

Xsan: Small Trail To A Big Place

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The original name of the Skeena River is often given as *Xsan*. Neil Sterritt, however, in his recent history of the Gitksan people, *Mapping My Way Home*, tells us that the proper name of the river was *Xsi'yeen*; the name *Xsan* actually referred to a specific canyon on it.

The five kilometre-long stretch of *Xsan*, upriver from the village of Kispiox, runs straight north-south. It had a traditional fishery that was crucial for sustaining Kispiox. Sterritt quotes Niist/Charles Sampson, who lived from 1888 to 1963, as saying “there were so many smokehouses in the canyon that the sun was red from smoke during fishing season.”

Xsan is a beautiful and peaceful place. It's important when visiting there to remember that not only are there many traditional fishing sites here owned by specific houses, but also that much of the shore is designated reserve land.

To walk into *Xsan*, begin at the village of Kispiox, specifically at the Kispiox river bridge. Drive 5.5 km north on Kispiox Valley Road, and turn right on Swan Lake Road. Continue another 3.8 km until you pass Stokes Rd. on the right. 1 km farther you will find an old grassy track leading up on the right, just before the driveway of WoodGrain Farm. Park in the grassy track (which began life as a logging road in the 1970s) but don't block it.

Dogs must be leashed on the first kilometer of the trail, where you will be passing through private land.

Follow the old track past a gate, through some woods and across a field. (The track you want continues straight across the field: do not turn right or left.) In a mixed wood of cedar, birch, aspen and hemlock it winds its way gently uphill, passes through a broad saddle, and begins to descend. About 30 minutes in, and shortly after this descent begins, turn right off the old road onto a trail. Here there is a sign pointing right that says “To The Skeena.”

The trail now winds its way downhill, gently at first and then more steeply, until you are in solid cedar forest. You dead-end into another trail, and turn a sharp left. (If you have time, explore to the right as well...) You are now on what I can only assume is the historical trail that ran along this side of the Skeena, winding through the forest above the canyon cliffs, with periodic side trails down to the water. Follow this trail north for about 20 minutes, during which you may note, on either side, old pits. These may have been cache pits, where dried salmon would have been stored until it could be transported elsewhere.

A clear side trail leads down to a rocky beach, directly across from the mouth of Xsugwa'mahlit – Sidina Creek. Allow about one hour to get here, one hour to return.

This is a fascinating stretch of river, where rocky fingers reach out into the current creating immense eddies. Black moss and driftwood indicate the height of spring flood. In the maps prepared as evidence for the Delgamukw case, there are no fewer than eight house-specific fishing sites along the short straight stretch of the canyon you can see in front of you. Across the river and high above you, you can see the rocky crest of Gwin Wijix – Caribou Mountain. It is a good place to feel small.