

Orca breaching



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TRIP IDEAS

NATURE & WILDLIFE VIEWING IN BC

Iconic creatures such as bald eagles, bears, moose and Orcas make their home in British Columbia's wilderness. Take a wildlife-watching journey to see these West Coast creatures (and more) in their natural habitats – mountains, rivers, beaches and deserts – without having to venture too far from civilization.

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Bald Eagles at Kilby Provincial Park

Each September, bald eagles migrate to Kilby Provincial Park to feast on salmon spawning in the Harrison River. Cottonwood trees on Kilby's beachfront are home to white-headed raptors eyeing the water for prey.

Enjoy a guided boat tour to get an even closer look at the river's ecology, or stop at nearby Weaver Creek fish hatchery to see salmon in action. A great time to visit is during the annual Fraser Valley Bald Eagle Festival (November), when a host of viewing sites are open and there are a range of activities and events. Make sure to pack the binoculars!

Kilby Provincial Park is a 90-minute drive east from Vancouver off Highway 7. Before or after visiting the park, stop at nearby Harrison Mills, Agassiz and Harrison Hot Springs to indulge in local produce, including roasted coffee, fresh hazelnuts, heirloom vegetables and artisan cheeses.

Bears at Whistler Olympic Park

A legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games has proven a boom for black bears in the Callaghan Valley in Whistler, site of Olympic and Paralympic Nordic competitions.

After construction of cross-country trails, forest lands were restored and filled with native plants, including protein-rich grasses and wildflowers. Each summer, increasing numbers of black bears graze in this area within sight of the ski jumps.

A similar scene occurs on Whistler and Blackcomb mountains, where berry bushes flourish on open slopes, attracting dozens of bears. Join a guided bear-watching tour or visit the park in mid-summer to view from the Gate House.

To reach Whistler Olympic Park, drive 90 minutes north of Vancouver to the outskirts of Whistler. Travel 9km/5.4mi uphill on the Callaghan Valley Road.

Orcas at Telegraph Cove

Up to 265 Orcas populate ocean waters in Johnstone Strait near Telegraph Cove, between Vancouver Island and the mainland.

In summer, many Orcas gather in Johnstone Strait to feast on returning salmon runs. The Orcas often congregate near Robson Bight (Michael Bigg) Ecological Reserve to feed and socialize. Paddlers, sailors and whale-watching and wildlife-viewing charters that operate from Telegraph Cove, Port McNeil and Alert Bay congregate near these waters for prime whale-watching opportunities (access to the ecological reserve itself is prohibited).

Can't travel that far? Try the observation deck on BC Ferries' Southern Gulf Islands routes, where Orcas, porpoises and dolphins can sometimes be spotted.

To reach Telegraph Cove on Vancouver Island, drive four hours north from Nanaimo on the Island Highway.

Desert Wildlife in Osoyoos

Come eye to eye with a western rattlesnake or hold a Great Basin gopher snake at the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre in Osoyoos. Across the narrow valley lies the companion Osoyoos Desert Centre, where visitors can take the 1.5-km/0.9-mi self-guided boardwalk tour by arid shrub lands, grasses and four interpretive kiosks.

Each desert centre offers wildlife viewing on a scale both small and large in Canada's only pocket desert, the northern corner of the Great Basin Desert. Staff interpreters are on hand to answer visitors' questions and provide facts about local wildlife such as spadefoot toads and burrowing owls, and about the desert's crust – a living organism in this sagebrush kingdom.

To check out BC's desert, located in the Thompson Okanagan region, drive two hours south of Kelowna to Osoyoos on the BC-Washington State border.

Tidal Pools at Botanical Beach

Marine life along BC's coast comes in rainbow shades, from orange starfish to purple sea urchins, blue mussels to green anemones. Botanical Beach offers one of the best opportunities to view dozens of species of intertidal marine creatures and plants on Vancouver Island.

The secret to viewing marine life at Botanical Beach is to visit at low tide when the ocean retreats, exposing tidal pools that resemble jewel boxes with colourful sea stars, chitons and anemones clinging to the walls. Wear waterproof clothing and rubber boots, then venture out onto the flat, kelp-covered rock shelves to peer into deep, crystal-clear pools.

Botanical Beach is a two-hour drive north of Victoria to Port Renfrew (northwest of Sooke) on the southwest side of Vancouver Island. Make sure to visit Parks Canada's West Coast Trail office in Port Renfrew (open May to September) or the Sooke Region Museum and Visitor Information Centre for details on tide times and sea life that can be viewed.



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