



6076000

6075000

6074000

6073000

635000

636000

637000

638000

639000

No parking here

Astlais Mtn.
▲
1840

Little Onion
▲
1588

tree line

Onion Mountain Trail

Trail

Old Babine Lake Rd

Junction with
Babine Lake Road
3.2 km

P

gate

SMITHERS

TELKWA

Old Babine Lake Rd.

Babine Lake Rd.

16

0 5 km

0 0.5 1 1.5 2 km



Onions, Little and Big

by Morgan Hite (morgan@hesperus-wild.org; more trail maps at bvtrailmaps.ca)

You may not have heard of a peak in Slovenia named Triglav, but you can be sure that Slovenians have. As the highest peak in the country, it is a goal for many Slovenes to climb it *at least once in their lives*. What if we had a similar tradition in the Bulkley Valley, that once in your life you would make an attempt to climb... the Big Onion?

Visible from almost everywhere in the central Bulkley Valley, the Big Onion is an accessible, colourful, dome-shaped peak with a broad summit that stands east of the town of Smithers. Imagine the pride and pleasure you might get as you gaze at it from Highway 16 and muse, "Yep, I've been up there."

Although it is right next to Babine Mountains Provincial Park, the mountain was excluded from the park so that its valuable minerals might someday be mined. This is in fact where its name comes from (rather than from its resemblance to a vegetable). If I can quote from Joe L'Orsa's *History of the Babine Mountain Recreation Area*, "In 1917 Axel Elmstead and his partners Tommy Haig and Ben Benson found mineralization on a mountain which they then named the 'Big Onion,' after Ben Benson's habit of talking about 'peeling the onion' - striking it rich. This onion was the BIG one." They staked the property the following year, and even today the scars of prospecting and exploration on the bright orange sides of the peak are visible from a distance.

The small prominence to the south that just pokes up above treeline is called, by association, the *Little* Onion. It makes a nice destination for a half-day hike, being about an hour and a half from the trailhead.

Approaches to both Onions, are straightforward. There is a large parking lot on Old Babine Lake Road, about 3.5 km from its junction with (new) Babine Lake Road. This lot is at the base of an old mining road, variously called the Onion Mountain Trail or the Little Onion Trail, that runs up and over the Little Onion, and then on around the Big Onion and into Babine Park. A spur of it leads up to the saddle between two prominences on the Big Onion.

From the parking lot, the old road is sustainedly steep and there is no reliable water. It switchbacks up through an old burn and then splits in the forest above (take the left fork). At the Little Onion, be sure to leave the road for a moment and climb to the high point just to your west. It's an excellent stop for a break, and having ascended 500 vertical metres to the lesser Onion you have only 300 more vertical metres to go to the top of the big one.

"Big Onion" is not an official name as far as the province of BC is concerned. The province recognizes only the name of the westernmost and highest of the three prominences that make up the Big Onion: Astlais Mountain, elevation 1841 metres. This name turns up in the street name of "Astlais Place" (off Bulkley Drive) in Smithers, and in the Astlais Mountain Ranch on Babine Lake Road.

Past the Little Onion it's just under 1 km to a second fork where the Onion Mountain Trail goes right. You go left, into the maze of exploration roads at the base of the Big Onion. The only one of these that you are interested in is the very steep one straight ahead, that goes up to the saddle between Astlais and the middle prominence. Ascending through multi-coloured hues of orange and yellow scree, this remarkable road provides a solid, if dry, staircase to the grassy saddle.

From the saddle, ascending turf and heather to the summit cairn on Astlais takes about fifteen minutes. From here you get impressive views of Ganokwa Basin and the southwest half of the Babine Park.

The Little Onion is certainly the way to approach this peak: I don't recommend getting to (or from) the base of the Big Onion via the labyrinth of bulldozed roads that occupy its southwest side. New scrapes overlap older scratches, which in turn overlap older trails, and the whole mess is confusing and complex. I'm not even sure it's shown correctly on the map above. And there's nowhere to park at the bottom.

Be sure to carry water on your once-in-a-lifetime ascent of the Onions!