

Vancouver Island

Sea Otters & Orcas

A Greentours Itinerary

British Columbia is truly a land of sweeping forests, endless mountainous and unspoilt rivers and lakes and nowhere is this truer than on Vancouver Island. Fabulous Coastal scenery, incredible Coastal Temperate Rainforests, and habitats hardly touched by man combine to provide a home for a rich array of fauna and flora that reaches its zenith in the large mammal populations. Both marine and land mammals can here be seen more easily and in good numbers than perhaps anywhere on the continent.

Day 1 To Vancouver

Join the tour at the Coast Tsawwassen Inn close by the ferry terminal for Vancouver Island.

Day 2 Ferry to Vancouver Island and to Qualicum Beach

We'll catch the morning ferry for Vancouver Island which takes two hours to cross the straits. En route we'll see California and Glaucous-winged Gulls, Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, and there's a chance of a cetacean or two. Following an early lunch on the ferry it is a little over two hours to Qualicum Beach where we will settle into the eponymous Inn before heading out to explore the coastal habitats roundabout. The beautiful Anna's Hummingbird speeds between blooms whilst Song Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos seem to be everywhere. Among the trees we'll find the lovely Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Northern Flicker and Spotted Towhee, and along the coast itself we can look for Belted Kingfisher, Northwestern Crow, Black Turnstones and the immaculate Black Oystercatcher.

Day 3 Little Qualicum Provincial Park and transfer to Ucluelet

After breakfast we'll explore Little Qualicum Provincial Park. Here is an ancient forest, the huge Red Cedars interspersed with Western Hemlock, Large Leaf Maple and Arbutus trees with their strange peeling bark. The unusual saprophytic orchid the Western Coralroot blooms here and we'll find Prince's Pine and the lovely Chocolate Lily, not actually a lily but a fritillary. The extraordinary Vancouver Groundcone, a strange purple apparition that parasitises the roots of the Salal is not uncommon in Little Qualicum. Later in the morning we'll head for Ucluelet and the wonderful habitats of the Pacific Rim National Park. A trail from close to our hotel takes us through rock pools with a stunning array of large almost lime green anemones, whilst various gulls and Common Loons will be offshore. An incredibly

scenic trail takes us round a spectacular headland, through contorted and twisted Red Cedars, to the Amphitrite Lighthouse. Myriad fungi decorate the mossy woodland floor including orange-yellow stacks of Chicken-of-the-Woods. There are many viewpoints from which we'll be able to watch for sea-going wildlife. Gray Whales, Humpback Whales and Orcas are all possible, as well as Steller's Sea Lions, Sea Otters, and Harbour Porpoises. The birding is excellent too with elegant Black Oystercatchers, Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots. The stunted twisted Shorepines emerging from the thick moss along the Sphagnum Bog Trail make for surreal scenery, the trees growing sideways instead of upwards because of the very poor growing conditions. The bog flora here is good with species such as Labrador Tea, Bog Laurel, Crowberry, Bog Cranberry, Sundew and Sweet Gale all present and there's a decent chance of spotting a Columbian Black-tailed Deer or two in the Muskeg forest.

Day 4

Pacific Rim National Park: Tofino Boat Trip – Black Bears & Sea Otters

We'll take our first boat trip out from Tofino where our local boatman will soon have us meeting our first unimaginably cute Sea Otters. These lovely animals have returned in numbers to the Pacific Coast after being driven to the verge of extinction. They have increased dramatically in numbers in recent years which has been great news for the underwater kelp forests as the Otters prey on their main herbivore the sea urchin. The study of the change in habitats brought about by the return of the Sea Otter has been fundamental in elucidating the idea of Trophic Cascades, an important concept now in ecological understanding. Sometimes we'll see them nuzzling their chests – blowing air into the fur to warm up. Sometimes we'll see them holding purple spiny sea urchins, clutching the urchin with their front paws as they swim on their backs, watching us all the while.

Black Oystercatchers feed on the rocky shore, groups of Surf Scoter loaf off the little bays and Belted Kingfishers hunt along the shore. The black backs of Harbour Porpoises surface from time to time around us. There can be a lot of Sea Otters in the waters here and we may see rafts of them wrapping themselves in strands of kelp, so that they can rest up or even sleep without drifting away. We've also a good chance of see babies at this time of year. Vancouver Island is famed for its bears and this trip is also aimed at watching and photographing 'Beach Bears' (Black Bears) foraging along the shore line. We'll see a number of them on our boat trips, all busy 'beach-combing' – it is great fun watching them turning over rocks in search of a tasty snack.

We'll have time to explore the trails in the Pacific Rim National Park either before or after our boat trips each day. Here we can look for Ruffed Grouse, or if we are lucky the rare Sooty Grouse, and we'll note the vertical lines of drilled holes in tree bark that are the indications of Sapsuckers (woodpeckers) feeding. Tasty Red Huckleberry, Himalayan Blackberry (introduced from India via England),

Thimbleberry and Oval-leaved Blueberry line the trails that lead to some ponds where we'll look for Beavers.

Day 5

Pacific Rim National Park: Whale-watching Boat Trip

Almost as we leave the harbour playful Dahl's Porpoises will be with us and they'll be around throughout the trip. These fastest of cetaceans are marked with similar black and white markings to Orcas. Common Seals haul out on the perfectly-formed rocky islets just out of the harbour. As we pass wooded islands, Bald Eagles gaze at the scene from beautiful Shore Pines draped with mosses. A population of around two hundred Pacific Gray Whales spend April to November in Clayoquot and Barkley Sounds. We'll have the chance to get close to this oddest looking of the great whales. Humpback Whales will also be on the agenda and we've another chance of Orcas though sightings are only every couple of weeks here! We'll also see Harbour Seals and, as everywhere, Bald Eagles and Great Blue Herons. Wolf sightings are also possible here.

Day 6

Cathedral Grove and to Moonwater Lodge

Wandering Vancouver's old-growth temperate rainforests is an experience that will leave you awed. The moss and fern-laden understory is peppered with giants – Western hemlock, Yellow Cedar, Western Red Cedar, Douglas-fir, Amabilis Fir and Sitka Spruce - these are some of the largest trees in North America. Red Squirrels scold us as we watch Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Pacific Wrens and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. Cathedral Grove has an 800-year-old Douglas Fir that stands 76 metres tall and has a circumference of 9m.

The giant moss-covered trunks shine in the golden light streaming down from the high canopy – hence 'Cathedral' Grove. Varied Thrush is amongst the more beautiful of the birds we might see and others include Northern Goshawk, Hammond's Flycatcher, Brown Creeper and Hermit Thrush.

In the afternoon we'll continue along to Malahat where we'll find the lovely Moonwater Bay Lodge, our home for the last two nights of the tour.

Day 7

Whale-watching trip for Orcas and Sea Otters

The boat trips out from the Victoria Island are well-known for their almost guaranteed (95% success rate) wildlife shows with pods of Orcas frequently observed at close range. These are exceptionally dynamic animals and every encounter seems to reveal a new facet of their daily lives – it is astonishing just how well one can see these incredibly powerful inhabitants of the island's seas. The Orcas we'll likely see in the Gulf Islands near Victoria comprise three pods totalling about eighty animals – collectively they are the Southern Resident Orcas. These

Orcas specialise in feeding on salmon preparing for the spawning runs in the autumn. We'll have plenty of time amongst the Orcas and will gain an insight into the behaviour we'll be witnessing as well as learning about their lives so well-known now to the boat guides. As we watch them small groups of Rhinoceros Auklets swim nearby in rafts, some with beaks stuffed with small silver fish. Harbour Porpoises appear briefly from time to time and we've a good chance of seeing a Minke Whale or two, and we've another chance of watching Humpback Whales. We'll encounter huge sleek Steller's Sea Lions swimming under the surface of the crystal-clear water eyeing us disdainfully as they pass. Steller's Sea Lions are not much smaller than a Grizzly Bear. We've another chance of seeing those incredibly cute Sea Otters on this trip and there's a possibility of seeing River Otters in the harbour too.

Day 8

Departure (or on to the Canadian Rockies Tour)

Indigo-hued Steller's Jays are common along the trails at Moonwater Bay. Bald Eagles nest in the bay and we'll likely see Downy Woodpecker, Violet-Green Swallow, Red-tailed Hawk and White-crowned Sparrow, before returning to the lodge for breakfast. From Moonwater we've a one-hour drive to the ferry to Vancouver and thence to the airport in Vancouver where those joining the Canadian Rockies tour will catch a flight over the Rockies to Calgary.

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