



# Deception Pass Marine State Park

Seven Good Reasons to Visit

Story and photos by **Jennifer and James Hamilton**

**Deception Pass State Park** is the most popular in the state, drawing some 2 million visitors each year. The 4,000-acre reserve has miles of walking trails and more than 100,000 feet of saltwater and freshwater shoreline. The biggest attraction of course is Deception Pass itself, where currents can reach nine knots as more than 2 million cubic feet of water per second—ten times the volume per second at Niagara Falls—courses through the 500-foot-wide channel. Near slack water on a busy summer weekend, a constant stream of all types and sizes of vessels navigates the waterway. Visitors can take in the action from the Deception Pass Bridge, 182 feet above the water surface, or closer to sea level on Pass Island.

Most visitors arrive by land. Boaters are usually just passing through on their way to or from the San Juan Islands, and few actually stop, other than to wait for slack water. But there are plenty of good reasons to visit and stay awhile. Here are seven.

## 1. DOWN BY THE BAYS

Two large bays, Cornet Bay east of the pass and Bowman Bay to the west, have easy moorage options at docks, on park buoys or at anchor, and are good bases for exploring the rest of the park or just relaxing on board. Both have sheltered waters that are ideal for a lazy kayak paddle or a slow putt in a power dinghy.

Cornet Bay is the busiest and most protected, while Bowman Bay has the easiest access to the rest of the park. Crab fishers can fill the public dock at Cornet Bay on busy summer weekends, but boaters have priority and fishers have moved their traps to make dock space for us when asked.

Bowman Bay is exposed to the west and we've read that waves can roll into the bay, both from weather and passing boat traffic. But we've spent several days anchored in

Jennifer Hamilton looks south to Goat Island and the channel to LaConner from the Hope Island perimeter trail.

A lazy summer long weekend along the north side of Hope Island. Empty mooring buoys are quickly claimed.



Below: An interpretive center has excellent displays describing the positive impact of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Bottom: This statue at Bowman Bay commemorates the men of the Civilian Conservation Corps, who built many of the park's features in the 1930s.



For a little more excitement, land a dinghy at North Beach for water-level views of the bridge and boat traffic. One time after landing there we carried a picnic lunch across to West Beach, looking out on the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Driftwood is piled high ashore and waves roll in continuously, even in calm weather. We felt like we'd been transported to the open ocean.

Rosario Beach, north of Sharpe Cove, is definitely the most scenic, with views across rocks and islets into Rosario Strait. Above the beach, the Maiden of Deception Pass story pole details the Samish legend of an Indian Princess who became a sea spirit. Her two incarnations are carved on either side of the pole.

Easy trails lead beyond the pole to Rosario Head, with excellent views into Bowman Bay. At the western extreme, cliffs drop off steeply all around, and we could see across Rosario Strait to the San Juan Islands and into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. With constant boat traffic below us, the setting reminded us of Turn Point on Stuart Island, but without the long walk.

### 5. TRAILSIDE VISTAS

For hikers, the park has 35 miles of marked trails and a number of other established trails. For wonderful views, three of our favorites are to Lighthouse Point, Goose Rock and Reservation Head.

Lighthouse Point is about a half mile from Bowman Bay. Just before the lighthouse a small island off a beach offers panoramic views of the entire bridge. With cliffs high above the water, Goose Rock has views of all the action in Cornet Bay, including the marina and the public docks.

Reservation Head has sweeping views across Deception Island and Rosario Strait, and up to Sharpe Cove and Rosario Bay.

We reached Reservation Head from an unmarked trail off the Lighthouse Point trail that ran along the south side of Bowman Bay. The trail was steep in

parts, and close to the edge, but clear and mostly manageable. We returned along the west shore of the headland following an easy spur trail south that connected to the Lighthouse Point loop trail.

the southwest corner and found it mostly calm, unaffected even by a large tractor tug and the Victoria Clipper passing by at full steam outside. And being exposed to the west does have a plus: We've watched some spectacular sunsets.

### 2. BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

We'd motored through the pass dozens of times before we finally made it up to the bridge from the water. The views in either direction are amazing. It was overcast that day, but we could still see east to Skagit Bay and beyond, and west through the Juan de Fuca Strait well past Lopez and the other

San Juans. And nearly 200 feet below us, water surged through the pass. We'd arrived during a flood current and watched a few boats take on the tidal stream.

The center section of the bridge stands on Pass Island, which splits Deception Pass into the main waterway and Canoe Pass, a 50-foot-wide channel suitable only for very small boats. It's easy to reach the island from the roadway, so we walked down for a closer look. As the tide slowed, more and more boats arrived. Most of the times we'd braved the pass, we had enjoyed the waves of people watching from Pass Island. Now it was our turn to wave.

### 3. PASSING THRILLS

One of the most exciting ways to experience Deception Pass is in a power dinghy. From Bowman Bay, the shoreline along the north side of the waterway is complex and interesting, and you can run safely through tiny Canoe Pass. With the walls rising steeply on either side, the narrow channel feels more like a canyon river than a saltwater pass.

In the main waterway south of Pass Island, the dinghy feels small and exposed, particularly when larger boats pass through leaving big wakes. And when the current is running, standing waves

and whirlpools are everywhere, while upwellings bigger than our craft appear randomly around us.

We've always felt adventurous taking the dinghy through the main pass, until our last trip. As we maneuvered in the flood current by motor, two separate groups of kayakers appeared. They paddled furiously against the flow the length of Pass Island, and then allowed the current to blow them back for another try. For a finale, they performed kayak rolls in the churning water for our camera. We enjoyed the show, but felt decidedly less intrepid after the encounter.

### 4. DAY AT THE BEACHES

If you're up for a day at the beach, the park has some excellent choices. The soft sand at the south side of Bowman Bay is ideal for a lazy stroll or a relaxing snooze.

The sweeping view from Reservation Head takes in Bowman Bay, Rosario Head and beyond.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Deception Pass Foundation web site, [www.deceptionpassfoundation.org](http://www.deceptionpassfoundation.org), has historical and contemporary information about the park, plus detailed maps of the major marked trails.

Detailed trail maps also are available from the park office. Call 360-675-2417 or write to [deception.pass@parks.wa.gov](mailto:deception.pass@parks.wa.gov) to request a copy.

*Afoot and Afloat: North Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca*, by Marge and Ted Mueller (Mountaineers Books, 2006), also has good trail maps, advice for boaters and information on the many points of interest.

The current *Waggoner Cruising Guide* (Weatherly Press, 2008) has up-to-date information on amenities and good advice on how to go through Deception Pass.

*A Cruising Guide to Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands*, by Migael Scherer (International Marine/Ragged Mountain Press, 2004), also includes information on getting through Deception Pass and amenities ashore.

Visit [www.pacificyachtingpnw.com](http://www.pacificyachtingpnw.com) for the Hamiltons' suggestions on how to reach the bridge and Goose Rock from the water.

## 6. A PLACE OF HISTORY

Much of the park's infrastructure was built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). President Roosevelt established the CCC to battle the Great Depression while preserving the nation's natural resources. For room, board and a living wage, young men learned transferable skills while building parks and restoring forests. More than 3 million men participated across the nation. The CCC Interpretive Center at the head of Bowman Bay has excellent displays, including many personal anecdotes, and describes the tremendous positive impact the program had on so many people's lives.

## 7. ISLAND TIME

The park includes two islands in Skagit Bay—Hope and Skagit—with moorage for pleasure craft. The islands offer a more secluded feel and slower pace than the rest of the park, as only boaters can visit.

A cove along the north shore of Hope Is-

land has mooring buoys and protected anchorage, and is popular in the summer. For more solitude, we typically anchor off the south-side bluffs instead. Open grasslands with wildflowers grow along the western end, while the remainder is mostly forested. An easy trail runs across the island between the two anchorages. A rougher trail runs around the south perimeter of the island, through the grasslands and past the navigation mark on the island's tip, with excellent views en route. The island is a nature preserve, so be sure to protect its ecosystem by staying on the established trails.

Skagit Island is a miniature version of Hope Island, with a shorter perimeter trail and three new mooring buoys along the north shore. We've also overnighted comfortably nearby on either side of Kiket Island. We especially like the anchorage off



A kayaker performs rolls in the churning waters of Deception Pass.

the north side for its sunset view through the Deception Pass bridge, but be advised that the buoys and the anchorage there are exposed to westerly winds.

## AND ANOTHER THING

All these reasons to visit could be reduced to one: the views. It's hard to go anywhere in the park without reaching a dramatic vista. Let other boaters rush past to the San Juan Islands. Stop instead at Deception Pass, relax, take in the views, and watch the world go by. ♣