



## Sitka: The Outside Edge of the Inside Passage

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. 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.

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](http://www.sitka.org) or call 907-747-5940.



From the bears of Hyder to the bald eagles of Haines, the whales of Frederick Sound to the birds of the Stikine River, the Inside Passage Segment of the Alaska Coastal Wildlife Viewing Trail highlights over 70 wildlife viewing sites in and near the communities of Gustavus, Haines, Juneau, Ketchikan, Petersburg, Prince of Wales Island, Sitka, Skagway and Wrangell.



*Alaska Marine Highway*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Wildlife Conservation and  
Restoration Program

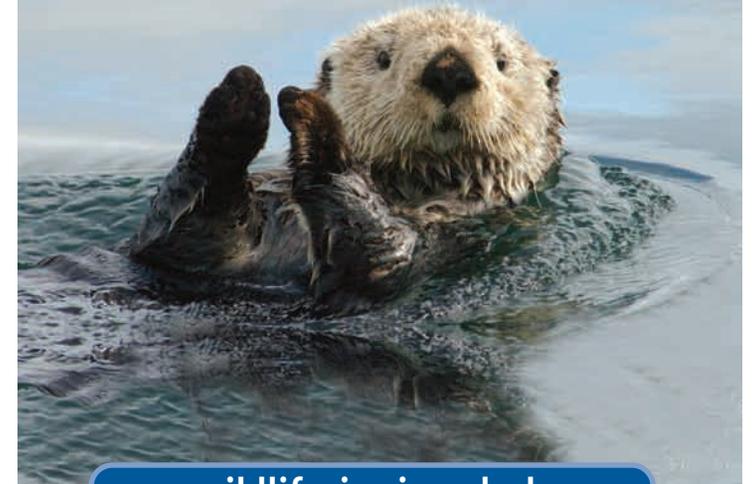
*All public partners  
are equal opportunity  
providers and employers.*

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
about the Alaska Coastal Wildlife Viewing Trail, or to  
browse through wildlife viewing sites in other  
communities, visit [wildlifeviewing.alaska.gov](http://wildlifeviewing.alaska.gov)

*Otter cover photo © Randall Davis.  
Bird raft, auklet, eagle, volcano and whale fluke photos © Jamie Karnik, ADF&G.  
Puffin photo - Donna Dewhurst, USFWS. All other photos © ADF&G.*

# SITKA

# Wildlife Viewing Guide



[www.wildlifeviewing.alaska.gov](http://www.wildlifeviewing.alaska.gov)

Alaska Department of  
Fish and Game  
**Watch Our Wildlife**

## 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 thermals 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.



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

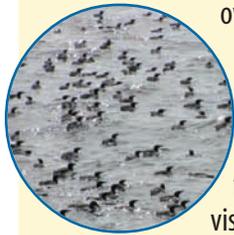


## Watchable Wildlife “Fun Facts”

**Herring is Believing:** Pacific herring lay up to 20,000 sticky eggs (or roe) per fish in protected intertidal and subtidal waters. Spawning in Sitka Sound typically happens in late March to early April. Herring move into the area weeks before. After the lean months of winter, these herring and their eggs herald the arrival of spring for birds, marine mammals, and people.



**Packing and Stacking Birds:** Imagine over 7,500 birds nesting on an area the size of a football field – and then double that number with chicks, and repeat this over 65 acres. This density and sheer number of hungry birds is supported by St. Lazaria Island's proximity to the open ocean resources. Sitka Sound protects the birds nesting on St. Lazaria from terrestrial predators. To prevent visitors from crushing burrows, the island is off-limits to people, except for a small research team that works to understand more about the diet, behavior and health of the birds.



**A Rhinoceros in Southeast Alaska?!** Near Sitka it is possible to see a rhinoceros. A rhinoceros *auklet*, that is. These birds get their name from the “horn” that extends from their bright orange bills. Rhinoceros auklets are sometimes mistaken for tufted puffins, which can also be seen near Sitka, but the birds' summer plumage show definite distinctions. Puffins have a mostly white face, while rhinoceros auklets have more of a black face with some white streaks. Sitka's proximity to open ocean and the availability of boat tours to nearby Saint Lazaria Island provide birders with a relatively easy way to add these birds to their birding “life lists.”



## Traveling Safely in Bear Country

(All of Sitka 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.**

If a bear is surprised at close distance, it may feel threatened and act defensively, especially if it has cubs or food. **Stand your ground!** If the bear strikes or bites you, lie on your front, protect your face and neck and remain still. In rare instances, bears may be predatory. Fight back if the attack is prolonged.



### 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](http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/safety).



# SITKA

## Wildlife Viewing Sites



Start your wildlife walking tour in **Downtown Sitka** **1** by heading east on Lincoln Street along Crescent Harbor. Look for Steller 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.

Bald 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 sapsuckers, 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.

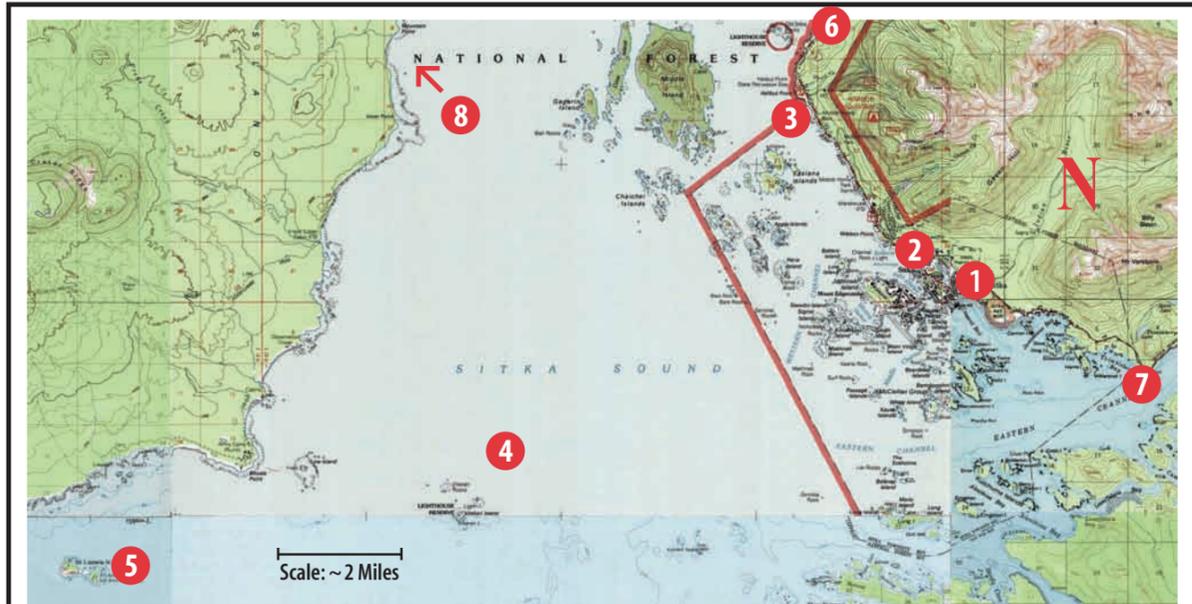
Take a boat tour on the protected waters of **Sitka Sound** **4** in search of marine mammals. The Pacific Ocean's Japanese current slightly warms the waters of Sitka Sound, making it a productive area for the fish and small organisms that are food for whales and other wildlife. The confluence of open ocean and protected waters allows marine mammals to feed near the relative safety of deeper water. Islands dot the Sound, providing kelp beds for sea otters and safe haulouts for Steller sea lions and harbor seals. Humpback, gray, killer and even a few minke whale sightings are possible throughout the summer. Humpbacks 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** looms like a sentinel 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 Leach's storm petrels. Glaucous-winged gulls, 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.



Look for tufted puffins at St. Lazaria Island

St. Lazaria Island was formed by a vertical upwelling 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.



1. Downtown Sitka	♿	🚶	2 – 4 hours
2. Turnaround Park / Harbor	♿		1 – 2 hours
3. Halibut Point State Recreation Site	♿		1 – 2 hours
4. Sitka Sound	♿	💰	2 hours – full day
5. St. Lazaria Island	♿	💰	2 – 4 hours
6. Starrigavan Recreation Area	♿	1	2 hours – full day
7. Whale Park	♿		2 hours – half day
8. Sea Lion Cove	💰		Half – full day

- ♿ Wheelchair accessible\*
- 💰 Entry or tour fee
- 🗺 Interpretive signs/guides
- 🚶 Hiking trails
- 🚤 Guided boat tours
- 🏕 Camping in area

\* Not all boats are wheelchair accessible, ask when booking.  
 1 Fee for camping. Trail use is free.

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A variety of habitats can be found at **Starrigavan Recreation Area**, **6** <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> 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 trailheads and parking areas, 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, canvasbacks, mallards, buffleheads and many other birds along the **Estuary Life Trail**, a barrier-free <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-mile boardwalk. Coho and pink salmon return to Starrigavan creek from July

through September, attracting the occasional river otter or brown bear. Watch for Sitka black-tailed deer and brown bears on the <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-mile **Forest and Muskeg Trail**. The walking guide has rich information about the plant life found along this trail. The **Mosquito Cove Trail** is a 1 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-mile loop with many stairs that leads through spruce-hemlock forest and along the shoreline. Check with the

Sitka Ranger District at 907-747-6671 for a schedule of interpretive talks at the outdoor amphitheater on the Mosquito Cove trail in the summer.

Scan for the blow of a humpback whale and the splash of a sea lion from the overlooks at **Whale Park**. **7** Covered viewing shelters, public-use fixed binoculars, interpretive signs and life-sized whale art make this more than an ordinary city park. A hydrophone at the park picks up



undersea noise; listen live in the shelter closest to the restrooms, 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 on 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 oil stove for heat. Check with the Sitka Ranger District at 907-747-6671 for information.

### Sitka WhaleFest

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](http://www.sitkawhalefest.org) or call 907-747-7964 for more information about this three-day festival, including a schedule of events.

Sitka WhaleFest is held the first weekend in November and combines perfectly with the Bald Eagle Festival in Haines ([www.baldeaglefestival.org](http://www.baldeaglefestival.org)) and an Inside Passage ferry trip for a fun and educational wintertime wildlife watching experience.