Petersburg: A “Whale” of a Place for Wildlife Viewing

Drive the roads around Mitkof Island, looking for bears and moose along the way. Catch a glimpse of trumpeter swans during their annual migration. Paddle a kayak amid seal-dotted icebergs or humpback whales. Wander the streets of downtown, watching for sea lions and bald eagles, and staying alert for a Sitka black-tailed deer watching you. Plan ahead for dramatic whale watching in Frederick Sound and tours to Leconte Bay.

Tlingit people settled in the Petersburg area because of the rich bounty of the marine waters. In the late nineteenth century, Norwegian immigrants were drawn to the region for the same reason, and the community’s “Little Norway” festival celebrates this Norwegian heritage each May. Fish is still a major part of life in Petersburg, but after spending a few days in town, you’ll come to appreciate the bounty of the wildlife viewing as well.

For information on tours and lodging, consult the Petersburg Visitor Information Center. Visit www.petersburg.org or call 907-772-4636. In Petersburg, stop by the visitor center on First and Frim Street.
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The mountains, trails, islands and waterways of Alaska’s Rainforest Islands: convenient connections between these three communities, Alaska’s coastal wildlife viewing landscapes. (from a tidewater glacier to caves with ancient animal bones), cultures, and old-fashioned Alaska hospitality, combine to make Petersburg a very special place. The wildlife viewing trails are wild lands. For safety, take a guided tour or take a first aid kit and a means of communication. Visit www.alaska.org/parks/safety.

Traveling Safely in Bear Country (All of Petersburg is bear country)

Making noise (sing, clap, talk) while you travel will reduce your chances of surprising a bear. Be alert along noisy streams, in thick brush, and when visibility is poor. Always keep your belongings (backpack, food, fish, etc.) with you or in bear-proof storage.

If you see a bear, stay calm. If the bear does not notice you, quietly leave, keeping your eyes on the bear. If it does notice you, face the bear, wave your arms and talk to it calmly. If it approaches you, stand your ground. Never run from a bear.

Never run from a bear.

STAY SAFE!
The mountains, trails, islands and waterways of the Alaska Coastal Wildlife Viewing Trail are wild lands. For safety, take a guided tour or take a companion, let someone know your plans and be prepared for emergencies with spare clothes, a first aid kit and a means of communication. Visit the Alaska State Parks’ Staying Safe web page for details:

www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/safety.

Wildlife Viewing Tips

Keep a Low Profile. Enjoy watching animals’ natural behaviors. Resist the temptation to try to attract their attention with sounds. If your presence is causing an animal to stop feeding or act restless, give it more space. Be especially respectful of nesting and denning areas, rookeries and calving grounds, and critical feeding areas.

Time it Right. Dawn and dusk are when many wildlife species are most active. Midday warmth energizes dragonflies and butterflies and creates thermal for eagles and hawks. Low tides expose tidepools and a wealth of food for birds and mammals.

Look for Clues. Tracks, droppings, trails and twigs tell stories of wildlife in the area – what they are eating, where they live and when they passed through. Noticing and reading these clues adds richness to wildlife viewing. Tracking books and workshops will help you.

Help Keep Wildlife Wild. Never feed wild animals. Doing so can cause them to associate people with food, which can cause trouble. Human food can also make them sick.

Be Considerate of Others. People use and enjoy Alaska’s wildlife in a variety of ways. Respect private property and give hunters, anglers and others plenty of space.

Watchable Wildlife “Fun Facts”

Tiny Bubbles: Bubblenet feeding is a cooperative feeding behavior seen in Southeast Alaska, but uncommon elsewhere. A school of fish, such as herring, is corralled into a tight ball. One whale dives beneath the school, circling and blowing bubbles. The bubbles rise through the water column as a kind of disorienting curtain surrounding and confusing the school of fish. As this ring of bubbles reaches the surface, the group of whales lunges up through the prey, gulping tons of water and fish.

Alaska’s Rainforest Islands: for a diverse complement of wildlife viewing, landscapes (from a tidewater glacier to caves with ancient animal bones), cultures, and old-fashioned Alaska hospitality, combine to make Petersburg a very special place. The wildlife viewing trails are wild lands. For safety, take a guided tour or take a first aid kit and a means of communication. Visit www.alaska.org/parks/safety.

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Watch for sea lions in Petersburg’s harbors.
Keep your eyes open for wildlife in downtown Petersburg. Sitka black-tailed deer are used to the presence of humans, and close encounters are common during the spring and summer. Sandy Beach Road, the Hungry Point Trail, and areas around the ballfield are good places to look. Scan the harbors, especially the South Harbor, for Steller sea lions. Bald eagles soar overhead throughout the summer. Watch for Barrow's goldeneyes, harlequin ducks, and other birds. Interpretive signs in the shelter provide information on bird identification and humpback information. Check with the Visitor Information Center or look for posted signs around town for information on last-minute bookings.

Petersburg's Marine Mammal Center has displays and an interactive computer terminal with information about the marine mammals in the area. Check with the Visitor Information Center for information on hours and location of this growing center, or visit their website at www.psmmc.org. Guided whale watching trips by kayak are also available; check with the Visitor Information Center for information.

Harbor seals congregate and pup in Leconte Bay, where the ice deters their chief predator, the killer whale, from entering. Look for dozens of isolated mother-pup pairs between late May and early June. During these months, a few bald eagles opportunistically hunt the newborn pups. Near the end of July, mothers and pups separate and additional seals enter the bay. It is possible to see hundreds of seals dotting the icebergs during this time. Day boat tours and multi-day kayak trips enter Leconte Bay throughout the summer, providing a chance to look for wildlife and enjoy views of the Leconte Glacier, the southernmost active tidewater glacier in North America.

In addition to spending time in town and on the water, consider taking a drive on the Roads Around Mitkof Island. The sides of the road are filled with grasses, low shrubs, wildflowers, and succulents that make good food for many animals. Keep an alert and maintain a respectful distance. Outside of May and June, eagle sightings at the park are possible but far less common, as most eagles are elsewhere nesting or looking for food. Eagle's Roost Park is just north of the Petersburg Fisheries building along Nordic Drive.

Petersburg is a two miles east of downtown, after Nordic Drive changes to Sandy Beach Road. This covered viewing area has three fixed binoculars and is one of the best shore-based places in Petersburg to look for humpback and killer whales. June through September is the best time to search for humpback whales here, with viewing chances a little higher in July and August. The likelihood of seeing killer whales is less predictable and more opportunistic. Look through binoculars for scoters, pigeon guillemots, and other birds. Interpretive signs in the shelter provide information on bird identification and humpback whales.

While whales are sometimes visible from Outlook Park, a Whale Watching trip provides more consistent, and often more spectacular, viewing. Boats head to the area where Frederick Sound meets Stephens Passage, where hundreds of humpback whales feed in the summer months. Along with humpbacks, look for killer whales, Dall's porpoises, harbor seals, Steller sea lions, scoters and marbled murrelets. Whale watching trips start running in May, with whales seen on most trips. The prime months for whale watching near Petersburg are July and August, when most humpbacks have returned from their winter grounds in Hawaii. Boats take six people per trip, and booking months in advance is advised. It is sometimes, though not often, possible to find same- or next-day space on a tour while in town. Check with the Visitor Information Center or look for posted signs around town for information on last-minute bookings.

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Hiking trails

Guided boat tours

* Not all boats are accessible, ask when booking

+ Multi-day trips allow for the richest experience.

At mile 16 of the Mitkof Highway is the Trumpeter Swan Observatory. Located along the waters of Blind Slough. Between mid-October and December, hundreds of trumpeter swans pass through to feed and rest here before resuming their southward migration, and up to 75 swans overwinter here. An enclosed wheelchair accessible viewing shelter allows wildlife watchers to observe the swans without disrupting them, which is critical during migration and the difficult winter months. Bring binoculars or a spotting scope for optimal viewing. This is also a good summertime birding spot; look for mergansers, mallards, geese, and bald eagles.

Twenty-one miles from downtown Petersburg, along the Three Lakes Loop road, is the Three Lakes Trail, which leads to Sand, Hill, and Cone lakes. Look for moose at any time during the year, and black bears in the summer. Tracks, scat and markings on trees let you know bears or moose are in the area. Beavers are also found here, changing the landscape with their dams and lodges. Sandhill cranes occasionally visit these lakes during their annual spring and fall migrations. This 4-mile trail is mostly boardwalks over gradual terrain, but does have steep sections.

There are additional, sometimes remote, wildlife viewing sites near Petersburg. The Falls Creek Salmon Ladder near mile 11 of the Mitkof Highway is a popular salmon viewing site. USDA Forest Service cabinets dot the area, each providing a unique wildlife viewing experience. Boat charters take visitors to Thomas Bay, and guided kayak trips visit Petersburg Creek on Kupreanof Island. Check with the Visitor Information Center for information on these sites.