

A Tour of the Seasons with a Naturalist From Sandy Seashores to Mountain Meadows

The mild climate in Oceanside provides year round access to nature hiking, wildlife viewing and bird watching in much of Vancouver Island's wilderness. That certainly doesn't mean our weather is boring. You just have to look a little closer to notice the subtleties that mark your passage from the months of the salmon, through the months of the leaping salmon, vibrant moss, herring spawning, singing frogs, brant geese, blazing flowers, alligator lizards, berries and back again. The First Nations of the area marked the passing of time with the cycles of the moon and sun. Lunar months were often named after natural phenomena such as salmon runs and bird migrations. There's plenty to do and see every month for the avid eco tourist in Parksville, Qualicum Beach and the surrounding areas.

The Pacific Tree Frogs begin their celebration of spring with their strident chorus of courtship songs in March and this is one of the first unmistakable sounds of spring beginning. The herring also return to spawn in March and in hot pursuit come thousands of sea birds and hundreds of sea lions, seals and eagles. April to June is the best time for wandering down fragrant paths alight with spring wild flowers. The red flowering currant is one of the first native shrubs to burst from the greenery in late March with its profusion of bright pink flowers, which also herald the arrival of the Rufous Humming birds, which love the nectar. Salmon berry, fawn lilies, bleeding heart, trilliums and violets are just a few of April's flowers. Streamside walks are especially lovely at this time of year with the wide diversity of flowering shrubs and herbs and the lush, bright green growth of new leaves. The air is deliciously thick with the honey-like scent of balsam poplar and all of the flowers - except skunk cabbage! This remarkable plant can melt its way through ice and snow by generating heat. While the snow may be gone at sea level, patches of snow and ice remain in the mountains year round. The brant geese arrive by the thousands in April, enjoying the feast of herring roe on eelgrass. The sound of thousands of wings beating is a true west coast experience - our equivalent of a stampede of bison. Thousands of other sea birds and shore birds can be viewed in the spring as well. Hamilton Marsh and the local estuaries are popular bird watching locations. Milner Gardens and Woodlands offer interpretive trails that include an eagle nest viewing area. At this time of year bear, elk and deer come out into the peripheral hay fields to browse new growth.

Summer is a parade of berries beginning in June with the orange salmon berries and black raspberries, then trailing blackberries, red huckleberries, Himalayan blackberries, blueberries, black huckleberries and cranberries. Where there are berries, there are bears and lots of birds. Over 250 species of birds can be found in the Oceanside area and there is a great diversity of habitats to explore within an hour's drive. Summer brings some of the lowest daytime tides and great tide pool exploring on sandy and rocky beaches. The seashore sports a colourful array of bizarre marine life. Visit during a full or new moon to take advantage of the lowest tides and the greatest variety of marine life. Snorkelling the lush eelgrass forests or wading through the sparkling phosphorescence at night are magical experiences not to be missed. Summer days are never too hot with a sea breeze nearby, comfortable ocean and lake swimming, icy rivers to dip in, cool snowfields to hike in the mountains and refreshing caves to explore. Alpine flower meadows peak in July and August, popping up as the snow melts.

The pink salmon usher in autumn in early September, followed by Chinook salmon peaking in October, then Coho salmon and Chum salmon continuing through November and December. You can watch them leaping over obstacles, jockeying for position or stare eyeball to eyeball with a 50 pound Chinook the size of a garbage can in an underwater viewing area. A trip to the birthplace of the legendary BC salmon is an essential addition to any west coast nature tour. Enjoy the serene vibrancy of a salmon stream and witness the wealth of life that salmon bring to the lush river valleys. This is the most reliable season to see black bears, as they are concentrated along the rivers where they can be safely viewed from a bridge, vehicle or spotting scope. Hundreds of eagles and sea lions also gather to enjoy the feast. Fall colour typically peaks in early October with brilliant yellow maples along the lakes and streams and plenty of red foliage from blueberries in the alpine. September hiking in the mountains is pleasant in the cool weather and abundant berry patches and lingering wildflowers. The alpine is remote wilderness, so it's important to check the weather and come prepared for a drop in temperature and rapidly changing conditions, especially in shoulder season. Massive bird migrations pass through in the fall, especially along the coast, so bird watching is a delight. Fall rains spark technicolour explosions of mushrooms. Most of the rain that nourishes the giant rainforest trees and vibrant moss gardens comes as a gentle drizzle and the moist air from the Pacific brings welcome warmth with it, sparing lower elevations from the grips of snow and ice that most of Canada knows.

The winter moisture makes the Vancouver Island mountains among the snowiest places on earth, receiving up to 10 meters of snow. When you want snow, you can have it by driving up Mount Washington between December and May and enjoy snowshoeing, snow boarding, cross-country and downhill skiing. Winter winds make for great wave watching and surfing on the west coast of the island from November through March. Many of the birds remain through the cooler months or return to winter here – in fact there's more sea birds enjoying the rich abundance in the Strait of Georgia than in the summer. The gray whale migration starts off the west coast in February and continues into May.

Unique nature exploration opportunities are available every month of the year in Oceanside. In addition to each season's unique features, beaver, mink, otter, seals, eagles, juvenile salmon, many bird species and tide pool life can be seen year round. During the September to May season the trails are less busy and offer some fantastic wildlife viewing opportunities. Discover nature's delights in the secret corners of Oceanside with local eco tour guides.

Patrick Walshe, R.P. Biologist, 1-250-954-0110
Coastal Revelations Nature Tours
www.coastalrevelations.com