Sitka sits perched on the outside edge of the Inside Passage. This proximity to the open Pacific Ocean attracts marine mammals and sea birds throughout the summer, and also makes the area a "last stop" for many migrating humpback whales in the fall and early winter. Humpbacks are still plentiful in Sitka's waters long after they have left the rest of Southeast Alaska, and an annual festival celebrates this late season abundance each November.

For information on tours and lodging, consult the Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau. Visit their website at www.sitka.org or call 907-747-5940.

Humpback whales feeding in the waters off shore. Stroll amid the historic buildings of downtown Sitka, keeping an eye out for eagles, sea lions and other wildlife. Visit a wind-swept island that hosts hundreds of thousands of nesting seabirds each summer. Enjoy the bustle of activity — from both people and wildlife — during an annual springtime herring spawn. Venture away from town to look for wildlife on trails and scenic overlooks. Visit a wind-swept island that hosts hundreds of thousands of nesting seabirds each summer. Enjoy the bustle of activity — from both people and wildlife — during an annual springtime herring spawn. Venture away from town to look for wildlife on trails and scenic overlooks.
of the Inside Passage

Sitka: The Outside Edge

While usually spotted in trees or in the air, eagles are also seen on rocks near the water’s surface.

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Watch humpback whales feeding in the waters off shore. Stroll amid the historic buildings of downtown Sitka, keeping an eye out for eagles, sea lions and other wildlife.
Start your wildlife walking tour in Downtown Sitka 1 by heading east on Lincoln Street along Crescent Harbor. Look for Stellar sea lions in the harbor, then stop at the Sheldon Jackson College fish hatchery and aquarium to view undersea life. Continue along the shore to Sitka National Historic Park (often called Totem Park) to view wildlife carved into totem poles along the park trail. Stand on the Indian River footbridge in the park for pink salmon viewing between July and October. Follow the trail to Sawmill Creek Road and the Alaska Raptor Center, a bird rehabilitation facility with tours available throughout the summer. The center is staffed and open to visitors year-round. Return to the center of town along Sawmill Creek Road bike path.

Balanced eagles congregate at Turnaround Park and New Thomsen Harbor 2 on the northeast outskirts of town from early May to mid-July. Look for great blue herons feeding at the water’s edge throughout the year, and arctic terns, mink and river otters in the cove at Turnaround Park.

The Halibut Point State Recreation Site 3 is a good spot from which to view Sitka’s annual springtime herring spawn. Watch for bald eagles, red-breasted sandpipers, hairy woodpeckers, varied thrushes, marbled murrelets, scoters, black oystercatchers and other birds throughout the summer. Halibut Point State Recreation Site is four miles west of town on Halibut Point Road.

Take a boat tour on the protected waters of Sitka Sound 4 in search of marine mammals. The Pacific Ocean’s Japanese current slightly warms the waters of Sitka Sound, making it a productive area for the fish and small organisms that are food for whales and other wildlife. The confluence of open ocean and protected waters allows marine mammals to feed near the relative safety of deeper water. Islands dot the Sound, providing pell’s beds for sea otters and safe haulouts for Stellar sea lions and harbor seals. Humpback, gray, killer and even a few minke whale sightings are possible throughout the summer. Humback can also be seen here in large numbers between mid-September and mid-January, when whale sightings are less common elsewhere in Southeast Alaska. The area is thought to be a last feeding stop for humpbacks before migrating to winter breeding and calving waters in Hawaii.

St. Lazaria Island 5 is a lighthouse at the outer edge of Sitka Sound. This 65-acre island is part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and is home to over half million breeding seabirds, including cliff-nesters like common and thick-billed murres, and burrow nesters such as rhinoceros auklets and fork-tailed and Loach storm petrels. Glaucous-winged gull, ancient murrelets, Cassin’s auklets, pelagic cormorants, tufted puffins and black oystercatchers also nest on or near the island. Bald eagles and peregrine falcons circle the skies over the island.

St. Lazaria Island was formed by a vertical upheaval of magma from an undersea vent adjacent to Mount Edgecumbe, the volcano on Kruzof Island visible from Sitka. This means that deep water surrounds the island, allowing for good viewing from boats (especially with binoculars). Tours are offered throughout the summer and depart from Crescent Harbor. Advance booking is recommended, though last minute bookings are possible. Check with the Visitor’s Bureau for more information. You may encounter rough water, and tours sometimes are cancelled or shortened due to especially stormy seas.

A variety of habitats can be found at Starrigavan Recreation Area, 1/2 of a mile beyond the ferry terminal at the end of Halibut Point Road. A printed self-guided walking tour is available at most of the trails and headlands, and matches interpretive text to markers along both the Estuary Life Trail and the Forest and Muskeg Trail. Look for great blue herons, bald eagles, common mergansers, belted kingfishers, common scoters, black oystercatchers and many other birds along the Estuary Life Trail, a barrier-free 1/2-mile boardwalk. Coho and pink salmon return to Starrigavan creek from July to September, cliff nesters like common and thick-billed murres, and arctic grayling spawn in the outlet stream at Beaver Lake.

Sitka WhaleFest is held the first weekend in November and combines perfectly with the Bald Eagle Festival in Haines (www.baldeaglefestival.org) or call 907-747-7964 for more information about this three-day festival, including a schedule of events.

Sitka WhaleFest is the first whale festival held in the United States designed to educate and entertain the general public on the relationship between whales and humans. Sitka WhaleFest is held the first weekend in November and combines perfectly with the Bald Eagle Festival in Haines (www.baldeaglefestival.org) or call 907-747-7964 for more information about this three-day festival, including a schedule of events.

The Sitka WhaleFest features cutting-edge research presentations about whales and marine mammals by local, national and international experts, whale watching cruises in Sitka Sound, and art and music events. Visit www.sitkawhalefest.org or call 907-747-7964 for more information about this three-day festival, including a schedule of events.

Look for Steller sea lions in the harbor, then stop at the Alaska Raptor Center, a bird rehabilitation facility with tours available throughout the summer. The center is staffed and open to visitors year-round. Return to the center of town along Sawmill Creek Road bike path.

Downtown Sitka 1

Turnaround Park / Harbor 2

Halibut Point State Recreation Site 3

Sitka Sound 4

St. Lazaria Island 5

Starrigavan Recreation Area 6

Whale Park 7

Sea Lion Cove 8

1. Downtown Sitka
2. Turnaround Park / Harbor
3. Halibut Point State Recreation Site
4. Sitka Sound
5. St. Lazaria Island
6. Starrigavan Recreation Area
7. Whale Park
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A hydrophone at the park picks up underwater noise; listen live in the shelter closest to the rooms, or select from available whale sound recordings. “Whale Radio” – 88.1 on the FM dial – broadcasts the hydrophone so you can tune in from your car or hotel, then drive to the park for a look if you hear something interesting. Whale Park is four miles east of downtown on Sawmill Creek Road. This is an especially good spot to look for humpback whales between September and January.

Sea Lion Cove 8

Tours combine boat trips through Salisbury Sound with hiking opportunities at the cove. Watch for sea otters and other marine life on the boat ride, and then for bears, bald eagles and other wildlife while hiking. Tours depart for Sea Lion Cove during the summer. Check with the Visitor’s Bureau for information.

Looking for more? Ask the Visitor’s Bureau about additional tours by kayak, boat, bike or foot. Chances of seeing wildlife are good on many of these tours. Watch arctic grayling spawn in the outlet stream at Beaver Lake between mid-May and the end of June. Turn left on the gravel road across from the pulp mill at mile seven of Sawmill Creek Road to reach the lake. USDA Forest Service cabins scattered around the Sitka area make for rustic, yet comfortable, wildlife watching bases. Cabins rent for $25-$45 a night, and most have bunk beds and a wood or stovetop for heat. Check with the Sitka Ranger District at 907-747-6671 for information.