

## 2005 Summer Camp

*by Bill Kinkaid, Marian Coope, Elly Brok, Cynthia Crampton and Wally Kiel*

The camp was held from Monday, July 4th to Sunday, July 10th at Big Bar Ranch in the Cariboo region of British Columbia.



*Satellite view of the Big Bar Creek area, courtesy of Google Earth. The Fraser River is in the foreground, with the deep valley of Big Bar Creek on the left, and the power line cut (and Jesmond Road) on the plateau. The Marble Range is behind, with Mt. Bowman (marked) centre, the long Lime Ridge on the right, and Jesmond Lookout on the far left. Wildhorse ridge is behind Mt. Bowman, less prominent than Mt. Kerr further back. Big Bar Mountain and Ranch are off the left side of the photo. The Big Bar (reaction) ferry is at the words, "Big Bar Creek".*

No dramatic peaks this year - a dude ranch in the Cariboo was the site of the 2005 camp. Big Bar Ranch is situated near the southern rim of the Interior Plateau, at an elevation of 1,030 m, but we had nearly 2,000 vertical m between the low and the high points to explore. To the southeast of the ranch, the Marble Range, a row of limestone mountains, tops out at 2,243 m on the alpine summit of Mount Bowman. To the west rises the low dome of Big Bar Mountain, only 1,700 m high but extremely wide. On the other side, it drops spectacularly to the Fraser River at around 300 m.



Mountain Bluebird perched on Big Bar sign.

*Photo by Bill Kinkaid*

The ranch itself, northwest of Clinton and just off the Jesmond Road, is on typical bunchgrass steppes interspersed with Interior Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine forests, aspen parkland and a number of small lakes and marshes. All this variety of landforms and habitats gave something for everyone, including spectacular birding and botany walks, moderate to strenuous mountain hikes, and road trips. Thanks to the great variety of habitats and a damp early summer, we saw record numbers of birds and wildflowers, a variety of species much greater than at our higher-elevation camps.

Big Bar Creek, which takes its name from a gravel bar where the creek joins the Fraser River, in turn gives its name to the whole area from Big Bar Lake around the north end of the Marble Range some 15 km away. Below the ranch, we found the creek was dammed to create a small lake. Our tents were set in the pastures north of the ranch buildings and tourist campground with its teepees, above the lake and looking over to the meadows of Big Bar Mountain. A dude ranch, indeed, but surrounded on all sides by real working ranches; we were left in no doubt that this was beef cattle country. The bellowing of a massive bull in the fields across the road enlivened the first evening. Was it sexual frustration, as some of us surmised? Large cows surrounded him, so it was unlikely. Dave Howell, the chief wrangler at the Big Bar Ranch, who sometimes worked as a cowboy for the other ranches, told us that the bull was particularly ornery and even wranglers avoided him when possible. Cynthia Crampton pointed out that, at this camp, our usual wariness of bears was replaced by wariness of cattle, and at least one hike to Poison Lake suffered “an ungulate-mediated change of plan” (Terry Taylor), which meant the trip through the field with the bull in it was cancelled.

But the first part of the trip was not cancelled. Terry Taylor introduced a large group of campers to the trees and plants of the campground. He continued to share his botanical knowledge with us throughout the week at the camp, for which many of us were very grateful.

The Marble Range was the main hiking destination for moderate-to-strenuous hikes on all days. Colin Campbell, a resident of 100 Mile House and author of *Trails of the Southern Cariboo*, was on hand to lead a large party up popular Mount Bowman on the first day. This began as a good, easy trail along a creek and then climbed through wet meadows and subalpine forest to meadows on a ridge at about 2,100 m. The ridge was enough for some, but others continued via a steep gully of broken limestone and a rocky slope to the summit. Another popular trip beginning on the same trail was to the tundra of Wild Horse Ridge, with a slightly longer hiking distance but no scrambling.

Two approaches to 5.5-km long Lime Ridge were attempted. One group tried a trail to the south end of the ridge via Porcupine Creek as described by Colin Campbell, but either the directions or the route finding were insufficient as most of the day involved unsuccessful bushwhacking trying to locate the trail. An approach by a second group to the north end of the ridge via Foundation Creek was much more successful: from an abandoned building foundation by the roadside, we easily found a pleasant trail which led to a low wooded pass from which a steep trail led through the subalpine to the open windswept ridge.

The 1,965-m Jesmond Fire Lookout at the north end of the range was yet another mountain objective, via a decommissioned gravel road that led through a beautiful open Douglas-fir forest to the summit. Easily accessible on foot from the camp, it was quite exciting in a 4x4, as John and Marian Coope discovered, because of the steepness and the deep-cut water bars across the road. They abandoned the top to an approaching rainstorm. In Bill Kinkaid's opinion, however, one of the best wildflower meadows seen all week lay directly behind the lookout tower, and while there were no unusual species, the profusion of flowers in one small place was the highlight of the walk.

These trips gave expansive views from the Shulaps Range in the west to the Interior Plateau and the Cariboo Mountains in the east and northeast, thanks to the isolation of the Marble Range.



The camp with cabins, and the cattle with half the massive bull.

*Photo by Ian Cumming*

Several car trips went down to the Big Bar reaction ferry in the Fraser River canyon: the crossing, accomplished by a pontoon boat driven by the river current and guided by aerial cables, was an enjoyable experience. The drive from Jesmond to the river provided splendid birding all the way, ending with attempts to rescue a Western Kingbird nestling on the way out of the canyon. A flock of bighorn sheep was seen on several trips.



View of the Fraser Canyon.

*Photo by Ian Cumming*

The various visits to the Gang Ranch, organized by Tim Hollick-Kenyon, were the highlight of the camp for many. This trip, 60 km each way, took us through fields of yellow mustards (probably rapeseed) contrasting with spectacular rocks above the Canoe Creek valley, and down to the suspension bridge across the Fraser, followed by a quick drive up a steep draw to the ranch. The Gang Ranch is the largest ranch in B.C. at 392,000 hectares (nearly a million acres) - and one of the oldest, founded in 1888 by the Harper Brothers, reputed outlaws from West Virginia. The managers gave us a good welcome and an excellent talk on the history of the ranch. From the suspension bridge, another trip was to the south along the Empire Valley, at about 1,000 m elevation, to the Empire Ranch, which since 1998 is part of the Churn Creek Protected Area. The vegetation on either side of the Fraser was truly arid, the dull grey sagebrush interspersed with delicate mariposa lilies, and down by the river there was cactus.

Near the camp, the meadows and hills around Poison Lake, on the lower slopes of Big Bar Mountain and across the valley from the ranch, gave easy walking and were popular for botany and birding. Cynthia recounted her trip to Poison Lake: “Terry, our leader, had first to ensure that the massive bull was on the right side of the fence. The bull kicked up clouds of dust as we went by, pawing the ground and snorting at us. Fortunately, the horned larks and bluebirds were further along the road, so there was no call to linger. However, on the way back, our group met with a herd of cattle and two wranglers on horseback. We stopped to watch them separate the herd into two parts, a border collie nipping at their heels. Most of those separated out went through the gate quite well, but one, a young bull, refused, and was chased and cordoned off by the wranglers. Suddenly, the big animal jumped between the second and third lines of the wire fence, his great head clearing the wires effortlessly although we were sure he would bring the fence down. But he landed on his feet on the other side, and trotted off to join the herd. Yet he was only half the size of the massive bull in the field!”

Much birding and botanizing were done at the nearby lakes, such as Otter Marsh, connected to Big Bar Lake, and at Riley Lake on the way there. Billy Louie Lake, the marshy lake just south of the ranch, was also productive and we could bird at the tiny lake, the enlargement of Big Bar Creek, below the camp. Rowing and fishing were other activities we could indulge in at Squally Pond, as it was called.

From the camp, a few of us went horseback riding up Big Bar Mountain. Some had not ridden for many years (Marian and Elly Brok), and others (Julia, aged 7, and sister Rachel Woldmo, aged 11), had hardly ridden at all, while their mother, Sandie Hollick-Kenyon, proved a real pro. We enjoyed it hugely. Elly reported that later, as she and her group were walking back to the camp, they saw “ten horses running free on the road. They came galloping towards us, looking for apples.” The others found them “a little scary” but fortunately, neither they nor Elly, our Camp Manager, were run over by them. Wally Kiel and Bob Holden, on an exploratory walk from Riley Lake to Little Big Bar Lake, were chased by an infuriated cow defending a herd with young calves. They escaped across Big Bar Creek, only to meet a herd of cows on the road. A fellow camper in a car rescued them just in time. As Bob said, you don’t get respect from four legs if you’ve only got two.



The Campfire: roasting marshmallows.

*Photo by Bill Kinkaid*

The weather was fairly good during the week, although the temperature varied from extremely hot in the Fraser canyon to biting cold and windy on top of the Marble Range. Most campers were in tents, but a few, more “middle-aged” than the rest, chose to stay in cabins. One of them, Coyote Lodge, had Mountain Bluebirds and Cliff Swallows hatching and fledging in the roof-beams and eaves. One night, we were entertained by two local historians who related the history of the area, and on another, by the songs of cowboy-singer Dave Howell, whose witty words and catchy tunes delighted us. On the last night, we held a singsong around a bonfire - and it rained.

We were sorry that Hugh Hamilton, who chose the camp, was unable to attend. Elly reports that although she was unexpectedly Camp Manager in his place, she met no insoluble problems and was able to enjoy herself riding, hiking and on the expeditions farther afield. She ends by giving special thanks to the camp committee and all the camp volunteers who stepped forward to lead the interesting hikes. We join her in those sentiments, and give thanks also to Anne Freeman, owner of Big Bar Ranch, for hospitably welcoming us, to our faithful cooks, Lance Weisser and Jerry and Arlyce Kretschman, who kept us well fuelled throughout the week - and last, to Elly herself, who worked ceaselessly and with humour to make the camp a success.