

*This forms the bulk of the  
Chapter brief to be submitted  
to Cabot this week. For your reference.*

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## The Natural Features and Recreational Opportunities on Sidney Island

We seek provincial park status for Sidney Island because it clearly offers recreational opportunities and natural features of provincial significance, not found within other parks in the Gulf Islands region. For an island of its size (2000 acres, 5 miles in length) and easily within day-use range of a large population center, Sidney Island displays a surprisingly high degree of naturalness. Though only about 3 miles east of the Saanich peninsula, Sidney's salt water marshes and foreshore zones provide valuable habitat for a large concentration of overwintering waterfowl and migrating shorebirds. Its extensive sand beaches and plant communities located on deep marine deposits are attractive features not commonly duplicated elsewhere in the Gulf Islands.

### Marine Features

The most immediately striking feature of Sidney Island is the extent of its beaches and intertidal areas. Nearly one-half of the island's 13 mile shoreline is bordered by sand beaches. At the north end, active deposition has resulted in the formation (and growth) of a long, narrow sand spit and a sand hook about 1 mile in length. The hook supports a sand dune complex and protects a large lagoon which has a rich intertidal area and shallow offshore sand flats highly productive of edible crabs. (Sidney Spit Marine Park presently encompasses the lagoon and about 200 acres of land, including the spit but not the hook.) Salt water marshes within the lagoon and adjacent the spit and other stretches of sand beach provide important shallow-water habitat for overwintering ducks and migrating shorebirds. The elusive black brant, attracted by eel grass in these areas, stop over on Sidney to feed during their spring migration to the Arctic breeding grounds. Four or five species of clams also live in the intertidal areas, including the highly prized geoducks, cockles, and butter clams.

Whereas clams are readily collected at low tide, visitors catch the crabs in deeper water with traps, dip-nets, or by scuba diving. Picnicking, camping, sunbathing, and beach combing (yielding driftwood, sand dollars and other shells) are encouraged within the small existing park. Swimming in the ocean is only feasible on hot summer days when the incoming tide is warmed by beach sands baking in the sun.

Outside of Sidney Spit Park excellent opportunities exist on the rest of the island for exploring long stretches of sand beaches and more rugged coastline having a rocky shore or beaches of different textures. For the photographer and naturalist opportunities for bird watching and wildlife observation abound.

From many vantage points, including high sea cliffs, marine mammals which may be seen include northern sea lions, harbour and Dall porpoises, and pods of killer whales. River otters are quite regularly seen swimming and feeding close to shore, as are mink scampering along a beach. There are at least two major harbour seal haulouts at Sidney Island, at which 75 animals were recorded during an official count in 1974. Hauling out and pupping take place on rocky offshore islets, which harbour seals share with numerous species of sea birds and ducks, such as black oystercatchers, cormorants, black turnstones, and harlequin ducks. Twenty-- acre Mandarte Island, which Rodway and Campbell (1977) have called "by far the largest colony of marine birds in the Gulf Islands," lies only 1½ miles to the east of Sidney. Grebes, scoters, oldsquaws, buffleheads, and three species of loons (the common, artic, and red-throated) are among the non-nesting marine birds which overwinter in the water surrounding Sidney Island. Observations of northern fur seals, northern elephant seals, minke (pike) and humpback whales, and dolphins have also been made but these mammals are by no means commonly seen.

Marine ecosystems near the shores of Sidney Island support a rich diversity of life and offer outstanding opportunities for viewing dozens of marine species. The

waters are free from domestic sewage pollution and from industrial pollution and are refreshed continuously by tidal currents. In the offshore zone, scuba divers gather seafood such as abalone and rock and swimming scallops, and are able to observe other forms of life such as sunflower and purple star fish, a variety of sea urchins, and possibly sea anemones and octopi. The opportunities for sport fishing are also good.

### Upland Features

The natural features and recreational opportunities are no less diverse on the upland portion of Sidney Island. The terrain may be divided in two portions, a broad level landscape composed of a mosaic of deep sands, silts, and clays of marine origin, and a hilly landscape (with maximum elevation above sea level of about 230 feet) composed of rocky knolls and glacial till deposits of varying depths. An extensive trail network provides access to a variety of interesting plant communities, ranging from rocky knolls with open stands of Douglas-fir, arbutus, and a few Garry oaks to darker forests of grand fir, red cedar, and red alder with salmonberry and sword fern in lush undergrowth. Communities of this type are situated on deep imperfectly drained marine silts and clays. Intermediate vegetation types occur on other sites with distinct soil differences. Dense stands of red alder and broadleaf maple with understory salmonberry and sword fern are often found on seepage sites underlain by marine sands and silts. And well drained moist soils derived from glacial till support forests of Douglas-fir, grand fir, and red cedar with an undergrowth of salal and oregon grape. This range of vegetation types in combination with the aforementioned wetlands and about 250 acres of cleared pastureland provides a diversity of wildlife habitats. The island supports an abundance of blacktail deer, which are native to the coast, as well as introduced fallow deer. Alert hikers might discover the nesting sites of resident birds such as turkey vultures, bald eagles, pileated wood peckers, night hawks, hooded merganzers, king fishers, red-tailed and coopers hawks, at least 3 types of owls,

and band-tailed pigeons, which frequent the knolls where arbutus berries and oaks are found. A large great blue heron rookery is also located in a stand of alders on the island. Because it occurs in the spring before the tree leaves open, bird watchers are given a good look at the nest building activity of the herons (75 pairs?).

Non-resident birds which have been seen on Sidney during migration include sandhill cranes, peregrine falcons and numerous species of hawks. Golden eagles visit the island to prey upon young birds and occasionally on the present owner's flock of sheep during lambing season. After the salmon runs, bald eagles visit Sidney in increasing numbers; up to 60 have been seen there at one time.

Sidney Island presently supports several species of exotic birds. Wild turkeys, Reeves pheasants, California quail, and peacocks may be found on the island and to date do not appear to be in competition with native species.

Besides wildlife observation, exploring and hiking, camping is another recreational activity for which Sidney has high capability. Several combinations of soils and vegetation provide durable sites able to withstand the pressures of concentrated use. Campsites could be located on beaches or on well-drained upland sites with attractive vistas. The island is large enough that visitors could choose between camping in groups or at locations offering more privacy and isolation.

Opportunities for nature study and photography are as diverse as the landscapes on Sidney. Many promontories provide good views of nearby islands, the Olympic mountains, and Mount Baker in the Cascade Range. Local glacial history may be studied by examining exposed sediments in the actively eroding sea bluffs on the west side of the island, and fossils which occur in sandstone formations found at Hamley Point may be of interest.

In the springtime, the occurrence of wildflowers is largely restricted to the small ungrazed island out in the lagoon. Comas, shooting star, seablush, and Easter lily are among the colourful flowers which may be found there.

### Park Values of Sidney Island

Sidney Island lies within easy day-use range of boaters in the Greater Victoria area. What other marine park is so accessible to a large urban centre and also offers such variety of recreational opportunities and such diversity of interesting natural features and important wildlife habitats? There are only a few jeep trails on Sidney and no permanent inhabitants. This undeveloped island is being managed as a wildlife conservation area (as well as a small sheep farm) by the present owner. The island is large enough and diverse enough that not only can both intensive and extensive types of outdoor recreation be accommodated, but the protection of valuable natural features is feasible at the same time.

Regarding the protection of unique features, the Archeological Sites Advisory Board has identified two sites on Sidney Island (outside of Sidney Spit Marine Park) which require protection for future study. The Nature Conservancy of Canada is seeking protection for the island's wetlands (tidal flats and salt marshes) which provide important habitat for notable concentrations of migrating waterfowl and shore birds. And the Ecological Reserves Unit of the Land Management Branch is interested in obtaining representative samples of at least three ecosystem types which occur on Sidney (See Appendix A). Since the Ecological Reserves Act dictates that only crown land may be considered for reserve status, unless Sidney Island becomes a provincial park there is nothing to ensure that these and other vulnerable environments (such as sensitive wild flower areas) will receive the protection which their importance and uniqueness definitely merits.

In a 1975 Gulf Islands Natural Areas Inventory Don Benn listed the "most significant" natural features of the Gulf Islands region, e.g., those having the highest priority for protection. Many of these features which are not commonly found on other Gulf Islands presently occur on Sidney Island and have been cited by the above agencies as requiring protection. To reiterate, they are: wild flower areas, open stands of Garry oak, arbutus, and Douglas-fir, intertidal and subtidal zones, ridge tops and vantage points with attractive vegetation, and outstanding wildlife habitat, including migration concentration and breeding areas.

Regarding recreational opportunities available on Sidney Island, natural features of course become recreational resources when people gain enjoyment and understanding from them. Through conservation, the unique natural features of Sidney Island can have their values protected and can be used by people at the same time.

A major problem facing visitors to the region is generally poor public access to the shoreline on most Gulf Islands. Another is that most marine beaches are too coarse or rocky for swimming, too cold, and with too steep a drop-off. Sidney's long shoreline and extensive sand beaches obviously have significant recreation potential and should be made available for public use in perpetuity.

Use of Sidney Spit Marine Park is increasing annually and the trend is ever upward. Parks Branch surveys found that in 1977 about 15,000 visitor-days were spent at the small park. Sidney Island's moderate climate (winters mild, summers dry and sunny yet cool) is conducive to all-season use and this is reinforced by the fact that the most interesting wildlife observations may be made during the "off season." Of the many recreational activities with potential on the island, only swimming can not occur in all seasons of the year.

Needless to say, Sidney Spit Marine Park, which encompasses only about one-tenth of Sidney Island's land area, does not protect the diversity of natural features or provide public access to the variety of recreational opportunities which the whole island has to offer. Since these opportunities are not readily available elsewhere, park status for the entire island is of paramount importance.

REFERENCES

Benn, D.R. 1975. Natural areas inventory: islands of the Strait of Georgia, Howe Sound and Haro Strait, British Columbia. Unpublished report prepared for the Islands Trust and the Nature Conservancy of Canada. 101 p. + appendices.

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