

Little Onion 1588

Snowmobile Trail

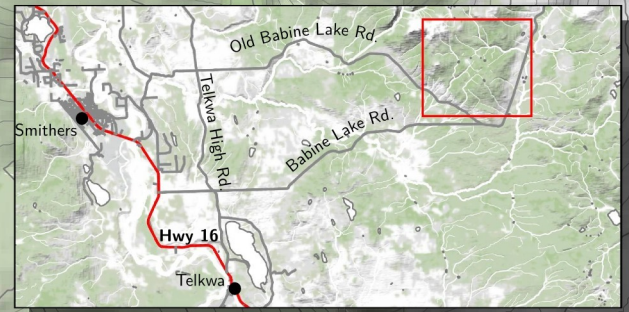
Blue Geranium

Old Babine Lake Road

Snowmobile Trail

Babine Lake Road

Smithers, 19 km



Blue Geranium: Trails and Pipelines

A Different Approach to Backcountry Exploration

by Morgan Hite (morgan@hesperus-wild.org)

How often do you go to “do” a trail? Have you had the experience of hiking or snowshoeing so fast that you don’t really notice where you are?

Some outdoors enthusiasts in the Bulkey Valley have noticed this tendency in themselves, and are deliberately exploring an alternate way of being in the woods, one that emphasizes the experience of the place over the experience of the trail.

A trail after all can be a barrier to perceiving place. It focuses our visit to a certain pre-marked, pre-flagged corridor. Like a pipeline it channels us, and our experience. For this reason the Friends of Blue Geranium are advancing an idea for a small snowshoeing area near the junction of Old Babine Road and new Babine Road: although they’ve been exploring this area for several winters, they’re *not* flagging trails.

“The purpose of FBG,” says Ray Chipeniuk, one of the founding members, “is to encourage outdoor recreation which is predominantly about encountering natural things, rather than human artifacts or social interaction.”

Of course winter off-trail exploration is not for everyone. The amount of attention one has to pay is not just double, but perhaps ten times more. Every contour of landscape, every slight change in forest -- the odd-shaped tree, the presence of a stream – all need to be noticed and assembled into a coherent picture, merely so you can find your way back. These are advanced skills, not for beginning hikers, who may find just staying on a trail challenging. It is the hiker who is completely comfortable with the flagged route, who perhaps finds the trail no longer wakes her up, who may want to jump out of the pipeline and begin looking at the landscape.

And there are more questions that FBG would like to pose. How do large groups affect our experience of place? What’s the effect of intending to get to a certain destination? What are the ethics around flagging or publicizing your route – how does this ruin the experience for those who come next? How does taking dogs on a hike change things? If you assign names to meadows, lakes, streams and peaks, what are you taking away from people who come later? When we set up a trailhead, how does that distort the landscape in people’s minds? If we are flagging a route, are we doing it just so we can get somewhere else faster? Since our culture builds too many roads, is it possible that we are also building too many trails?

If you’re interested in these kinds of questions too, FBG would like to hear from you (chipeniuk@explornet.com). FBG members are, as well, happy to accompany you out on a first Blue Geranium trip. It bears saying: away from trails, it is quite easy to get lost!

Practising these ethics is purely voluntary at BG. It’s not a special reserve, or a piece of land with some kind of special designation. It’s just a typical piece of public land with evidence of old logging and bulldozer use. The idea is to explore the Idea.

For all these reasons, the map I’ve got of Blue Geranium here has no trail on it, no trailhead and no feature names. Blue Geranium itself has no actual bounds. It lacks all those handrails we are used to! It is *supposed* to provoke a bit of discomfort. Where do I start? Ah...