



ENTRY RULES

In order to qualify for this unofficial quest for alpine fishing gold, each lake had to at least meet the following initial criteria:

■ It must be located off the Sea-to-Sky Highway between Vancouver and Whistler

■ It must be above 800 metres in elevation

■ There must be no automobile access

■ The round-trip hike to its shores must be at least four hours long

■ It must hold the promise of good shore fishing

*Writer Gordon Morrison
at B.C.'s Garibaldi Lake*

fishing for gold

By GORDON MORRISON

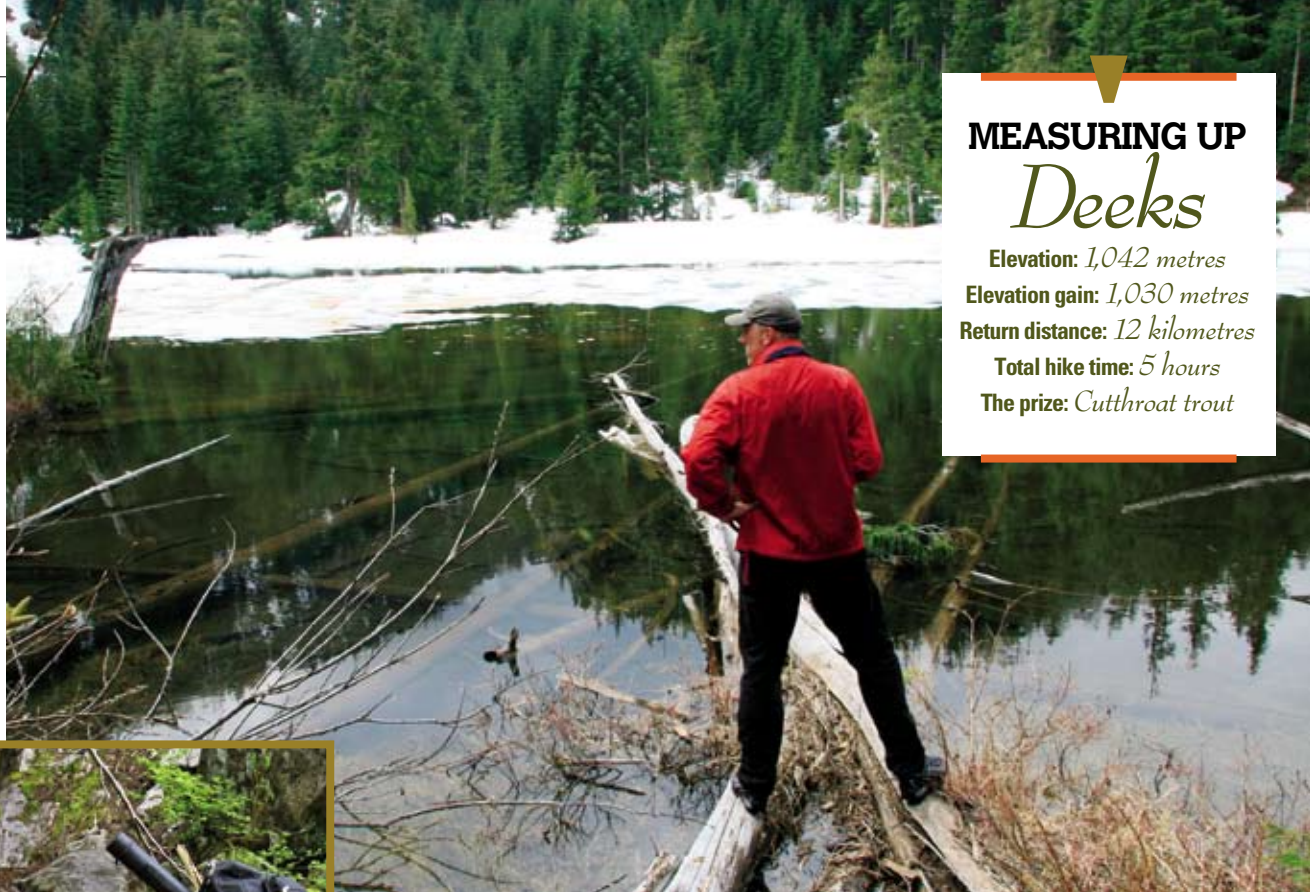
An Olympics-inspired roundup of the Sea-to-Sky Highway's top three alpine hot spots for the athletic angler

The pursuit of gold, silver and bronze at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver is already underway, with athletes vigorously training for a shot at glory. And many of them will be heading up the Sea-to-Sky Highway to Whistler, where much of the competition will take place.

That got us to thinking: Why not get in the Olympics mood by bestowing honours on the top fishing destinations along the road to Whistler? After all, the rocky slopes lining the Sea-to-Sky Highway harbour some remarkable yet difficult-to-access alpine and subalpine lakes, making them the perfect venues for combining athletics with angling.

While there are many noteworthy lakes between Vancouver and Whistler, our gold, silver and bronze winners made it to the podium because reaching their shores demands a physically challenging hike. Of course, we also took into account other factors, not the least of which was the promise of some good fishing (see "The judging" on page 65).

In the end, our competition for the top three mountaintop fishing holes came down to Deeks, Echo and Garibaldi Lakes. Read on to learn where they placed in the medals. And in the spirit of the Olympics, don't be surprised to find a few judging controversies along the way.



MEASURING UP

Deeks

Elevation: 1,042 metres
 Elevation gain: 1,030 metres
 Return distance: 12 kilometres
 Total hike time: 5 hours
 The prize: Cutthroat trout



Deeks Lake

The thought of fishing Deeks Lake came to me by accident one summer's day as a nice cutthroat lazily swam into my view. We stared each other down, neither of us altering course, me eating lunch and Mr. Cuttie patrolling the perimeter of his lake. The year was 1983, and I had foolishly neglected to pack a rod and reel. At that time, I was more concerned about finding some challenging hikes than fishing.

But just as an Olympic hopeful must hold fast to his or her dreams, I never gave up on the thought of one day hauling that cheeky trout out of Deeks' cool, alpine waters. Fast-forward to 2008, and the Deeks Lake Trail beckons yet again. This time, however, my rod and reel are tagging along.

The Deeks Lake trail starts at the Sea-to-Sky Highway about six kilometres north of Lions Bay. From the brand new pavement laid down for the 2010 Winter Olympics extravaganza, the trail climbs approximately 1,030 metres to the lake. A

fit hiker accustomed to travelling through the West Coast's rainforest can get to the lake in about two and a half hours. But be forewarned: this hike is nature's version of the Stair Master, so expect tired legs and an elevated heart rate. The trail also has some uncomfortable sidehill sections, and small boulders that can be hazardous to weary ankles.

Along with some rewarding views of Howe Sound near the top of the trail, the lake itself is very picturesque and peaceful. Since Deeks was half-covered in snow during my first visit in mid-June, I returned in August. This ended up as a wet and slippery event, with the cool August rains keeping the angling time to a minimum. Fishing the inflow and outflow creeks didn't pan out and, sadly, any cutthroats patrolling the lake's perimeter remained remarkably elusive.

In short, the dream of catching the Deeks Lake trout that finned its nose at me back in 1983 remains unfulfilled. But just like an Olympian who can't shake the agony of defeat, I'll be back. After all, fishing—like the Olympics—requires perseverance and timing to attain that coveted prize.



The challenging hike and the alluring promise of cruising cutthroats demand a return visit



MEASURING UP

Echo

Elevation: 910 metres
 Elevation gain: 910 metres
 Return distance: 6 kilometres
 Total hike time: 5 hours
 The prize: Rainbow trout

Getting to Echo is the best part of the adventure. The rainbow trout are the bonus



Echo Lake

There is no true trail network into Echo Lake, isolated as it is on the undeveloped side of the Squamish River. This makes the journey to its shores a multi-faceted adventure, requiring a few more skills than merely the ability to follow a trail. Because the way in is less than obvious, you'll need to use a good contour map, as well as a compass or GPS.

The hike also demands some preparation in terms of securing other necessary equipment—namely, a means of crossing the Squamish River. Some bushwhacking protective clothing is also recommended, along with an air horn to ward off the odd black bear (don't be surprised if you stumble upon a bruin's wintering den along the way).

The journey to Echo begins with a paddle across the steady flow of the Squamish River. Our vessel of choice was a canoe, which we launched from the western jetty that bounds the Squamish estu-

ary. The gentle crossing was a highlight of the journey, as was a bald eagle's soulful screech echoing across this beautiful, yet rarely explored part of the river.

Upon landing on the other side, you need to stash your canoe to ensure there's a means for making the return trip. But take the paddles with you—they're useful for hacking through the brush. Plus, it will make it that much more difficult for someone else to "borrow" your canoe.

The Echo Lake Trail has an elevation gain of approximately 910 metres and an average gradient in the 35 per cent range, making it the steepest of the three hikes in this competition. During the six-kilometre return trip, you'll also traverse the Squamish flood plain parallel to the outflow creek from the lake. This poorly marked trek goes through mature forest and numerous granite waterfalls and

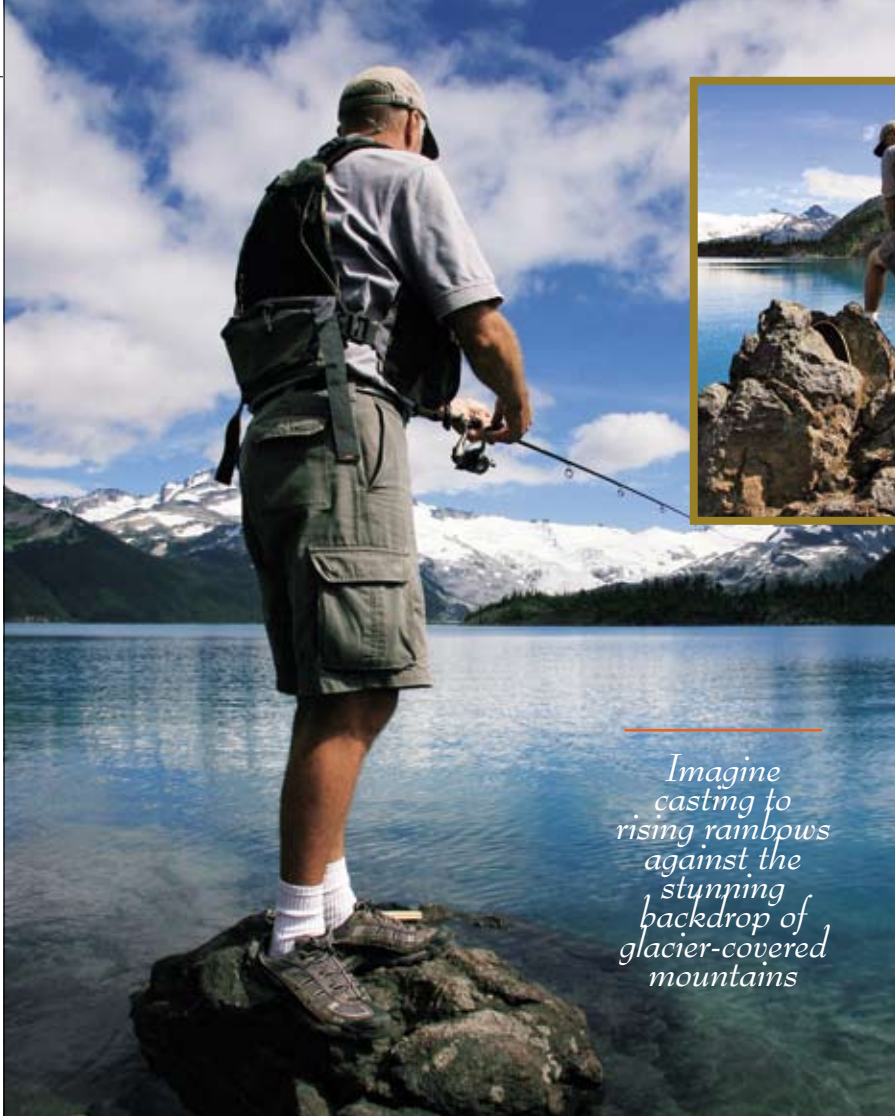


bluffs, which are uniquely beautiful.

The lake itself is also uniquely beautiful and, notably, roughly the same smallish size as Deeks, making it comfortable for a shore angler. Echo's rainbow trout are rumoured to occasionally launch themselves right out of the water in pursuit of flies, whether real or man-made. Although I didn't witness such acrobatics, it sounds intriguing.

The real joy of a fishing trip to Echo Lake isn't so much the prospect of getting into some respectable sizes and numbers of trout, but rather the adventure of getting to the lake itself. Simply put, it's a delight to experience the peaceful tranquility of this isolated and special place.

CHAS WARDLE (ANGLER PHOTOS); DAVID LAMBROUGHTON (FISH PHOTOS)



Imagine casting to rising rainbows against the stunning backdrop of glacier-covered mountains



MEASURING UP Garibaldi

Elevation: 1,484 metres
Elevation gain: 940 metres
Return distance: 18 kilometres
Total hike time: 5 hours
The prize: Rainbow trout

And while Garibaldi's trout may not be huge, they're hungry—it was mere minutes before I caught and released the first fish of the day, a 14-inch rainbow. And because this lake is such a gem, the hike is a wonderful experience even without catching fish.

After enjoying plenty of action, it was time to savour one last cast into the brilliant waters and drink in the view. And just as I was making my reluctant departure from this enchanting fishing destination, two trout put on a final, wonderful show, hovering in the crystal-clear outflow waters and occasionally giving chase to one another. It's quite special to watch a wild rainbow behaving, unobstructed, as a wild fish should.

Contributor Gordon Morrison has fished and hiked along much of the West Coast.

CRAIG WARDLE (ANGLER PHOTOS); DAVID LAMBROUGHTON (FISH PHOTOS); AMANDA DUFFY (ILLUSTRATIONS)

The Piscatorial Podium

Summarizing the competition for the best alpine or subalpine lake along the Sea-to-Sky Highway requires an understanding of the fact that angling, like the Olympics, is unpredictable. And sometimes, the real reward isn't so much the fish as it is the overall experience itself.

The aim of this contest was to determine which lake combined the best physical challenge with the best fishing. While the lakes on the road to Whistler certainly provide big doses of fitness, they'd likely disappoint the angling purist seeking only sizes and numbers of fish. But a health-minded angler, someone who's happy to stop to smell the flowers along the trail, will certainly be in awe of the chance to tackle both fish and fitness on the scenic Sea-to-Sky Highway.

Indeed, the journey truly is the big prize. And the big prize for this competition, the gold medal, belongs to Garibaldi Lake—and to any angler who one day experiences the honour and magic of standing on a solid lava podium, rod and reel in hand, lost in a very special moment. ♦

The Judging

Yes, there was some method to the madness in choosing the gold-, silver- and bronze-medal winners in this competition. For each of the criterion listed below, points were awarded using the following grading system: below par (1 point), average (2 points) and top marks (3 points).

Gold: Garibaldi Lake

- Physical challenge (3)
- Shore accessibility (3)
- Fish sizes and numbers (2)
- Scenery (3)
- Amenities (3)
- Safety (3)

TOTAL POINTS: 17



Silver: Echo Lake

- Physical challenge (3)
- Shore accessibility (2)
- Fish sizes and numbers (1)
- Scenery (3)
- Amenities (1)
- Safety (1)

TOTAL POINTS: 11



Bronze: Deeks Lake

- Physical challenge (3)
- Shore accessibility (1)
- Fish sizes and numbers (1)
- Scenery (2)
- Amenities (1)
- Safety (2)

TOTAL POINTS: 10

