

PURCELL WILDERNESS CONSERVANCY

The Purcell Wilderness Conservancy (PWC) contains an outstanding diversity of natural features.

From the Dewar Creek Hot Springs in the valley bottom, all the way through long forested valleys up to the soaring peaks of the Purcell Mountains, with its highest peak being Mount Truce at 3250 m (10,660 ft.), the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy protects amazing wilderness. "It is the largest intact ecosystem in southeastern B.C.," quoted from the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy, BC Parks, Management Direction Statement, 1996.

The highest summits of the Purcell Range reach over 3200 m (10,500 ft.), and active glaciation still dominates in many upper basins. The Purcell Mountains contain some of the oldest rock in the province, with impressive sedimentary, metamorphic and igneous formations.

Road access into the park is often many kilometres away from the borders. In Findlay or Dutch creeks, for example, the end of the road is 30 km away. At Toby Creek the road ends near the confluence with Jumbo Creek. Yet, along Dewar and Wesley creeks the road end is near the boundary.

The Purcell Wilderness Conservancy is a 200,173 ha area that is managed for a wilderness priority. Although remote, this park is renowned for its outstanding scenery and wilderness backcountry recreation. Owing to the park's size, remoteness and the length of its trails, day hikes in the area are not common.

Extended visits by mountaineers, horse-packers or backpackers are increasing. However, hunters, guide outfitters and their clients, along with trapping tenures, entertain the most

human use. BC Parks does not allow motorized access in the park. The local people who worked hard to protect this vast area and the park management goals want the PWC to be left wild, without trail signs, bridges or other facilities. Visitors must rely on their own wilderness skills and independence in this remote area.

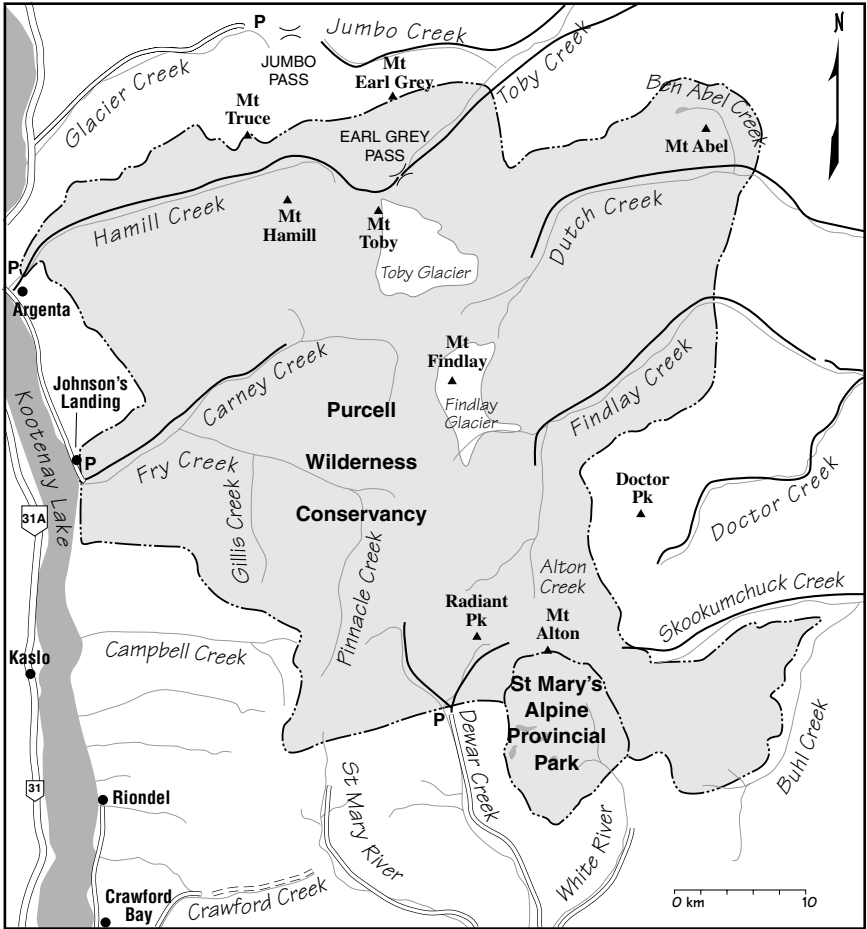
The eastern PWC includes eroded rounded Purcell Peaks and typically long natural valley ecosystems. Horse trails, maintained by guide outfitters, lace most of the eastern valleys. The PWC embraces the headwaters of St. Mary River, Wesley Creek trail, see page 193, Dewar Creek Hot Springs trail, see page 195, along with Skookumchuck, Findlay, Dutch and Toby creeks. The Purcell park also fuses wilderness protection to the northern boundaries around St. Mary's Alpine Provincial Park, see page 187.

The eastern extension of the park now includes Ben Abel Lake, see page 272, and a larger portion of both Findlay and Dutch creeks.

The northern extremities of PWC press up against the quasi-wilderness area of Jumbo Pass, see page 264.

The creeks on the western slopes of the Purcell Mountains tumble down steep, narrow and confined valleys of Fry Creek Canyon and Carney Creek and into Kootenay Lake. Hamill Creek, on the western side, features an extensive tract of old growth western hemlock and cedar stands.

The historic Earl Grey Pass trail traverses for 60 km (38 mi.) through the wilderness in the park's northern reaches. This trail climbs from Toby Creek across the Purcell Mountains and descends into Hamill Creek by Lardeau on Kootenay Lake. Designation of this route as a Heritage Trail



under the Heritage Conservation Act is being pursued.

The trail was named after the Governor-General Earl Grey. In 1909 he and his crew travelled across Canada, and in an extremely remote voyage they traversed the Purcell Mountains. The Earl Grey Cabin was built for this historically significant expedition, which still stands along the Earl Grey trail today. However, packrats and porcupines now occupy this deteriorating structure. BC Parks is now discussing the possibility of restoring this well-built cabin.

After Earl Grey's visit, he proposed the protection of the Purcell Mountains as a national park. Still, nothing was done until citizen advocates, six decades later, restored the protection issue.

They reawakened the legacy of the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy in the early 1970s. An active network of environmental citizens recognized that the summits of the Purcell Mountain range, along with the dry open slopes of the East Kootenay and the forests in the West Kootenay, all needed protection from development. They wanted a completely



Photo by Roy Moe and Art Twomey, taken on their 1972 traverse of the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy. Looking south to Lees Clutterbuck from Mount Findlay.

protected unit so that the spectacular wild lands of the Purcells could be shared with future generations.

After intense lobbying from conservation and recreational sectors, in 1974 the minister of Parks and the premier signed a provincial order-in-council. The document specified what exactly was the PWC and granted a level of protection. The Conservancy was set up as “a roadless tract” where “natural and ecological communities are preserved intact” and “natural systems may proceed without alteration.”

It took two more decades of active citizen commitment to the Purcells to complete the Conservancy as a park. In 1995 the B.C. government extended the boundaries of PWC on both the east and west flanks and granted Class A provincial park status. The order-in-council was strengthened to “full legislated protection.”

Ric Careless described the value of wilderness in his book, *To Save the Wild Earth, Field Note from the Environmental Frontline*, published by Raincoast Books. He wrote, “Wilderness is the pristine legacy of Nature. It is the land and life as they have evolved since the beginning of time, free of the development or exploitation of civilization. There is a priceless virginal quality to wilderness: either it remains intact or it is irreversibly lost. There can be no in between. Defile it with roads, cut down trees and, regardless of the logging technology used, the wilderness vanishes. Instead it becomes just another plot of land managed, more or less for human wants. And with its passing, the remnant wild estate of the original Earth dwindles further.”