Preface

There is no shortage of information about Cordilleran fossils. Over the past century, paleontologists have published hundreds of papers in scientific journals, as well as many reports and monographs on their research on the paleobiologic and geologic significance of fossils collected from localities throughout British Columbia. Nevertheless, this information is reaching only a limited audience. Written for geologists and paleontologists, these publications reside in the libraries of large universities and are not generally available in regional libraries or bookstores. As a result, the broad audience of curious naturalists does not read them.

The information about Cordilleran fossils contained in these specialized publications should, in fact, be of interest to many residents and visitors to British Columbia. After all, each paper or report is a window through which the reader can view strange inhabitants of ancient ecosystems from the distant geological past. This is local history, to be sure, but it is local history writ large.

Convinced that Cordilleran fossil plants and animals are potentially as interesting to BC naturalists as are living plants and animals, in the fall of 1992 I wrote to about two dozen paleontologists actively working in the province with a proposal to compile a multi-authored book on the fossils of British Columbia. The book was to be written in accessible English to reach a broad audience and, of course, it had to be well illustrated. I thought it was important to cover the full range of BC fossils through the entire Phanerozoic Eon – familiar groups such as dinosaurs, mastodons, trilobites, and ammonoids, to be sure, but also little-appreciated fossil groups such as conodonts, brachiopods, radiolarians, pollen, and insects. I recognized that a single book could not possibly deal with all of the thousands of different fossils known in the province, nor with all paleontological themes and biological aspects presented by these fossils. But I believed that it could explore the nature, significance,
and meaning of the fossil groups that are particularly well represented in the rocks of British Columbia. The response I received from the paleontologists was gratifying and overwhelmingly positive. This volume on Cordilleran fossils is the result.

Despite good intentions, the coverage of BC fossil groups of different ages is not complete. I had hoped to include chapters on Vendian multicellular fossils; Paleozoic shelly fossils such as brachiopods, corals, and cephalopods; Permian and Carboniferous fusilinid foraminiferans; Triassic marine reptiles; and Cenozoic (including Pleistocene) mollusks. But for a variety of reasons – not the least being the diminishing numbers of paleontologists in Canadian universities and geological surveys – this goal was not possible.

This book has been prepared under the aegis of the British Columbia Paleontological Alliance, an association of amateur and professional paleontologists recently formed to increase understanding of fossils of the Cordillera. In assembling and editing the book, I acknowledge, first and foremost, the paleontologists who considered it important to communicate their knowledge and enthusiasm about various fossil groups to a broad audience. Their contributions here illustrate a notable conceptual distinction, namely, that ‘popularize’ does not mean ‘trivialize.’

The project was supported by a grant from the Canadian Geological Foundation, a highly unusual private agency that supports endeavours that raise public interest, understanding, and involvement with the geological sciences. I am grateful to Richard Hebda of the Royal British Columbia Museum and Peter Milroy of UBC Press for supporting and encouraging this project from its inception. And finally, I am greatly indebted to Louise Bell of Denman Island, whose talent and editorial insights have been instrumental in converting the submitted manuscripts into a unified whole.