

Battle Mountain Reconnaissance

by C.P. Lyons and R.Y. Edwards, 1955
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History

With the advent of intensive wildlife studies in Wells Gray Park in 1950, valuable information on big game animals has been steadily accruing. One animal causing particular concern by its comparatively small numbers is the caribou. In 1950 and 1951, park biologists examined the Battle Mountain area lying adjacent to the park. They found an ideal summer range for caribou and the remnants of a once large herd foraging on the uplands.

Photo: Extensive meadows provide ideal summer range for caribou.

Their cursory survey indicated that natural barriers would prevent domestic stock from intruding from adjacent areas. Considering the many other features including the wildflower meadows, riding country, scenic advantages, the grizzly bear habitat, and the comparative ease of access, it was recommended that the Battle Mountain region be added to the Park.

Photo: Scenic uplands provide hiking and riding opportunities

The writer in a memo dated January 2nd, 1952, outlined the various aspects and recommended the park addition. **It was pointed out that when Wells Gray Park was first established, Mr. E.C. Manning, the Chief Forester, stressed that the southern and southeast boundaries were only tentative and adjacent areas should be examined for possible inclusion in the park.**

Possible conflict with grazing interests in the Battle Mountain area were outlined by the Grazing Division and definite objections were received from The Beef Cattle Growers' Association.

In brief, the contention was that the Grazing Division had expended funds in trail construction to give access to alpine country in or near the Battle Mountain area. The cattlemen outlined their view that this was the only available summer range for members of the Upper North Thompson Livestock Association.

The counter argument of the biologists was that the Battle Mountain region was a distinct unit separated by natural barriers from any uplands that the cattlemen might reach. Their further contention was that the size of the cattle industry in the North Thompson Valley was governed by winter range conditions and could not be expanded appreciably. It was also pointed out that what grazing was taking place was on confined bottomland of the Raft River in an area quite remote from the one under discussion.

Because of the lack of maps and factual data, no general agreement could be reached. Therefore, a reconnaissance survey was proposed. This was carried out in September 1952 with the following persons being present;

Mr. W. Pendray	- Grazing Division
Mr. A.R. Metcalf	- Beef Cattle Growers' Association
Mr. R.Y. Edwards	- Biologist, Parks and Recreation Division
Mr. C.P. Lyons	- Assistant Forester, Parks and Recreation Division
Mr L. Brooks	- Planning Section, Parks and Recreation Division

Travel Route and Description of Terrain

It was decided to follow the route taken by cattle going to summer range and thereby see the progressive difficulties to be encountered.

The trail known as "The Hole-in-the-Wall Trail" starts some seven or eight miles east of Birch Island at a small holding corral by the side of the road. The first half mile of trail is on a gentle grade and passes through a stand of birch broken by patches of conifers. Upon reaching the sidehill, the trail angles upward at grades up to twenty per cent. The forest of birch and aspen is fairly open which, together with the southern exposure, makes for a well-drained trail. This condition continues for several miles until reaching a ridge where the route swings sharply to the northwest.

The "Hole-in-the-Wall" is not apparent as such, but is caused by entering a ravine formed by a shoulder on the main mountain slope. Once in the ravine, the forest is typically coastal in character, with numerous muddy swales ringed by red cedar. This forest type changes to a very brushy deciduous cover as the trail emerges on to an expansive side hill flanking the flats by angling northward around the side hill. The distance to the river bench is estimated to be about six miles.

Except for the well watered benches paralleling the river, the entire valley is covered with willow and aspen, interspersed with a few conifers. The soil is dry and either nearly bare or growing a poor cover of forbes and woody heath. This valley was burned by an intense fire in 1931, and the burn extends well into the sub-alpine forests on some valley slopes. Coniferous restocking of the burn has been slow, but is now accelerating as scattered young trees reach seed-bearing age.

Brushy flats a half mile wide in places extend back from the river. At one time these were surveyed and pre-empted, but later abandoned for rather obvious reasons. It is on these flats that present summer grazing is concentrated. Despite this, there was a little evidence of use and no sign of over-grazing at any place. At the same time it was apparent that this range is not suitable for continuous use by a large herd of cattle if such use should come to pass. Just how much it could carry is not clear, but grassy meadows near the Raft River crossing, only several miles distant, have remained untouched to date.

The trail follows the river flats for approximately five miles and then crosses the Raft River. The grassy meadows on the river's edge make a convenient campsite with an extensive horse pasture.

From this point onward only sketchy evidence of a trail can be found. The route follows the line of a trail can be found. The route follows the line of least resistance, with numerous twists and turns. The terrain in the vicinity of Silence Lake is a confusion of small knolls, gravelly flats, and steep-sided draws. Forest cover is mainly birch and aspen with a very scattered under-story of spruce. Ground cover is a sparse growth of kinnikinnick and sarsparilla, but numerous small grassy benches were noticed near the river.

Immediately to the north of Silence Lake is a very steep mountainside with numerous rocky outcrops. A severe fire has swept this slope, leaving a thin cover of birch, aspen and alder. The trail's course up this mountain is simply the most direct and steepest climb it is possible to make with horses. Should cattle be driven through here, it would be necessary to construct a well graded trail up this steep side hill. It is estimated that four to five miles of new trail would be required to make the climb.

Once the main plateau is reached, the trail enters an extensive coniferous stand of lodgepole pine and spruce. Infrequent blazes give a minimum of guidance through the more open timber with advantage being taken where possible of narrow, boggy forest meadows.

Photo: The trail winds through boggy meadows

In the estimated five miles of this type of travel, the gradual climb results in more frequent openings until, as the large open burn is approached, the forest might be classed as bordering on sub-alpine. However, it does not appear too well suited for grazing because of the intervening thick timber stands which would lead to wide dispersal of cattle in their search of forage.

Undoubtedly the open grazing country in the minds of the stockmen is the extensive burn now reached by the trail. Although comparatively heavily forested at one time, it now resembles alpine terrain except for the numerous snags and windfalls. No defined route exists and it is safe to say that hitherto no one has attempted anything but the most cursory of examinations.

Through careful study of aerial photos, a possible travel had been plotted to cross a narrow saddle on to the adjacent Battle Mountain area. Broken country, heavily timbered in places, made it difficult to approach this saddle. Immediately the crossing was made, rough rocky terrain with steep brushy slopes made horse travel almost impossible. A way was forced through this for approximately a mile until an open burn was reached.

Photo: Brushy, rocky slopes lead to an old burn. The heavy forest in the right background provides a natural barrier between the open terrain of a lower burn and the high slopes of Battle Mountain.

Then by taking advantage of ridges and glades a circuitous three-mile-long ride brought the party to the meadows at Phillips Lake. To reach the slopes of Battle Mountain, a further ride of two miles was made.

Photo: Lower slopes of Battle Mountain near Phillips Lake. These meadows form part of the caribou range.

Photo: Wildflower meadows near timberline on Battle Mountain.

Explanatory trips to the top and flanks of Battle Mountain confirmed the limitations of approach as visualized from aerial photos and as previously described by the biologists.

The trail route from Battle Mountain to the floor of the Clearwater Valley at Hemp Creek traverses the meadow at Phillips Lake and passes directly into the Clearwater burn. For a mile or so no sign of a defined trail can be seen. The thickness of the windfalls necessitates forcing the horses through the tangle where-over a passage is possible. Once the steep side hill is reached, the cover is more open and the steep zig-zagging trail leads quickly to the valley floor.

Park Possibilities

Besides the aspect of non-conflict with other uses, one of the strongest arguments for the inclusion of the Battle Mountain region in Wells Gray Park is that it is a readily accessible alpine region, allowing considerable scope for hiking and riding. Despite the vastness of this park and its large proportion of high mountains, there are few alpine areas that are available from convenient access points. Once reached, they are found to be so rough and broken as to almost completely localize travel.

The very nature of the park is one of rugged wilderness terrain with emphasis on fishing and hunting. Therefore, at present, visitors must fit in this category or find the park lacking in possibilities for recreation at the higher elevations.

The alpine slopes of Battle Mountain would hold a key position being at the very park entrance and relatively close to the center of accommodation and guiding services. They are extensive enough to lend themselves to a three or four day outing. There is a remarkable balance of lakes, meadows and rocky mountain top, thus provide diversified opportunities. Visitor facilities such as trails, campsites and horse pastures can be provided without trouble. All in all, the region has very high park potential.

Photo's x2: This type of terrain finds high favour with the park visitor

Wildlife Considerations

a) Caribou

Caribou were once abundant in Wells Gray Park, and guiding caribou hunters provided much of the income to residents on the marginal agricultural soils of the Upper Clearwater Valley. Through the 1950's, this caribou herd declined rapidly. Residents asked the Game Commission to investigate the condition, which resulted in several reconnaissance trips by Wardens Holmes and Shuttleworth, a recommendation by Inspector Robertson for a detailed ecological study, and the closing of the area to caribou hunting in 1937.

The cause of the decline is not definitely known. A study in progress has revealed that range destruction by fire is the most probably cause, and this aspect is now under observation.

The high ranges necessary for caribou survival in this area are those rounded mountains with extensive alplands adjacent to the glaciers and rugged peaks forming the core of the Cariboo Mountains. The herd in question uses an extensive area typical of all caribou ranges.

Photo: Caribou make a seasonal migration to these alplands.

Photo: A favourite hunting ground in the past. Meadows around Phillips Lake.

John Ray, who knew this country better than any man, described this range as "Ray Mountain, Goat Peaks and Moberly Mountain, around through Murtle Lake into the Battle-Table Mountain country." The present study has verified this range, which consists of the Murtle Lake area and adjacent uplands. The caribou move regularly between the mountains north of Murtle Lake, which are in the Park and the Battle Mountain area. If the park is to contain the herd, Battle Mountain must be added to the park.

Battle Mountain is good caribou range. The area is almost devoid of grasses, but the browse plants, forbs and lichens that form the bulk of the caribou diet are adequate. The open meadows interspersed with stunted conifers, the talus of the mountain slopes and its position relative to other ranges used, combine to form nearly ideal conditions.

This is no place to argue the need for preserving rare and interesting animals. It is sufficient to say that British Columbia's once abundant caribou have dwindled alarmingly from the Kootenays to the Cassiar. Wells Gray Park is a potential sanctuary

for an animal in need of sanctuary, and for an animal which played a quiet but important part in the history of this Province.

b) Grizzly Bear

The Battle Mountain area is good grizzly range, apparently attracting wanderers from the park to the north. Spring wanderers frequent this area when food is scarce and the ground squirrel population attracts bears using this food prior to hibernation.

As do caribou grizzly bears use the Battle Mountain area as part of an excellent range which is now only partially within the park. Any plan to manage wildlife in Wells Gray Park, where wildlife protection and use is a major attraction can only have limited success if the park boundary does not completely contain natural units of game range. At present, there are no complete range units for caribou, grizzly, or moose. The addition of the Battle Mountain area to the park would be a major step towards correcting the range deficiencies of these three valuable animals.

c) Moose

Both the Raft and Clearwater Valleys support heavy winter populations of moose on what is very possibly the best moose range now existing in British Columbia. In summer, these populations scatter to neighbouring sub-alpine areas.

The size and excellence of winter range determines the extent of the moose population. The present park boundary does not include enough winter range in the Clearwater Valley to ensure successful management of the main park herd. While Battle Mountain itself does not provide moose winter range, a new park boundary enclosing this area, and joining the old boundary in the southeast corner of the park in the Clearwater Valley, will bring much of the necessary moose winter range into the park.

Management of moose necessitates management of winter range. The value of the Wells Gray moose herd has been conservatively calculated as a sustainable million dollar resource, using only those values which can be reduced to monetary value with reasonable accuracy. The inclusion of more winter range within the park would ensure the continued existence of this important resource.

Proposed Park Boundaries

All the park investigations into the Battle Mountain area have stressed that this addition could be, and should be made to minimize conflict with any other possible use. From the ground it is very apparent that topographic features provide a definite delineation between grazing terrain and the suggested addition.

Photo: A heavy forest flanks Battle and Table Mountain (in background). Steep valleys are a further restrictive factor limiting grazing to lower slopes.

Photo: Thick forests on the east side of Battle Mountain bars cattle access from Stevens Lake area.

Unfortunately, because of the lack of official maps, such a boundary cannot be described at this time. A detailed field map prepared from aerial photos can only be correlated very roughly with the meager pre-emption or reference sheet.

Since a map is under preparation and will be available within a year, it is suggested that a tentative boundary be set now and the addition protected by a map reserve. Such a boundary is shown on the attached small scale map.

Although the Battle Mountain area can be encompassed quite readily, a problem arises in the boundaries around Hemp Creek. Private land in this vicinity and possible agricultural expansion must be considered. A balance should be struck in adding to the park all the valuable winter moose range that can be made available without creating problem for the settlers.

Although it is an obvious fact that settlement in this region is on a sub-marginal level, nevertheless, the rancher must be allowed an opportunity to expand his holdings should he so desire. A further factor to be accounted for is that slight use of adjacent Crown lands takes place in the way of grazing and wood cutting. Should the park boundary abut private lands, all these minor infringements could prove difficult to administer.

Keeping all these points in mind, a tentative boundary has been set which provides a buffer zone between park and settlement. It is felt that this greatly favours the settlers and omits very desirable moose range in the lower valley. However, after certain wildlife studies are conclusive and the problems of management are in sharp focus, it should be possible to make minor adjustments at lower elevations. Under the present fluid state of park and wildlife management, it is only reasonable to expect the residents present reaction of fearing too close confinement to a park boundary.

Signed,

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R.Y. Edwards
Biologist

1955

Parks and Recreation Division
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Supplement to Report on Battle Mountain Reconnaissance

-W.C. Pendray

The comments in this brief supplement will be confined almost entirely to the possible impact on livestock interests of the proposed extension of the Wells Gray Park boundaries.

I think the most salient fact determined as a result of this reconnaissance was that the range intended to be opened up for the Upper North Thompson cattlemen by Stock Trail No. 81 is entirely separate and of a distinctly different type from that found on Battle Mountain proper. As indicated in the body of this report, the range situated at the head of the trail running northerly from Silence Lake (Stock Trail No. 81), and as shown in light green on the accompanying large scale cover map, is separated from Battle Mountain proper by precipitous terrain or large blocks of dense timber. None of this area lies within the proposed park extension. Although the carrying capacity of this range could be accurately determined only by an intensive range survey, it is a very extensive area and would appear to be more than adequate to meet the possible future summer range requirements of the Upper North Thompson cattlemen. Both the topography and the forage is suitable for cattle.

Up to the present, the Upper North Thompson cattlemen have made absolutely no use of the higher range at the head of Stock Trail No. 81, their stock being confined to the Raft River Valley south of Silence Lake. There is no doubt, however, that the higher range at the head of the Trail will be required if there is any appreciable increase in the numbers of stock tun by the cattlemen or if the "brushing up" occurring in the area presently used continues. When it becomes necessary to use the higher range, the logical plan would be to reserve the Raft River Valley for early and late grazing with all stock being moved to the higher range during midsummer. The present trail from Silence Lake to the high range, although not entirely adequate, will require only minor improvement to make is a passable stock trail. The main improvement required is the relocation of the trail to avoid the more boggy of the openings scattered through the thickly timbered plateau area. More blazing is also required in the more open Silence Lake area. Some improvement is also required on the steep hillside north of Silence Lake but this need not be as extensive as suggested in the body of this report. In general, the trail follows a direct route and the logical approach to the range of Stevens lakes and the west fork of Raft River is from the presently grazed Raft River Valley.

Within the area proposed to be added to the Park are fairly extensive areas of sub-alpine range. Because of topography, elevation, and the nature of the forage, this is not desirable cattle range. It could be used by sheep. However, although the area is extensive, the carrying capacity for domestic sheep is low. Some slopes produce rich stands of palatable forbs, but unfortunately from the grazing standpoint, these are interspersed with large

areas covered with but a sparse stand of palatable vegetation. The photos in this report illustrate the situation fairly well. A more intensive examination than that carried out would be required to accurately estimate the actual capacity of this sub-alpine range for sheep but it would probably not carry more than a band of 750 ewes with their lambs on a sustained basis. This would not appear to be sufficient to attract sheepmen from any considerable distance. It might be of importance to the settlers in the Upper Clearwater Valley. However, there appears to be little interest in sheep in this area and certainly no one ranch would support a band of economic proportions. The organization of a community band appears unlikely, at least from some time. Further, the opinion might be ventured that more benefit would accrue to the local settlers through supplying the services required by an increased number of park visitors than by grazing sheep on the area. The logical access route to Battle Mountain for grazing purposes would be from the Clearwater Valley at Hemp Creek.

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