

Hiking to Light Blue Lake

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My colleagues and I work as Park Interpreters and visitor service professionals in Regional Parks in the Central Okanagan. What that means is that we lead guided walks, hikes, and nature discovery programs and provide self-guided nature experiences for anyone of any age who visits a Regional Park.

Recreation is a great entry point for nature connection. The genesis of many outdoor programs is the core idea that if we can get people outside walking or hiking (or biking, etc) then the nature discoveries and connections will flow from there. After all, half the battle is simply getting people outdoors. Once people are outside in a park then the fun and enjoyment of nature connection can begin.

One Saturday late last October, I took a group of twenty hikers into Stephens Coyote Ridge Regional Park as part of our popular Take a Hike program. The hikers ranged in ages from teenagers to fifty-somethings. Our destination was Light Blue Lake, a five acre lake located in the centre of the park. Fed by an underground spring, the lake is a welcome reward for anyone who perseveres on the often challenging trails of Stephens Coyote Ridge.



The park is classified as a conservation park, meaning that it has been left largely in its natural state. At this time, there are no developed trails and signage in the park and so I explained to the group that even though I'd hiked Stephens Coyote Ridge before, I would still be heavily reliant on a GPS-enabled map loaded onto my smartphone to guide us.

And so we set out, a group of twenty hikers with our destination about an hour's hike away. All began well enough as we easily followed an old service road that cut through the park. The climb was constant but so far it was gentle. The group quickly fell into natural sub-groups of faster, intermediate, and slower hikers. I led the way and a sweeper brought up the rear.

Our first challenge came in the form of a rock face that the trail steeply climbed. Hiking on my own in the park previously the rock face hadn't seemed so difficult, but with a group of twenty in tow it was suddenly daunting. Though we were a group of mostly strangers, we quickly became comrades as we helped each other navigate the trail up the rock face, offering outstretched hands to those who were struggling to climb up. About halfway up someone considered turning back and so we all stopped and discussed if we should turn back as a group because no one wanted her to go back alone. After a pause, it was decided that we would carry on all together and that surely this must be the most difficult section and it would all be clear sailing once we reached the

top of the ridge. Clear sailing it was not; as once we made the top it was a sometimes tricky path along the ridge and then a long hike down to the lake in the bottom of a small valley.

Many times we came to spots where the trail virtually disappeared and the only guide was my sense of direction, which I often confirmed by consulting my trusty smartphone. The running joke became that if anything happened to me, it would be important to save my smartphone first because it contained the GPS-enabled map that would guide everyone out.

After almost exactly an hour, we reached our destination- Light Blue Lake! We took the welcome chance to rest and have a snack on the shore of this clear little mountain lake. Cliffs of volcanic rock lined one side of the water, speaking to the mountain's distant past as an active volcano.



After fifteen minutes, it was time to attempt the hike out. The trail out was just as difficult as the trail in, often more so because not only were we tired but the return hike presented new trail perspectives and challenges. One woman came close to tears of frustration as we made our way back up to the top of the ridge. The group reassured her and a couple volunteered to hike alongside her to the end. So we pushed forward, which is really the only thing you can do, the faster hikers leading the way, stopping at times to check in with the slower hikers. Those who were struggling leaned on others for encouragement and sometimes physical support. The hike back to the parking lot took us two hours, twice the time as the hike into the lake.



The discoveries and connections made that day were a true reward. Not only did the hikers connect to each other, but they also connected more deeply to themselves and discovered their own determination and tenacity. We connected to the bright blue late October sky and the cool shady trails and we discovered a beautiful view at the top of each hard climb and around every unsure twist in the path. We entered the park as a group of strangers and emerged three hours later as a team, everyone having come together in various capacities to make the experience a success.

Crossing paths with some of those hikers in the months since then, we've chuckled at our adventure at Stephens Coyote Ridge and reminisced about the connections we made to each other and to the park.