Strathcona Wilderness Institute
ANNUAL REPORT 2026

General remarks

With a below-average snowpack over the winter of 2025-6 and an early melt of the snow in the Meadows, we started our schedule of programmes at the beginning of June and opened the SPWC on June 19. The Park had already seen many visitors before the beginning of June. This year we had very few days of extreme heat, and again were not affected badly by smoke from large number of wildfires on the mainland, so the average daily numbers of visitor has remained at 73, as last year, but significantly higher than 2023 and 2024. We received funds (covering minimum wage) for 7 students through the federal Canada Summer Jobs programme and were able to fill all seven positions this summer, three as a Staffers at the SPWC, one as a Staffer at our Buttle Hut, one as Summer Programmes Coordinator/ Research Assistant and two Naturalist Interpreter/Research Assistants, continuing the work of previous years documenting flora and fauna on the Trails, as well as helping with our summer programmes (See photo #1 in Appendix). We had a cohort of 7 volunteers to assist in the staffing of the SPWC at Paradise Meadows, and 9 at the Buttle Hut. 13 individuals, plus 5 directors and 4 students, acted as leaders or presenters in our summer program of walks, hikes, presentations and workshops. Funding from the BC Parks Foundation made possible our augmentation of the salaries of our summer students, as well as supporting our volunteer staffers and the implementation of our various programmes.

General Visitor Information and Education

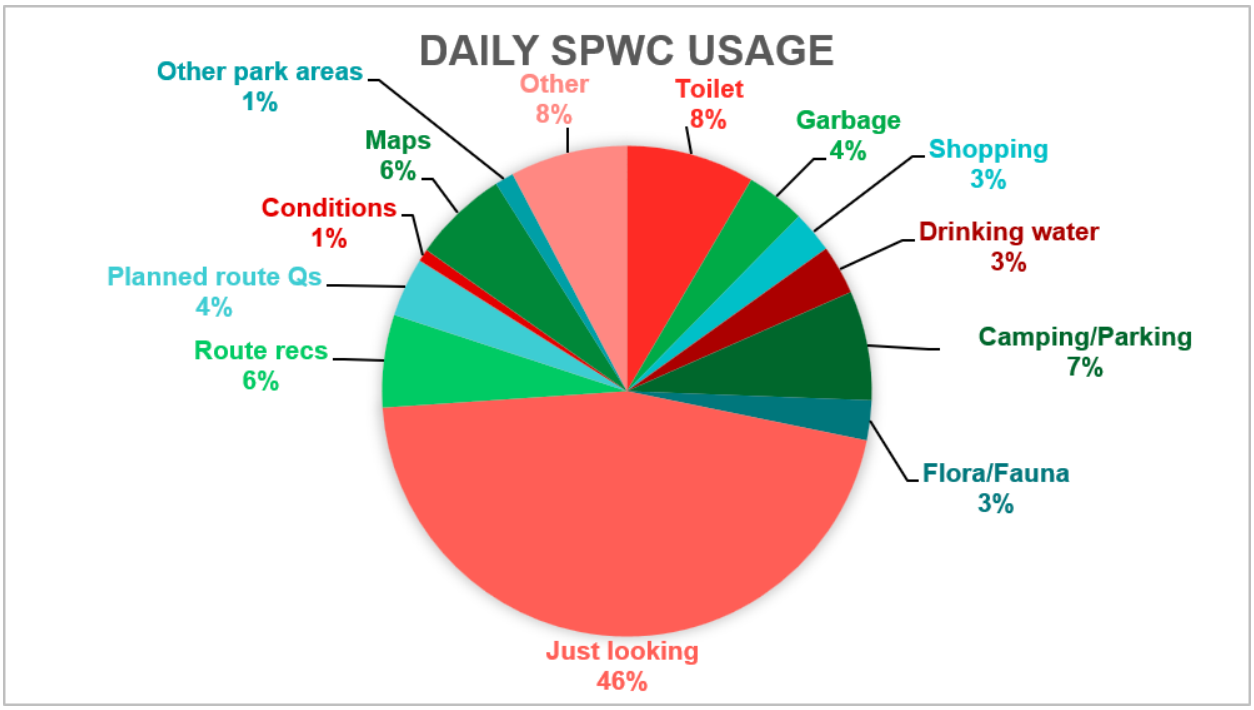
Strathcona Park Wilderness Centre: Paradise Meadows Trail-Head

The SPWC is the focal point for Visitor Information and Education on the Forbidden Plateau side of the Park. It was open between June 19th and October 9th in 2026, for a **total of 83 days:** 11 days in June, 31 days in July, 27 days in August, 10 days in September, 3 days in October. The Centre was ably staffed in July and August 7 days a week by three students (notably Jesse Anderson-Burchill in his fourth year with SWI, and Sable Gilmore in her third year), while the other days over the season were covered by 7

veteran Volunteers. **6023** visitors were recorded at the Centre, with a daily average of **73** (similar to last year's average and a significant increase from 2024's daily average of **57** over **86** days).

This year one of our CSJ staffers (Sable Gilmore) set up a survey to determine visitor usage of the Wilderness Centre, which will in future help those training staff and volunteers identify of what information and resources were most frequently requested.

Below are her results expressed in pie-chart format **- figure 1**



[Please note that the Toilets at Paradise Meadows are not located in the SPWC, but further down the path. Visitors tend to assume that our building contains both toilets and garbage facilities and are surprised to discover otherwise. At the end of the summer the two toilets at the Trailhead are no longer maintained by the BC Parks Contractor, as a result our unpaid volunteers bear the brunt of visitor complaints about the lack of toilet paper and general cleanliness.

Wheelchair & TrailRider Use at Paradise Meadow

At least 6 sets of visitors made use of the Wheelchairs for the Paradise Meadows & Centennial Boardwalks. The TrailRider was taken out on 5 occasions for day-trips up to Battleship Lake.

The Buttle Hut beside Park HQ at Buttle Lake

In the Buttle area of the Park, the Buttle Hut provides Visitor Information and Education.(See photos #2 & 3). It was open between June 22 and September 13 for **a total of 80** days, twice as many as last year, since we had one of our CSJ students working weekdays from June 22 to August 14, plus 8 volunteers at weekends, with veteran volunteer Jame McBeath staffing the Hut 32 days during the week and at weekends from June to mid-September. A **total of 2671** visitors were recorded for the 80 days (an average of 33 per day, up from 23.5 per day over 40 days last year), with 37% being visitors from outside Canada (by comparison less than 20% recorded at the SPWC on the east side of the Park.) This year's figures are the highest both in numbers of days open and numbers of visitors reported over the past 16 years.

Educational Activities and Public Outreach

Scheduled Interpretive Walks, Hikes, Presentations and Workshops

We continued this summer to offer a full summer programme of weekly interpretive walks and hikes, presentations and workshops. We started the season in early June with a Workshop on Nature Photography using an iPhone, but our Back-County Safety and First Aid Workshop slated for June 27 was postponed until July. Within the ongoing "**Discovering our Biodiversity"** series we held **2 Workshops** including the 8th Annual Subalpine Mycology Workshop and hosted **2 Presentations**: a) by researchers with Dan Strickland's Canada Jay Project on the ongoing study of the social dynamics within the 24 Canada Jay territories in Paradise Meadows and beyond (see photo #4) and b) by one of the CVRD's "Connected by Water" team on the importance of Strathcona Provincial Park for the Comox Valley's watershed. Our planned Workshop on "Flora in their Habitats" was cancelled due to the illness of the presenter. From late June to the end of September, we scheduled **7 Interpretive Walks** in Paradise Meadows and **12 Guided Hikes** on the Plateau and in the Buttle area (see photos #5 & #6). A total of 221 participated in these events. Our student Mateo Jaeckel, as Program Coordinator for a fifth

year, oversaw the schedules and handling of registration and waivers, as well as leading two hikes. Leaders included 7 Guest Presenters, 6 Volunteers, plus 5 Directors and 4 Students.

Brochures

As part of our educational mandate, we continued to distribute our Wilderness Code pamphlet setting out the general principles of *Leave No Trace*, with specific reference to Strathcona Provincial Park and our brochure about Volunteering with SWI, designed to encourage those who are familiar with the Park to consider using their love and knowledge of the Park to help visitors appreciate all that it has to offer. Through our general SWI brochure and our website, we invited hikers to send us or post on iNaturalist their wildlife observations. To reach out to families visiting the Meadows, we continued to hand out the "Exploration Bingo" Cards for kids and youth (5-9, 10-14, 15+) to fill with their observations of flora and fauna in the Meadows, the most popular by far being the 5-9 category. We provided small prizes for the completed cards. We also continued to distribute BC Parks Educational Booklets for Children and Youth.

SWI Data Collection Project on iNaturalist 2026

This year we again specifically assigned 2 of our students to assist in the on-going documentation of floral and faunal diversity in the Park. The students' observations are uploaded into the original *SWI Data Collection Project* on iNaturalist (https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/swi-data-collection), as well as our other projects devoted to specific organisms in the Park- Lichens, Fungi, Slime Moulds and Bryophytes and are thus made available to the public. From the work of our summer students, as well as input from Research Director L. Maingon, Strathcona Provincial Park is listed in the BC Parks iNaturalist Project (https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/bc-parks) with a total of **3644** species (as of October 26) and continues to be the best documented Park in the overall BC Parks Project on iNaturalist.

Family-oriented Programs and School Groups

Our 2 student Naturalist Interpreters led three Weekend walks specifically designed for families (see Photo #5) and throughout the summer many families picked up and returned our "Exploration Bingo" cards, the one specifically created for Kids 5-9 being by far the most popular with well over 100 distributed. (See Photo #9.)

Special Events at the Strathcona Park Wilderness Centre

June 20: **SWI Volunteer Appreciation Tea.**

To coincide with the opening of the SPWC, we invited volunteers from past years and those who might become an SWI volunteer in the future for refreshments at the Wilderness Centre, making it an occasion both to acknowledge the hard work of our volunteers in the 2026 Season, as well as to encourage new volunteers to learn more about what SWI does through engaging with our "veteran" volunteers and members of the Board. A group of about 30 enjoyed cake and refreshments in the shade of the Ruth Masters Nature Hall on hot June afternoon. (See Photo #7.)

September 26: 4th Annual Elders Memorial Hike and Tea.

Our final hike of the season, formerly the Chris Carter Memorial Hike and Tea, has morphed into the SWI Annual Elders Memorial Hike and Tea, to commemorate our illustrious founding elders and those long-time volunteers who have devoted their time and energy to promoting SWI's vision of educating the public about Strathcona Provincial Park over the past 31 years. This year, sadly, we said a final farewell to Steve Smith, one of the founding directors whose passion for the Park was an inspiration to all of us. The destination of the hike is a ridge, unofficially called the Chris Carter Look-Out, that affords a spectacular 270 degree view to the mountains of the Plateau including the Comox Glacier.
(See Photo #8.)

Funding Acknowledgements 2026

SWI thanks the following sources for funding received to support its programs in 2026.

BCPF's Parks Ambassador Programme
Canada Summer Jobs Programme
Comox Valley Regional District Rural Community Grant
Strathcona Regional District Grant in Aid.

2 Successful Fundraising Events held in the Spring at the Stan Hagen Theatre

March 6 - "**The Mountain Legacy Project**" - a slide presentation by Mary Sanseverino of the Alpine Club of Canada -Vancouver Island Section.

April 10 - The ever popular 29th annual **Vancouver International Mountain Film Festival.**

APPENDIX : PHOTOS ILLUSTRATING SWI SUMMER 2026

#1 Team of 6 CSJ students inside the SPWC



#2 Interior of Buttle Hut



#3 Student Staffer outside Buttle Hut



#4 Canada Jay Workshop with Dan Strickland and Andie Siemens



#5 Interpretive Walk in Paradise Meadows



#6 Guided Hike on Mt Elma



#7 Volunteer Appreciation Tea



#8 Elders Memorial Hlke



#9 “Exploration Bingo” Card for ages 5-9



