from less specific information sources.

As such, the ATES ratings included in this book must only be used as a rough guide to the terrain classification. It is the responsibility of everyone in the backcountry to make their own slope evaluations to determine the terrain severity and to make their own decisions regarding the suitability of the terrain for travel by their group under the prevailing conditions.

Bootpacking onto Mt Myra's west ridge.

South Strathcona Park

When moisture laden air rolls onto Vancouver Island from the open Pacific Ocean it is the west coast and the mountains overlooking the coastal sounds and inlets that catch the brunt of the weather and receive the greatest amounts of precipitation. The peaks of southern Strathcona Park bear witness to this phenomenon and illustrate it with their heavy winter snowfalls and remnant glaciers.

Southern Strathcona is one of the best regions on Vancouver Island to look for great backcountry ski/snowboard descents. Although the peaks are as much as a thousand feet lower than some of their more illustrious cousins to the north, the terrain is especially well-suited to skiing. Part of the reason for this difference in topography is due to the granite that forms these peaks resisting the scouring action of the glaciers during past ice ages. The result is more rounded mountain shapes ideal for ski touring with many convex slopes offering committing ski descent lines. Look for skiable terrain on Mt Myra, Moyeha Mountain, Big Interior Mountain and Mt Rosseau.

Similarly high quality to the descents are the ski tours found in southern Strathcona Park. Long sections of high ridges, wide open glaciers, névés and sub-alpine valleys dotted with frozen lakes facilitate good travel through this area. Some of the longer tours are far more enjoyable to traverse on skis than during the summer months when the notorious bush of the near-coastal valleys makes for some trying bushwhacking.

Some of the better ski tours in Southern Strathcona include: the Onimitis high traverse from Bedwell Lake over Mt Tom Taylor to Mariner Mountain and Bedwell Sound along the **Bedwell-Moyeha Divide**; a circumnavigation of the **Mt Septimus/Rosseau** massif which takes in a number of small glaciers and gives the option of some great descents off the peak; the tour over Big Interior Mountain to the iconic Nine Peaks; and the vicinity of **Mt Myra** and along the **Myra-Thelwood divide** there are a number of tour options amongst some magical terrain.

A happy warrior, Marie-Lou Piché. Photo Ryan Van Horne

Major Access Routes

The main routes that access southern Strathcona include: from Port Alberni via Great Central Lake to the **Della Falls Trail**; and from Campbell River via Highway 28 and Buttle Lake to the **Bedwell Lakes Trail**, **Tennent Lake-Mt Myra and Upper Myra Falls trails**, and by air or water to the **Bedwell Sound Trail**

Great Central Lake: This is the largest lake on Vancouver Island and part of the Drinkwater Creek watershed which flows south via the Stamp River into Alberni Inlet. Great Central Lake provides access by boat to the **Della Falls Trail** and is a vital access route from the Alberni Valley into Strathcona. There is limited logging road access along the lake shore but Ash River Branch 83 can be used to reach the Scout Beach campground where a canoe can be launched saving about 20km off the distance of the paddle down the lake from the main access at the east end.

To reach the east end of Great Central Lake at the resort and marina, head west on Highway 4 from Port Alberni and then turn right (north) 14km out of Port Alberni onto Great Central Lake Road . Drive an additional 6km to the boat ramp and small village on the lake.

The usual way to travel up and down Great Central Lake is with **Della Falls Water Taxi** a private, BC Parks contractor who provides a reliable daily service to and from the trailhead. At the time of writing the costs were: groups of 1-2 $120 each, groups of 3-5 $175 each. The main hiking season is May 15th to September 15th. For ski-touring season service contact the operator.
See more at: **www.dellafallswatertaxi.com**

Buttle Lake Parkway: Follow the Gold River Highway 28 from Campbell River west to Buttle Narrows. Leave the highway at the Buttle Narrows junction continuing straight, southward, along the east shore of Buttle Lake. At the south end of the lake the road curves westward, crosses a bridge above Thelwood Creek and winds uphill into the Myra Creek valley where it cuts right through the extensive mine facility to a well signposted parking lot. Provides access to: **Price Creek**, **Bedwell Lakes Trail** via the Jim Mitchell Lake Road, **Tennent Lake-Mt Myra Trail** and the Lower & **Upper Myra Falls trails**.

Jim Mitchell Lake Road: At the south end of Buttle Lake on the Buttle Lake Parkway, on the west side of the Thelwood Creek bridge, a gravel road heads south into the Thelwood valley. The Jim Mitchell Lake Road services the hydro-electric dam at Jim Mitchell Lake and the generating station lower down the valley. It is gated but usually open and clear through the summer but may be unploughed during the winter.

Note: Some restrictions and/or cautions regarding mining activity may be posted. The road accesses the Bedwell Lakes trailhead and the upper Thelwood valley from Jim Mitchell Lake.

Tofino Air & Water Access: The only way to reach the southwest corner of Strathcona in Bedwell Sound and Herbert Inlet is by air or water from the closest community with these services, Tofino.

John Waters ripping down the west ridge of Mt Myra above Sandbag Lake. Photo: Mike Waters

14 Mt Myra

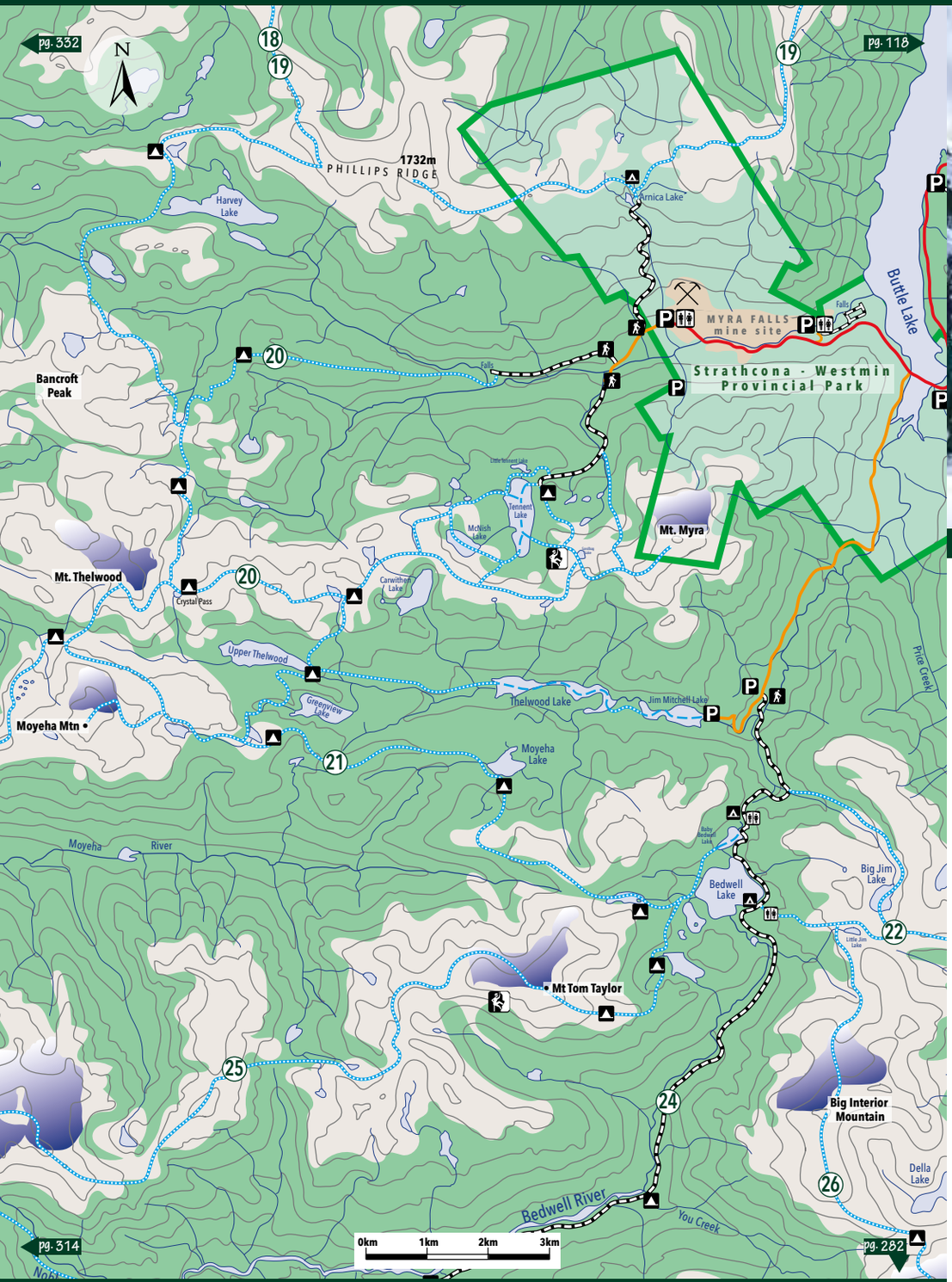
When the stars align: good travelling conditions, stable snowpack etc... Mt Myra is amongst the best backcountry ski destinations on Vancouver Island, combining decent access on an efficient route up to the sub-alpine, big-island-mountain terrain with good descents and a variety of touring destinations suitable for day trips and overnight tours.

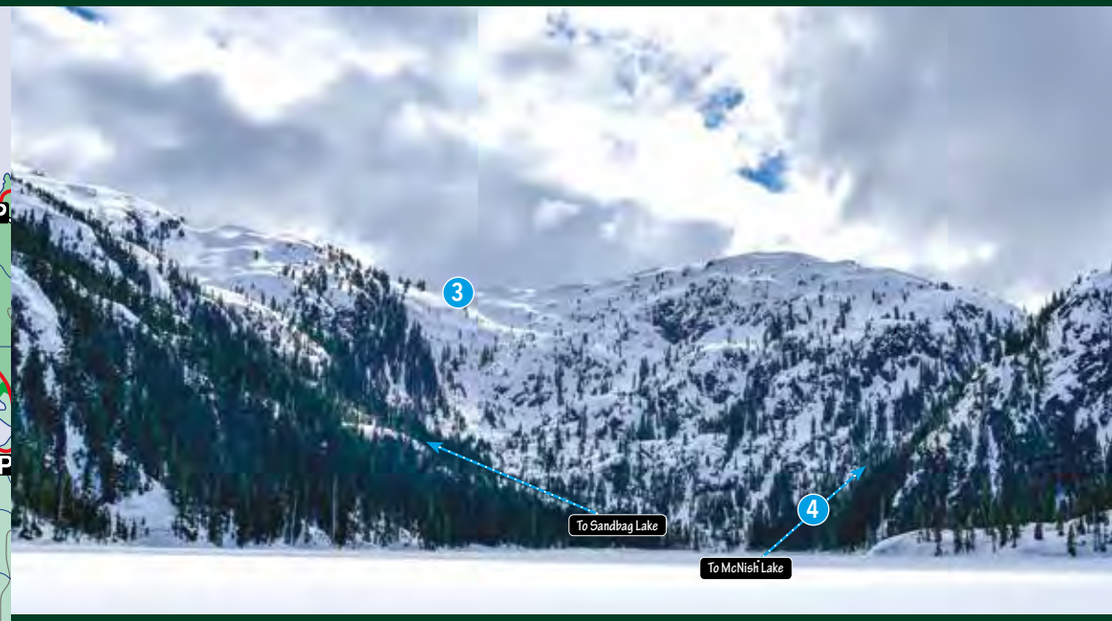
Mt Myra overlooks the southwest corner of Buttle Lake and the Myra Falls mine site in the lower Myra Creek valley. The mine's above-ground footprint is fairly small as mines go but it is still a gross visual and aesthetic intrusion to British Columbia's premier Provincial Park. In a failed sleight of hand however the mine site and an odd polygon of the surrounding area is technically in a separate park, Strathcona Westmin Provincial Park (see **Exploring Strathcona Park** p. 303-309).

The Mt Myra-Tennent Lake area is a particularly good winter destination with its slightly shortened approach as the trailhead at the mine is just above 300m. There is some good all-weather sub-alpine terrain and the trail up an old cat-track as far as the hydro-electric dam at Tennent Lake can be navigated in poor visibility with little trouble. Above the lake the transition into alpine terrain is buffered by a maze of sub-alpine meadows and smaller lakes for exploration. There are short descent lines to be found amongst the glades. On the upper flanks of Mt Myra is some more impressive terrain offering great descents with a high reward to effort ratio.

The **Tennent Lake - Mt Myra Trail** offers access to some beautiful touring terrain along the Thelwood-Myra Divide with some good descent options off the high knolls. Tour options include a circuit from Tennent Lake around McNish Lake

NTS Map Sheet(s):	92F/12 Buttle Lake
TRIM Sheet(s):	092F052
Road Access:	Hwy 28 to Buttle Lake Parkway
Main Trailhead(s):	Tennent Lake-Mt Myra Trail
Elevation Range:	350 to 1,800m
Duration:	Day Trips & Weekenders
Difficulty:	B- Difficult, ■ & ◆
Max. Ski Vertical:	~950m North Cirque
A.T.E.S. Range:	0-3





The south end of Tennent Lake.

and following the Thelwood-Myra Divide out to **Mt Thelwood** (pg. 275) and **Moyeha Mountain** (pg. 279). More ambitious tours could connect south to the Bedwell Lakes area through the Thelwood Creek valley and north toward Phillips Ridge.

Access

The **Tennent Lake-Mt Myra Trail** follows an old cat-track built to facilitate the construction of the small dam on Tennent Lake. The hydro-electricity from the dam is used to partly power the mine. From Campbell River drive west on Highway 28 to the Buttle Narrows junction and then due south on the Buttle Lake Parkway. Continue around the south end of Buttle Lake and up the hill to the mine site in the Myra Creek valley. There may be some check in or other security at the mine entrance. Continue driving through the mine site and park at the posted trailhead (~86km from Campbell River)

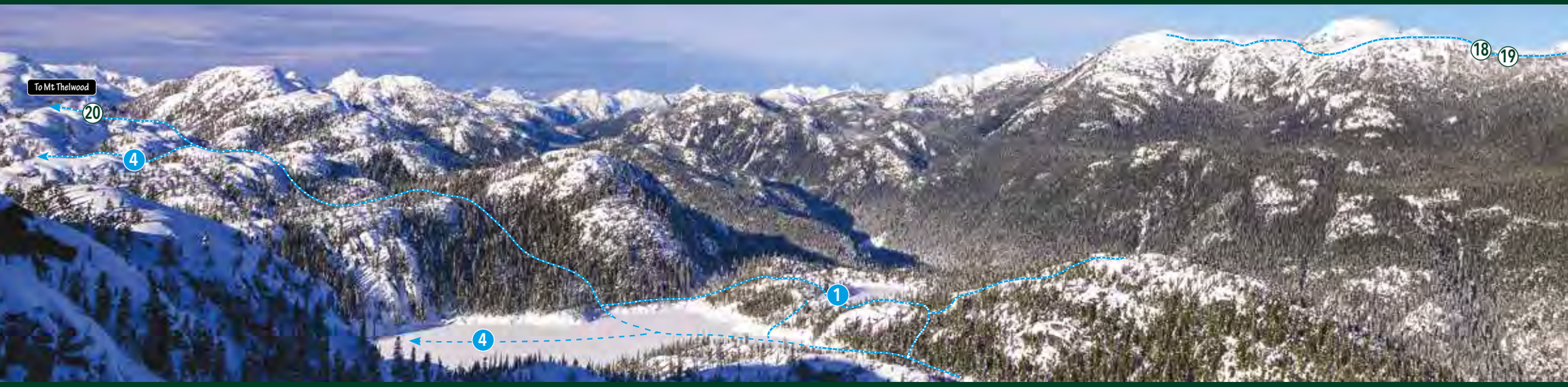
Walk down the gravel Powerhouse Road just over a kilometre to the bridge over Myra Creek and locate the trailhead before the noisy powerhouse at the end of the road. The trail takes an old cat track which switchbacks steeply up the hillside following the bank of Tennent Creek. Travel conditions up the cat track can vary widely from dream to nightmare, many a hardened island ski-tourist has been turned back. ~2km up the track it crosses East Tennent Creek at 49.55617°, -125.62372°, 850m elevation.

To continue up to Tennent Lake cross the creek either using the spooky bridge on top of the penstock or through the washed-out ford. In either case take extreme care as the downstream consequences here are severe. It's ~1.25km from the creek crossing to the dam at Tennent Lake 49.5521°, -125.6384°, ~1,000m elevation. From the dam there are three main routes into the terrain beyond: due west across Tennent Lake onto the Thelwood-Myra Divide, south to the south end of the lake where two lines lead up onto the ridge and the main summer trail route which swings southeast crossing open meadows to a steep climb up to Sandbag Lake and onto the southwest ridge of Mt Myra.

To reach the northwest cirque directly leave the trail at the creek crossing and follow East Tennent Creek upstream ~750m into the base of the cirque at 49.5497°, -125.6225°, 1,050m elevation.

More Info

ESP Ed.1 p.313-316



Looking northwest across Tennent Lake showing route on to the Thelwood-Myra Divide, January.

Tennent Lake

Length: 10km, Elevation gain/loss: ~750m RT. **ATES 0-1**

A good tour choice in most conditions. If the snow level is down to low elevations the grind up the cat-track can fill a day's trail-breaking quota and if it's higher then the quick elevation gain makes for a decent ski-pack. Even just heading as far as Tennent Lake has rewards of views of the alpine terrain above on Mt Myra and some easy cruising lapping around Tennent Lake.

Simply follow the **Tennent Lake-Mt Myra Trail** up on to the dam from where the conditions on the lake can be assessed. From the dam it's a short drop onto the lake.

1 Little Tennent Lake: To the immediate north of Tennent Lake is a small lake nestled between two knolls, Little Tennent Lake. Follow the creek draining into Tennent Lake up a short climb to an area of meadows and rock outcrops. The easternmost of the knolls at 49.5542°, -125.6367° has a good view across Tennent Lake of Mt Myra and over the Myra Creek Valley of Phillips Ridge.

The smaller western bowl at the head of East Tennent Creek.

If Tennent Lake isn't safe to cross, a small rock cliff close to the dam can make it difficult to get around the north shore to reach Little Tennent Lake and the route up the forested draw to the Thelwood-Myra Divide. In this case a route keepoing clear of the lake shore leaves the main trail to the north, 75m before the dam at 49.55238°, -125.63754°. Make a short but quite steep 45m climb up a forested draw between rock bluffs to reach more open terrain and Little Tennent Lake (see photo above), **ATES 1**.

2 East Tennent Meadows: Following the line of the summer trail, southeast from the dam, leads into a maze of small lakes and meadows at the west edge of the northwest bowl.

From the dam turn south. At high water, as the snow cover recedes, care may be needed crossing the dam spillway. Head southeast weaving between the granite crags. Keep to the east of the ridge bounding the east side of Tennent Lake following the line of the summer trail into a subsidiary cirque below a point where the trail climbs up a steep, exposed slope onto the ridge toward Sandbag Lake 49.54623°, -125.63175°. There are a pair of lakes in the base of this small bowl with good camp options away from the avalanche runouts on the rounded ridges above (see photo left).

Look for short ~250m glade runs off the slopes around the cirque taking care with the overhead hazard from the short cliffs in the headwall particularly at the west side of the bowl where the waterfall from Sandbag Lake flows over the rock face. Following the creek east leads into the base of the main northwest bowl, **ATES 2/3**.

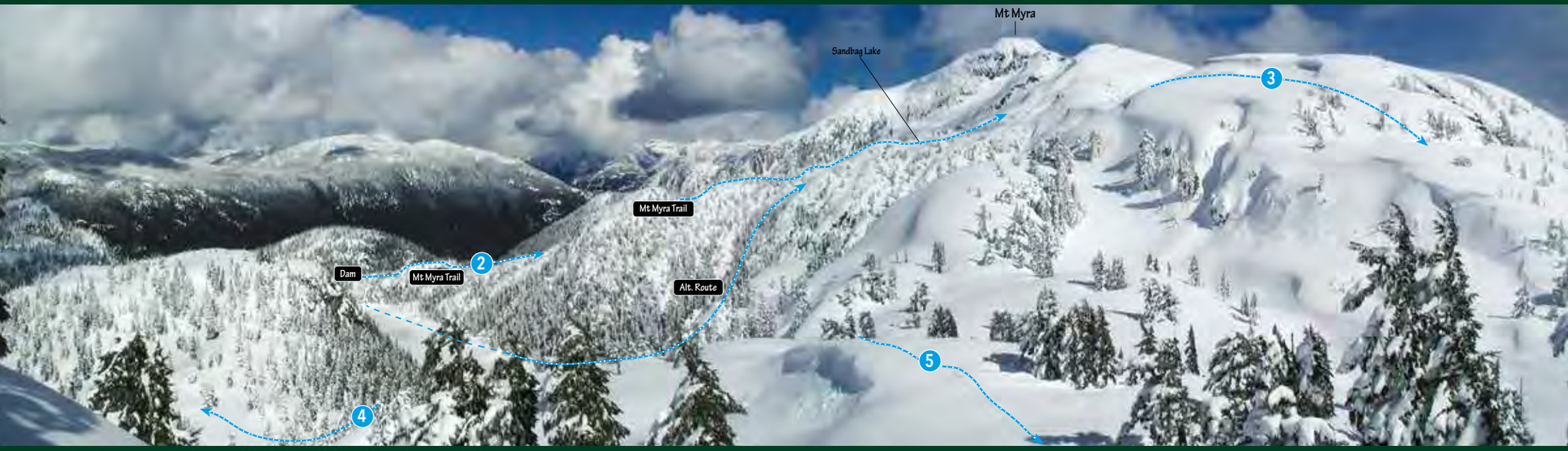
This area can be reached or exited using the more direct line up East Tennent Creek from the main trail at the pipeline bridge crossing. This is a better and quicker line in winter conditions, **ATES 2**.

3 South Tennent Knoll: The prominent knoll overlooking the south end of Tennent Lake, the next knoll west of Sandbag Knoll. Its summit is at 49.5355° -125.6413°, elevation ~1385m.

To its northeast a long draw leads up from Tennent Lake onto the ridge north of Sandbag Lake and while not without exposure does provide an alternative to reaching Sandbag Lake and Mt Myra's southwest ridge to the exposed slope on the usual summer trail on the east side of the ridge, **ATES 2/3**.

On the knoll's northwest side a deep draw offers a route to McNish Lake and on to the Thelwood-Myra ridge which can be used to make a loop over McNish Lake or to access the route to Mt Thelwood, **ATES 2**.

Directly off the top of South Tennent Knoll are potential descent lines up to 350m. The terrain is a bit broken up by cliff bands and a boulderfield but in deep, stable snow cover might offer a decent run, **ATES 2-3**.



Looking east along the Thelwood-Myra Divide to Mt Myra, McNish Lake lower L, March.

4 McNish Lake Loop

Length: 5km, Elevation gain/loss: 300m from dam. **ATES 1-2**

To the west of Tennent Lake and 100m higher is McNish Lake nestled on a alpine shelf/cirque at an elevation of 1125m. A loop can be made from the dam at the outlet of Tennent Lake, up and across McNish Lake returning to the dam. This makes a good extension to a visit to the main lake as time and conditions allow.

On balance it's probably best to execute this loop in a clockwise direction by heading to the south end of Tennent Lake. From the bay in the southwest corner of Tennent Lake 49.5410° -125.6431° head up the nicely angled draw to a saddle at 49.5395° -125.6478°, 1,170m elevation. Either turn north and make the gentle drop on to McNish Lake or climb onto the knoll to the southeast of the lake and grab a short 100m descent for a few turns onto McNish.

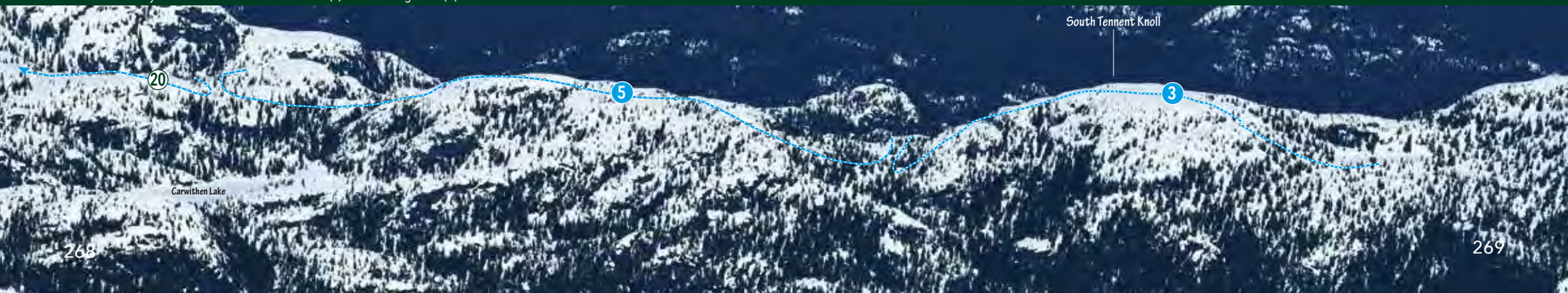
From McNish Lake the terrain to the north opens up with several small alpine tarns, knolls and creek drainages. There's no defined route here, either follow the low drainages or the adjacent ridges. By whichever route aim for the top of the prominent forested draw to the northwest of Tennent Lake at 49.550730° -125.648484°, 1130m elevation. Descend this draw 110m down to Tennent Lake. Keep to the south (right) bank of the creek. The trees are tight and the terrain steep but a few turns for strong skiers in good conditions are possible if not likely. Cross the lake eastward back to the dam and trail.

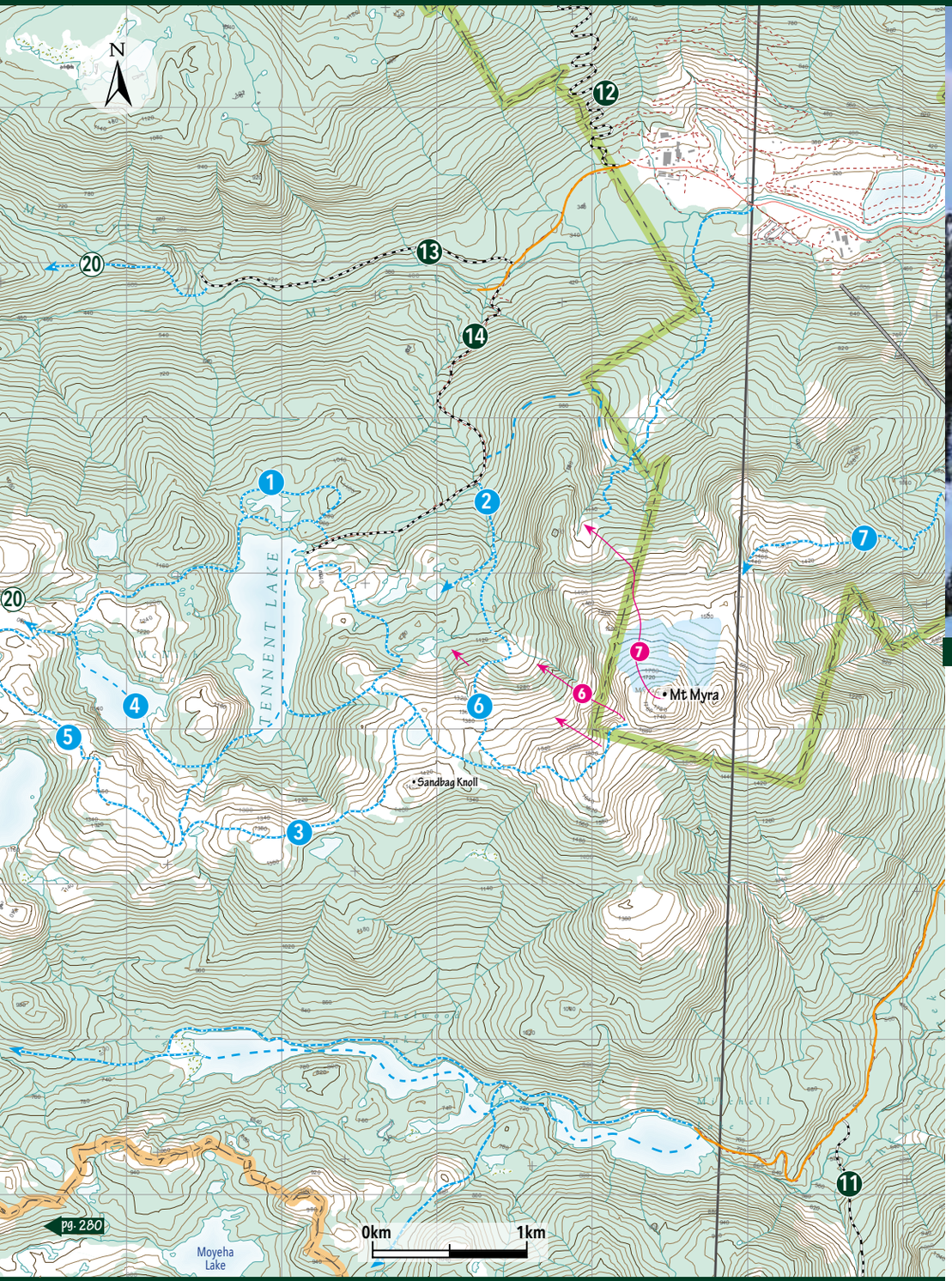
5 Alternate High Route - Instead of making the northward leg of the loop across McNish Lake a longer circuit can be made via the higher ridge of the Thelwood-Myra Divide a bit to the west. From the saddle at 49.5395° -125.6478° ascend a steep draw to the southwest to gain the main ridge crest.

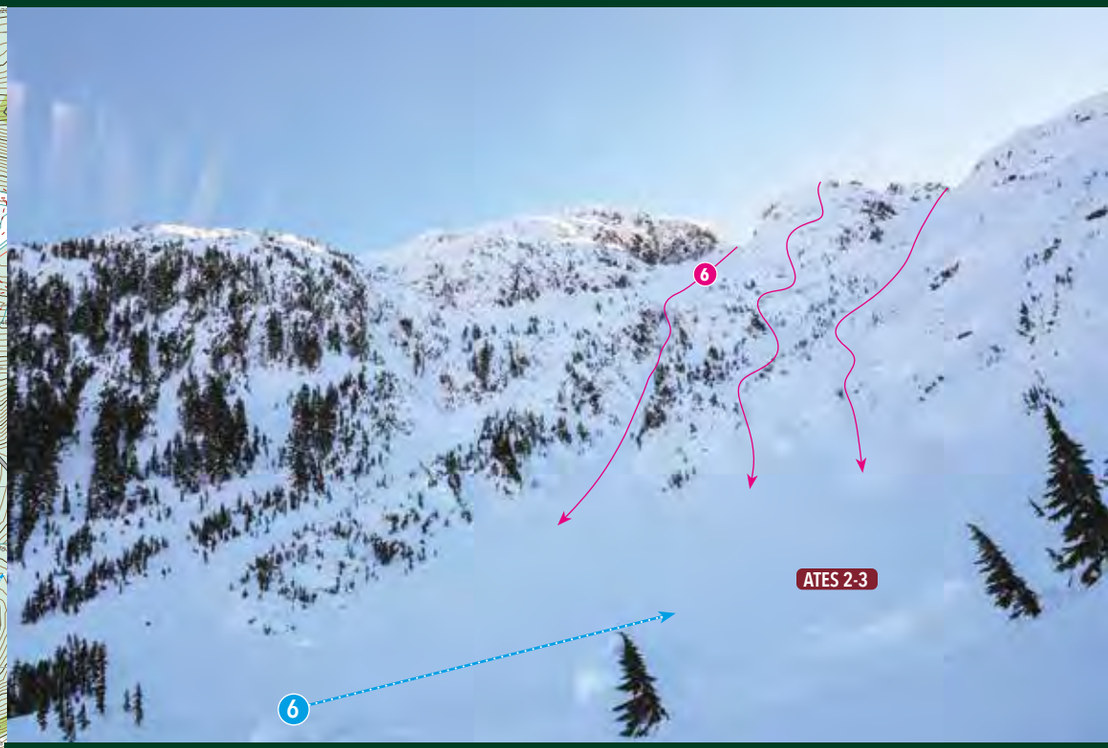
Follow the height of land as it curves to the north between McNish and Carwithen lakes. There is a short cliff band at 49.539331° -125.656695° that may require some care to negotiate. Look for a line down a steep, treed gully to the west side of the ridge crest, **ATES 2**.

Be aware that the creek draining McNish Lake into Tennent Lake flows through a steep-sided canyon and doesn't seem to offer a good route between the two. The most likely line in the vicinity is following a band of trees to the north of the creek to a shallow col between knolls at 49.54672°, -125.65216°.

The Thelwood-Myra Divide between Carwithen Lake (L) and Sandbag Knoll (R).







The northwest bowl of Mt Myra, January.

Myra Northwest Bowl

Length: 11.5km, Elevation gain/loss: 1445m RT. **ATES 2-3**

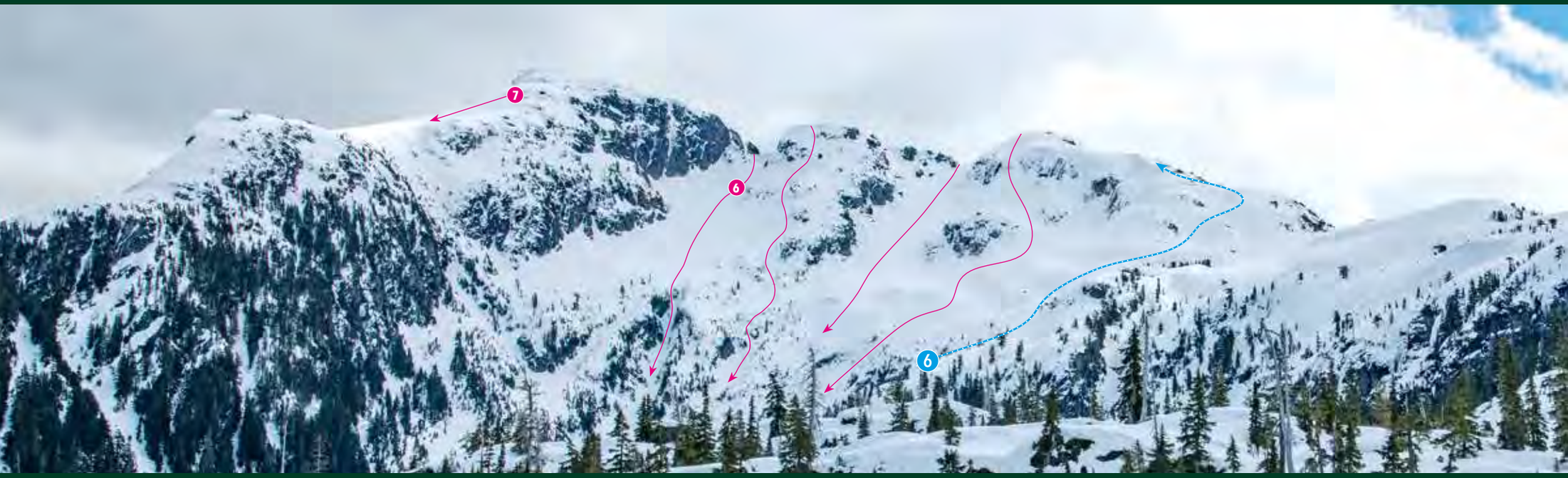
The northwest bowl of Mt Myra is amongst the best accessed alpine, backcountry ski terrain on Vancouver Island. When conditions are right this is a go to day trip with a guaranteed solid work out and the potential for a great ski run.

Access is via the **Tennent Lake-Mt Myra Trail** as described on pg. 265. It is possible to follow the trail all the way up to Tennent Lake and continue either up the line of the summer trail or the alternate winter route from the south end of Tennent Lake to Sandbag Lake. From Sandbag Lake follow the main ridge east on the height of land to the highest col west of the summit.

A much more direct and quicker line leaves the trail at the pipeline bridge over East Tennent Creek at 49.5561°, -125.6237°, 850m elevation. Head south following the course of the creek upstream. Beware of overhead hazard from the steep gullies running off the northwest ridge of Mt Myra. Avoid this exposure by crossing East Tennent Creek to the west side when safe and practical. At 49.5501° -125.6225°, elevation 1050m the grade levels out at the base of the northwest bowl and the terrain above comes into view.

6 Head south and ascend the steep ridge bounding the west edge of the cirque to where it butts into the main ridge at 49.5442° -125.6231°, 1350m elevation. Continue up onto the crest of the ridge turning gradually east along the crest to the highest col just west of the summit, this is the main drop-in (49.5422° -125.6093°, 1675m elevation).

6 It's a 600m vertical descent from the high west col down to the base of the cirque with another 200m down alongside East Tennent Creek to rejoin the trail. There are plenty of other descent lines around the bowl with varying degrees of hazard and exposure.



The northwest bowl of Mt Myra, March.

Mt Myra North Cirque

ATES: 3-4

The longest descent lines on Mt Myra are off the north side of the peak down the northwest ridge into the trees and also down the remnant glacier and névé draping its north aspect, continuing right down the main drainage that leads directly to the mine site.

Getting on to the summit in winter to reach the northwest ridge and north glacier via the usual **Tennent Lake-Mt Myra Trail** is a long way and has its challenges. An alternative and more direct approach up the northeast ridge might be considered.

7 Access the base of the northeast ridge off the Jim Mitchell Lake Road which also serves the Bedwell Lake trailhead between the turn off and the mine road that breaks off to the right at the top of the first big switchback on the road. Access on these roads may be limited by current mining activity so be sure to check for signs and other notices indicating closures.

Much of the slope up onto the road was burned by prospectors and the silver, weathered snags sticking out of the snow make an interesting if stark landscape to ski through. Continue up onto the crest of the northeast ridge and follow it to below the subsidiary north peak of Mt Myra and pick a traverse line into the cirque between the two peaks. Carry on as the terrain, exposure and snow cover dictate to the Myra Glacier which can be skinned right up to the summit, **ATES 2/3**.

7 A line has been skied 950m vertical down the cirque and remnant glacier through the basin at 49.5588°, -125.6095°, **ATES 3-4**. Exit down the steep slope below the basin keeping to skiers right of the creek gully, all the way into the mine site at the bridge over Myra Creek. Alternatively, aim for the **Tennent Lake-Mt Myra Trail** by traversing left (west) from the basin across the steep toe of the northwest ridge above the 900m contour joining the trail at the cat-track curve near 49.5583°, -125.6230°.

More Info

ITT Ed.1 p.151-154, **IBA** 1996 p.19, 2020 p.18-20.

Mt Myra north aspect.