

Land Based Whale Watching Guide for San Juan Island



Introduction

Welcome to San Juan Island! This is a great place to observe local marine mammals including the famous Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKWs). Although whale watching boats can take you to where these animals are located, many times you can witness amazing sights from right here on the island! This guide will assist those who are not familiar with the island in finding these marine mammals from shore.

Remember that many locations on the island are private property. This guide will list only public viewing sites. Please do not trespass on private property!

Recommended Equipment



1. Binoculars/Spotting Scope
 - a. Many times, the killer whales are far offshore and can't be seen without magnification.
2. Camera
 - a. For the best results, a camera should have at least a 300mm lens in all but the closest situations. A high shutter speed (1/800 or faster) should be used to minimize motion blur. Use the fastest shutter speed available depending on lighting conditions.
3. Phone/Tablet
 - a. Map applications can be used for basic island road navigation.
 - b. If you are not using the [NPS app](#), downloading it can take you to all of these sites c.
 - c. Remember to check if you have international roaming with your cell phone plan. When on

the west side of the island, your phone will pick up Canadian cell phone towers, causing you to roam internationally. Using the settings on your phone, either switch off international roaming, or put your phone in “airplane mode”.

Resources

- [Orca ID Phone Application](#)
- [Transient Killer Whale Catalog](#)
- [Orcasound Call Catalog](#)
- Online Cameras
 - [Lime Kiln Point State Park](#)
 - [DestiCam](#)
 - [Port of Friday Harbor](#)
- Internet Connected Hydrophones
 - [Lime Kiln Hydrophone](#)
 - Orcasound [Haro Hydrophone](#)
 - Simres [Hydrophone](#)

Etiquette and Responsibilities

Do

- [Learn the rules for whale watching](#)
- Report dead, injured or stranded marine mammals
 - West Coast Region Stranding Hotline: 1-866-767-6114
 - U.S. Coast Guard VHF Channel 16
- Report whale harassment and violations
 - NOAA Enforcement Hotline 1-800-853-1964
- Clean up after yourself and your pets
- Stick to trails
- Use all your information resources to have a successful viewing
- Watch for deer in the roadway, especially in the evening
- Look for whale watching boats
- Check your phone’s international roaming settings when on the west side
- Give yourself 60 minutes of travel time to check in for your ferry
- Have a great time!

Don't

- Trespass on private property
- Park illegally
- Stop on the roadway

San Juan Island Viewing Locations

Visiting with Safety and Politeness

There are many public whale viewing locations on San Juan Island. There are some parts of San Juan Island where viewing is not possible as there may be no public place that is adjacent to the water. Do not trespass on private property. Avoid dangerous areas such as the edge of cliffs or narrow road shoulders. Be a good steward of nature and stick to trails while being sure not to disrupt wildlife. Remember to pick up any items left behind and to clean up after your pets.

If you're driving and happen to spot wildlife, don't stop on the roadway. Instead, pull over to legal parking. During sightings on the west side of the island, parking spaces can fill up quickly. If you can't find parking, [Lime Kiln Point State Park](#) and [San Juan County Park](#) have large parking lots. Don't speed to try to "catch up" with killer whales moving around the island. Be wary of the significant deer and fox population which tends to be on the roadway during afternoons and evenings. In the peak visiting months, there are many bicycles and mopeds on the road, be wary of these.

This guide is organized from Northern sites on the West Side of San Juan Island headed southward to give you a sense of where whales can be found geographically.

San Juan County Park

If the killer whales are coming north, up the west side of the Island and past the Lime Kiln Lighthouse, County Park is the next publicly available spot to view them. Some island kayak tours depart from Smallpox Bay in County Park. The park has a good view north up to Mosquito Bay and west across the border to Canada

The space between the park and Low Island is very shallow and normally killer whales don't cross between them.

If the killer whales are headed south, the next publicly available viewing area would be Lime Kiln Point State Park. If the killer whales are headed north, there isn't a good viewing area available, unless they enter Mosquito Pass into Roche Harbor, which is rare.

Lime Kiln Point State Park



Lime Kiln is the *premier location* for viewing killer whales when they are on the West side of San Juan Island. Among the park's many amenities are designated viewing areas, an interpretive center, and the lighthouse itself. During peak season, docents are available to assist with viewing, sightings, information, and questions. Parking passes can be purchased using the machines, or from the Interpretive Center if it is open. The park also has an internet connected hydrophone and live streaming camera that allows you to see and listen to whales remotely

Westside Land Bank Parking Area

Just south of Lime Kiln Point State Park on Westside Road are the three Land Bank parking areas. You can view whales from the parking area or walk down the trail to watch for whales closer to the water. Killer whales will often pass very close to land here. Watch out for sheer cliff edges. Be careful not to trespass on private property; the land bank area is bordered by private land.

American Camp

Our park is an incredibly historic place, but it's also an ideal place for whale watching. When the killer whales are passing the Salmon Banks on the West side of the island, they can be seen from [South Beach](#). Normally killer whales stay in deeper water, so they don't come up close to this beach.

When the killer whales are in [Griffin Bay](#), they can be spotted by looking north from [Redoubt Road](#).

With a good pair of binoculars, they can be seen as far as Turn Rock at the north end of Griffin Bay. Be sure to keep an eye out for foxes and eagles while visiting the park.

There is more information at the American Camp Visitor's Center during peak season. Tread lightly on National Park grounds: stay on designated trails!

Cattle Point



This is the southernmost tip of San Juan Island. Transient killer whales (also called Bigg's killer whales) are attracted to the seals and sea lions in this area which are their only source of food.

The proximity of Lopez Island makes this a very narrow pass. If killer whales are in the area, chances are this will be a great viewing area, as you have a close view of the animals traveling through this narrow passage. Look for harbor seals and sea birds on Goose Island, and Steller's sea lions and bald eagles on the Whale Rocks.

This area consists of the [Cattle Point Lighthouse Reservation](#) and the Cattle Point Interpretive Area (Washington State Parks). Picnic tables and stairs down to the beach allow you to get closer to the marine landscape. A large parking lot has free parking for 15 minutes at the interpretive area. Limited shoulder parking is available at the lighthouse reservation.

East Side: These locations on the East Side of the island are ordered from South to North, allowing easy access as you head back up the island.

Jackson Beach Park

If the killer whales are passing Griffin Bay, Jackson Beach Park has a good overall view of them. Usually, killer whales stay closer to Lopez Island, so close encounters at Jackson Beach Park are rare.

Friday Harbor

Good viewing locations in Friday Harbor are:

- The foot of Spring Street
- The Port of Friday Harbor marina
- Overlook Park at the end of West St.
- The Whale Museum parking lot
- The parking spaces at the top of First St N.

Reuben Tarte County Park



This is the best viewing location for when the killer whales are passing the northeast side of San Juan Island through President's Channel. This park is primarily a kayak launch point and only offers a few parking spots for disabled drivers. All other parking is at the top of the hill by the gated entrance, so you must walk down the steep hill. Note that there is very limited turn around space at the bottom of the hill, so if you drive a large vehicle, it's suggested that you don't drive down.