

FINDING THE LOST ROUTE TAKEN BY MACKENZIE INTO BELLA COOLA

Harvey Thommasen (2023)

It is winter, and I am staring down into clear flowing waters, just upstream from where Burnt Bridge Creek joins the Bella Coola River. I can make out broken ends of a dozen or so logs jutting out from the bottom of the river arranged in a line which appears to span the entire river. These are the remains of an amazing fish catching “Machine” that Sir Alexander Mackenzie describes when stopping over at Friendly Village over 230 years ago. Few people are aware of the existence of this weir remnant because glacial silt obscures this view most the year



Remnants of an engineering wonder – Friendly Village Fishing Wier



Carol Thommasen looking at remnants of the Friendly Village fishing weir

"...Salmon is abundant in this river (Bella Coola River), that these people have constant and plentiful supply of that excellent fish. To take them with more facility, they had, with great labour, formed an encasement or weir across the river for the purpose of placing their fishing machines, which they disposed both above and below it. I expressed my wish to visit this extraordinary work, but these people are so superstitious, that they would not allow me a nearer examination than I could obtain by viewing it from the bank. The river is about fifty yards (150 feet) in breadth, and by observing a man fish with a dipping net, I judged it to be about ten feet deep in the foot of the fall. The weir is a work of great labour, and contrived with considerable ingenuity. It was near four feet above the level of the water, at the time I saw it, and nearly the height of the bank on which I stood to examine it..."



"... The water of this river (Bella Coola River) is of the colour of asses milk, which I attribute in part to the limestone that in many places forms the bed of the river, but principally to the rivulets which fall from mountains of the same material..." Bella Coola River in flood. June 1985.

Footnote: The mountains are of granite, not limestone and the greenish whiteness of the water is due to glacial flour. Hålle Flygare.

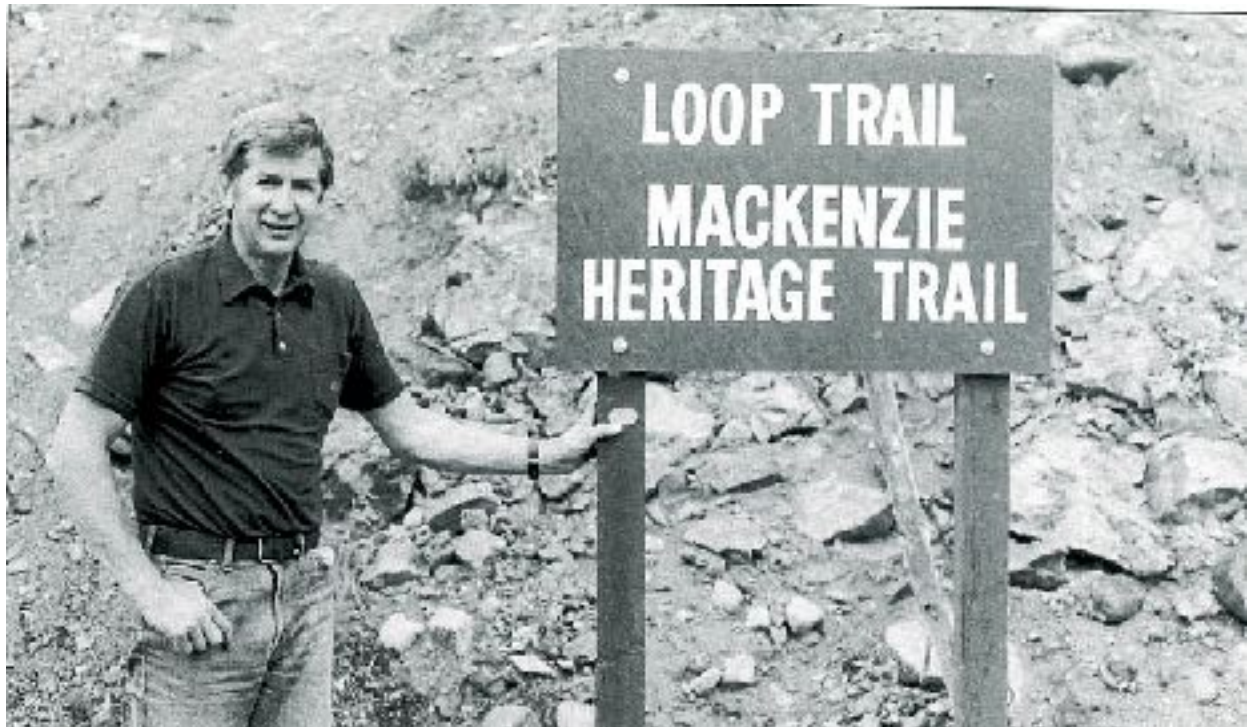
Looking North from where I am standing, looking far up the Burnt Bridge Valley on a distant, high elevation, sloping ridge, I can see the site of another Alexander Mackenzie landmark that even fewer people are aware of. That is the moment when the guides took Mackenzie and his group of 8 voyagers to the edge of a precipice and told him that there in the distance is what he was looking for: A village, beside a river, that would take him to the ocean he was seeking - the Pacific Ocean!



Looking North up Burnt Bridge Creek valley

The reason why so few people are aware of this site is because the precise route Mackenzie, his crew, and his native guides took on the day he arrived in Friendly Village has been a mystery for well over 100 years. By the time provincial surveyors like Frank Swannell were surveying this area of the province in the 1920's, pack horse trails were what linked the central interior to the Bella Coola Valley, not the hiking trails which dominated the scenery when Mackenzie came through in 1793. These pack horse trails incorporated some of the hiking trails for sure, but new trails more friendly to horse transportation were constructed. The sections of hiking trails that once made up the ancient grease trail network and were no longer being used, became abandoned and in time unrecognizable.

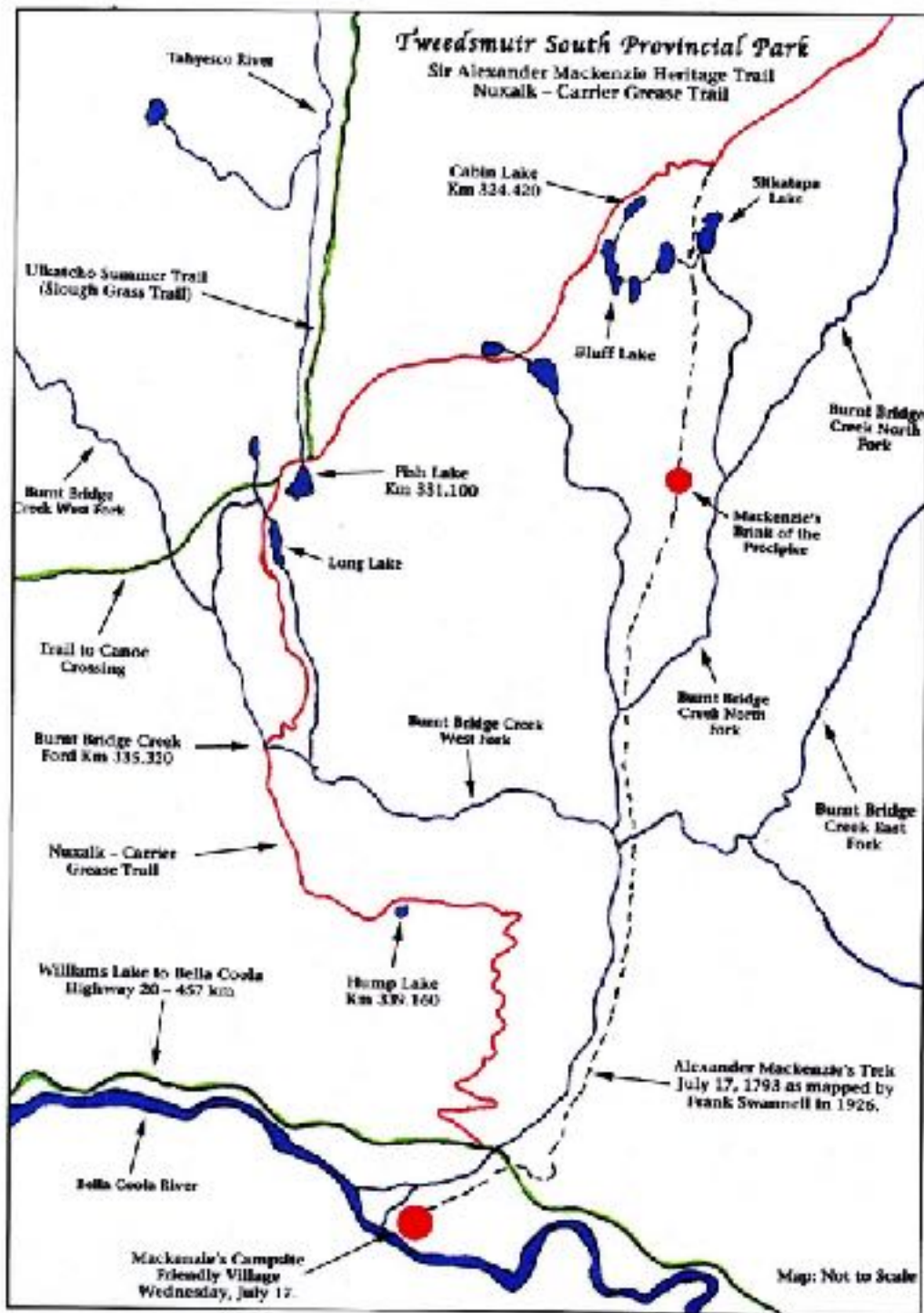
These days, if you want to hike the Mackenzie – Grease trail you begin by following the Mackenzie Heritage Trail. This trail is shown on all modern maps.



Halle Flygare standing beside the Mackenzie heritage trailhead sign

It is sometimes referred to as the Nuxalk-Carrier Grease Trail; the Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail, the Nuxalk-Carrier Route, the Sir Alexander Mackenzie Trail, Blackwater Trail, Nuxalk-Dakelh-Heritage Grease Trail, and most simply “The Grease Trail.” All refer to the same historical overland route between Quesnel and Bella Coola that Mackenzie followed. It begins at Highway 20, just to the west of the Burnt Bridge Creek bridge and more or less parallels Burnt Bridge Creek passing by Hump Lake, Long Lake, Fish Lake, Bluff Lake, Cabin Lake, Sitkatapa

Lake before heading northeast towards Mackenzie valley via Kohasganko Creek headwaters where it eventually joins Tweedsmuir Trail. The section of the Mackenzie Heritage trail from Hwy 20 Bella Coola Valley to Sitkatapa Lake - and shortly thereafter to Mackenzie Valley - is generally assumed to be the route Mackenzie took to access and to leave the Bella Coola River but that is incorrect. This section of the Mackenzie trail system is actually one of those pack horse trails that packers made to enter the Bella Coola Valley. This is not the route Mackenzie took to access the valley.



On older topographical maps you will see a trail marked out from Sitkatapa lake that heads almost due south crossing two major forks of Burnt bridge Creek before heading down the east side of Burnt Bridge Creek proper all the way to Highway 20. This trail is the route academic historians will tell you is the route Mackenzie took on the day he arrived in Friendly Village from his starting point that day in Mackenzie Valley. It is the route Frank Swannell, the pioneer

surveyor took in 1927, who more or less just guessed that was the route Mackenzie took after reading Mackenzie's journal. The problem with this proposed route is that the section from Sitkatapa lake down to Burnt Bridge is almost unpassable due to what Swannell described as an impenetrable jungle of alder, willow, devil's club and scrub hemlock. Other seasoned hikers like Raymond Zillmer and Halle Flygare confirm the route from Sitkatapa Lake south to Burnt Bridge Creek is very rough, very dangerous and rather fool hardy.

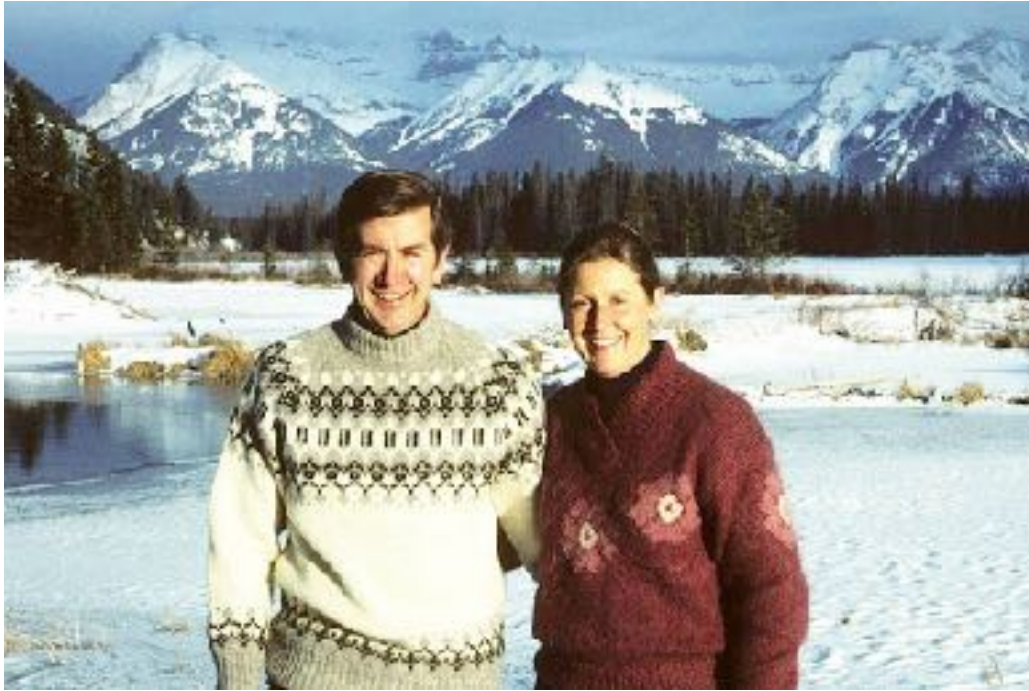


Linda Flygare admiring Sitkatapa Lake with Stupendous Mountain {2,579 m} in background



Standing on edge of a precipice south of Sitkatapa lake, Bella Coola River Valley in distance

The Flygares are recognized as world authorities on the route Sir Alexander Mackenzie followed from the Fraser River to the Bella Coola River – a distance of some 347 kilometers along what is now most commonly referred to as the Nuxalk-Carrier Grease Trail. The Nuxalk-Carrier Grease Trail is of course, part of the route Sir Alexander Mackenzie followed when he became the first European to trek across Canada. This trail was designated as a provincial heritage route in 1988.



Hälle and Linda Flygare of Canmore, Alta. have spent a lifetime understanding and preserving the Nuxalk-Carrier Grease Trail, formerly known as the Sir Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail.

In the summer of 1972 Hälle was guiding and Linda was cooking for Bob and Ginny Stewart's hunting and fishing Lodge located on Nimpo Lake. While out and about guiding he came across sections of a long forgotten trail that Bob Stewart explained was part of the "old Grease Trail, the one the Indians took Mackenzie over" on his way to the Pacific Ocean. Mackenzie achieved this feat some 12 years ahead of a similar accomplishment by the far more famous Lewis and Clark expedition across western United States.

The term "grease" trail refers to the fact that the Bella Coola Nuxalk peoples would carry a very nutritious greasy fish oil derived from a smelt-like fish – the eulachon – up along this trail in cedar boxes, to trade with the interior peoples for things like obsidian stone used for making razor sharp knives.



Eulachon (Thaleichthys pacificus) [Mike Wigle Photo]



Spoon canoe full of eulachon, Nuxalk man holding two eulachon



Ulkatcho man backpacking eulachon oil. Harlan Smith photo 1922



Ancient Obsidian knife (Josh Pettinger photo)

Halle decided at that moment this grease trail was a valuable piece of history worthy of being recognized and preserved as a historic trail from both the First Nation's perspective and a Canadian historical perspective. Halle began a letter writing campaign which caught the attention of John Woodworth, a renowned conservationist and past Chairman of the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Together with the help of other interested persons, they secured an agreement between Nature Conservancy of Canada, British Columbia Parks, and Parks Canada to study the possibility of developing British Columbia's first heritage trail.

Between 1975 and 1986 Halle and Linda Flygare were reassigned from their Parks Canada jobs in Banff and given the task to retrace and clear undergrowth and windfalls of what would eventually be known as the Nuxalk-Carrier Grease trail. This they did - six different times. The last time, the summer of 1986 Halle and Linda hiked the entirely cleared trail. Using a bicycle wheel odometer they determined that the Heritage trail between the Fraser River and Bella Coola totaled 347 kilometers. Along the way they made notes and took numerous photographs. On May 28th, 1982 a historic agreement was signed by Environment Minister, John Roberts of the Federal Government, and British Columbia Lands, Parks, and Housing Minister, Jim Chabot to share equally in the estimated \$1,800,000.00 to develop and protect the 347 km long trail. Only a fraction of this money was ever actually spent on the trail, but in the end on July 31, 1989 the

Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail was officially recognized. Halle Flygare has self-published extensively on this experience. These publications include a detailed Trail Guide entitled 'In the Steps of Alexander Mackenzie, as well as six different photo-journal books detailing the route he took from the Grand Portage to Bella Coola.

In May of 2023, Halle and Linda were awarded a certificate of recognition from the British Columbia Historical Federation (BCHF) recognizing their years of hiking, photographing, researching, and writing about the route Alexander Mackenzie must have taken from Fraser River to Bella Coola Valley.

After much thought and deliberation Halle Flygare concluded way back in 1985 that the route shown on maps from Sitkatapa Lake south to Burnt Bridge Creek could not possibly be the route Mackenzie took to the Bella Coola Valley. It really bothered Halle that the last section of the trail was obviously not being properly identified but there was nothing more he could do. The funding that Halle was receiving to work out the Mackenzie heritage trail had dried up and the exploration came to an end in 1986.

Rather fortuitously, after Halle had come to the conclusion that an alternative route needed to be figured out he came across this letter written by a Bella Coola local resident Leslie Kopas.

Leslie Kopas, a Bella Coola guy, used to wander through the Rainbow Mountains on his spare time. And he was aware of the Mackenzie route puzzle. He found a big rock, and he found a ridge with a worn trail heading up from a chain of lakes now referred to as Bead lakes. And so he wrote a letter, and in that letter he said.

"I am convinced that Mackenzie climbed out of Mackenzie Valley by way of the southerly most pass where the Tweedsmuir Trail now goes. He then struck southwest on a route that is virtually level for over two miles ("our way was now nearly level"). There is an isolated boulder on the route ("a huge rock") behind which he sought shelter in a storm. The route descends easily from the flat area to a bench above a branch of Burnt Bridge Creek. The way is again fairly level for some distance, on an old trail through trees. The trail reaches a grassy valley containing three small lakes, one of which probably was the "large pond" beside which Mackenzie found a tomb. South of the lakes a long tongue of meadow climbs to a pass above another branch of Burnt Bridge Creek. I believe Mackenzie followed this branch to the base of the mountain; and part way down his guides pointed out the Bella Coola River and Friendly Village. Over the years people seem to have been trying to tie the trail to Mackenzie Pass and Sitkatapa Lake. I doubt that Mackenzie used Mackenzie Pass or went within two miles of Sitkatapa lake, the route I followed seems the more likely way; it is remarkably easy and direct.



Leslie Kopas obituary photo (July 2, 1938 to April 19, 2022)

For the next 20 years or so Halle Flygare asked anyone he could think of who might be hiking in Rainbow Mountains to look for the “huge rock”; and he asked pilots who might be flying over the area to also look for the “huge rock”.

Dr Harvey Thommasen is a retired family physician who was spending time wandering the old growth forest of Tweedsmuir Park along the eastern border of Burnt Bridge Creek. He kept running across well worn tracks which he initially thought were game trails, but later came to the conclusion that these were ancient hiking tracks and wondered if this could be the original grease trail route.



Remnants of a well traversed moccasin trail along lower Burnt Bridge Creek still visible

He mentioned this to Katie Hayhurst and Dennis Kuch, long time hiking guides and residents of Stuix in Tweedsmuir Park. They filled Harvey in on Halle's theory of where the original Nuxalk-Carrier Grease Trail came down from the plateau – which fit perfectly with the trails Harvey had seen. They mentioned Halle was still looking for volunteers to check it out and that is how Harvey and Halle connected. Harvey took on the project in September and October 2023. First, he made multiple attempts to follow the game trail up onto the plateau ridge.



Trail heading up ridge after traversing Burnt Bridge Creek East Fork

The old west coast adage, “never go down a mountain side you have never first gone up” is especially relevant to the Bella Coola valley where sheer precipices are so bountiful that it is easy to get bluffed out onto a place where there is no return.



Andy Schmidt (seated on rock) and Ronald Poole were part of the first attempt up the ridge

It took three different day hikes with three different sets of friends but finally on October 12, 2022 Harvey achieved the goal of getting to the plateau ridge where he was on a precipice where he could see the Bella Coola River in the distance, looking south down the Burnt Bridge Creek valley.



Chris Fletcher and Orlando Andy admiring view from the “real” Precipice View point



View from the Precipice looking down the Burnt Bridge Creek Valley. The confluence of the Burnt Bridge Creek with the Bella Coola River is visible in the far distance

Carrying on east he could pick up remnants of the old trail and he felt he had achieved the first goal.



A well worn trail still visible through the forest at the top of the ridge

The next goal was to find the big rock. That was done when Harvey and Josh Pettinger hiked in from East Branch parking lot, a distance of 30 km on a bright, cool, mid-October day. The Rock fit all the necessary criteria to qualify as Mackenzie's rock. It was not actually a rock, but more like a butte, where one could easily seek refuge from bad weather.



Big Rock described in Mackenzie's Journal



Josh Pettinger “seeks refuge” behind the Big Rock



Big rock at sunset

Finally, in July 2023, Harvey and Peter Young put it all together. They walked west from the East Branch Parking Lot along the Octopus Lake trail, and walked north along the Tweedsmuir Trail for several kilometers before cutting northwest to the big rock. They camped at the big rock overnight, and then proceeded to hike the final 20 km to Burnt Bridge creek parking lot in the Bella Coola Valley. They basically followed Leslie Kopas' instructions to a tee. And as Kopas described, this was a fast, relatively easy route that was breath-taking and beautiful almost the entire way. Amazingly this old grease trail, this old "moccasin trail", is still very visible along most of the way --- basically unchanged for millennia. Only about 3 kilometers were challenging – mostly because of blow down and working one's way through a series of bluffs – going too far to the right or left takes one onto impassable cliffs. The rest of the way is open with no bush or bush whacking. It is fast, easy and fits all the journal landmarks. .



Harvey Thommasen (old guy) and Peter Young (young guy) and Queenie starting out



Trail leading up from Middle Bead Lake



Grease Trail still visible after all these years



Looking east back towards Bead lakes



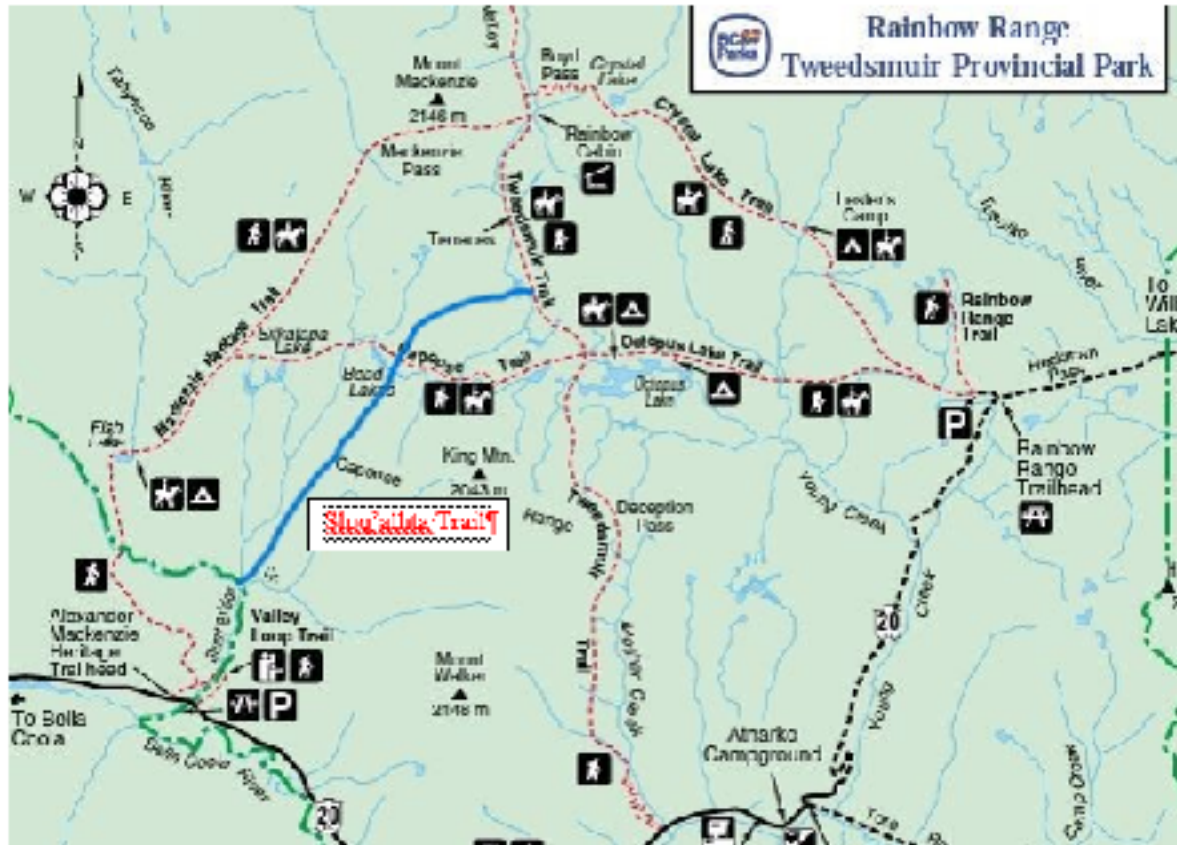
One of many scenic ponds along the Grease trail route



Peter Young hiking to crest of the Grease trail, trail drops down to valley after this part

Halle Flygare was happy to hear that finally someone had confirmed what he always suspected --- that Mackenzie, his crew, and his native guides made their way into Bella Coola Valley following the ridge between the North and East Branch of the Burnt Bridge Creek. Not south from Sitkatapa lake.

The discovery of this route - which we are calling Sluq'alhta (pronounced Slookasta) Trail - into the Bella Coola Valley opens up numerous hiking opportunities for hikers as shown in the map below. At least half a dozen loop trails could be developed using the Sluq'alhta trail. Sluq'alhta means Grease Trail in the Nuxalk language.



*The lost route is shown by the blue line connecting Tweedsmuir Trail to Burnt Bridge Creek.
At least six loop routes are possible using the newly re-discovered Sluq'alhta (pronounced Slookasta) Trail*

At the present time, the last drop of the "Precipice" remains poorly marked and will have to be cleared and marked a little better before we can recommend people attempt to follow the route without at least going with someone who has already successfully completed it. We are currently working with Nuxalk Nation Councilor Blair Mack to make this happen. For now, we feel confident that the route taken by Thommasen and Young in the summer of 2023 is the most likely route Mackenzie took into the valley on July 17, 1993. We look forward to the day when people from all across the planet come to experience a wilderness hike of unparalleled beauty that in many ways has not changed in over 230 years.



The rather steep section between two cliff sides still needs to be clearly ribboned and cleared