

Comox Valley Nature Viewing Guide



Trillium PHOTO Bob Bartsch Garry Oak PHOTO Terry Thormin Bald Eagle PHOTO Bryan Walwork

Nature in the Comox Valley

The Comox Valley on the east coast of Vancouver Island features a great diversity of habitat: from the intertidal life of the ocean to the east, to subalpine and alpine terrain of the mountains to the west; from wet western hemlock forest to the north, to drier Douglas-fir forest to the south. The Beaufort Mountains and the Vancouver Island Range, forming the western backdrop of the Valley, have a dramatic centrepiece: the Comox Glacier.

At the heart of the Valley is the Courtenay River Estuary. More than 23 creeks and rivers enter the Estuary and Baynes Sound. The mixing of waters here results in a highly productive estuarine ecosystem.

During the last Ice Age, all of British Columbia including Vancouver Island was ice covered. When the ice melted and parts of the Strait of Georgia were dry, most of the land animals that migrated north into BC also reached the Island.

However, some have not yet made the crossing - the Island has no mountain goats, bighorn sheep, moose, foxes, coyotes, porcupines, chipmunks, skunks or resident grizzly bears. Happily, poisonous snakes, poison ivy, and poison oak are also absent from the Comox Valley. Due to the extent of private land on the east side of the Island, protected areas are scarce. Remaining natural areas are few, fragmented, and under development pressure. Please enjoy our nature in the Comox Valley and help conserve and protect our natural environment.

About Us

Nature Comox Valley: The Comox Valley Naturalists Society is one of the oldest organizations promoting nature conservation in our Valley. This brochure highlights only a small portion of the natural history sites of interest in our area.

The sites featured here have a variety of habitats and species and are rewarding in all seasons, with easily accessible nature viewing. All have trails of 2 km or less, and in many cases, have the option for greater explorations.

For more, please visit the **Nature Viewing Guide on our website:**

www.comoxvalleynaturalist.bc.ca/nature-viewing-guide



Canada

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Point Holmes PHOTO Terry Thormin



Baby Harbour Seal PHOTO Bob Bartsch



Great Blue Heron PHOTO Terry Thormin

Viewing Highlights

The Comox Valley, Baynes Sound and the waters around Hornby Island are designated Important Bird Areas, with the second largest concentration of **wintering waterfowl** in BC, including thousands of **Trumpeter Swans**. From November through March, look for swans while passing Comox Bay Farm and adjacent fields; and visit Lazo Wildlife Park for viewing swans in the flooded fields nearby.

Good viewing sites for overwintering waterfowl and migrating shorebirds are all along the water - from Ships Point to Goose Spit and beyond. In the Estuary, view from Courtenay Riverway and Airpark, the Comox Road Rotary Viewing Stand, and the wharf in Comox. **Bald Eagles** and **Great Blue Herons** are frequent along the beaches - around the Estuary, along Comox Road, and at Point Holmes are good sites. Lazo Marsh is a delightful spot for close encounters with **forest songbirds**, while **woodpeckers** are abundant at Miracle Beach Provincial Park.

An amazing display of spring flowers, including **trilliums** and **white & pink fawn lilies**, peaks in April along riparian areas such as the Tsolum River Floodplain trails, Puntledge Park, Mack Laing Park and Brooklyn Creek Park. The earliest flowers, such as **gold star & blue-eyed Mary**, bloom at Point Holmes and Kin Beach Provincial Park.

Subalpine flowers are prolific in Paradise Meadows in late July and August. **White-flowered rhododendrons**, **shooting stars**, **subalpine daisies** and **pink & white mountain heathers** are just a few of the species abundant in the meadows.

Going up to Paradise Meadows, there is a chance of seeing the **Vancouver Island Marmot** near the ski hill. **Black-tailed Deer** will be seen year-round among the streets, gardens, and golf course in downtown Comox. Mack Laing Park and Brooklyn Creek Park are also likely spots.

Black Bears are found throughout the forested areas of the Comox Valley, but are most likely to be seen in the Cumberland Marsh and Forest areas, and along the Strathcona Parkway up to Paradise Meadows, especially near dawn and dusk.

The herring spawn in March attracts **waterbirds** as well as large numbers of **Sea Lions**. Good viewing is at the log booms at Royston, and from Fanny Bay Conservation Area; or on Denman Island at Boyle Point Provincial Park, where they are visible on the rocks below the bluffs.

Seals are often in the Courtenay River, and **beavers** have dams in Cumberland Marsh. These wetlands are also good habitat for **butterflies & dragonflies**.

In the autumn, several species of **spawning salmon** attract numerous gulls and other birds; one of the best sites is at Puntledge Park in Courtenay. Point Holmes and Ships Point are the best rocky beaches for viewing **intertidal life** at low tide. Beneath the seaweed-covered rocks is an amazing world of **sea stars**, **crabs**, **sea cucumbers** and numerous other creatures. For sandy beach life such as **sand dollars**, visit Kye Bay and Miracle Beach Provincial Park.

While most of the original forest in the Comox Valley has been logged, some large **Douglas-fir trees** can be seen in Miracle Beach Park. Along the Tsolum River Floodplain trails, look for large **Sitka Spruce**. Seal Bay Forest is a substantial 2nd growth forest ecosystem. The Valley is at the northern range of **Garry Oak** distribution, which occurs at drier sites such as Helliwell Provincial Park on Hornby Island.

Dynamic geological processes are ongoing at Goose Spit and the source of its sand, Willemar Bluffs. In a similar process, Cape Lazo is eroding and providing sediment for Kye Bay. Interesting **sandstone formations** are found at Helliwell Provincial Park.

Comox Valley Nature Viewing Guide



Camas PHOTO Sharon Nisack



Leather Seastars PHOTO Robin Harrison



Trumpeter Swans PHOTO Charles Brandt

Comox Valley Nature Calendar

Spring: March, April, May

Early: Herring spawn in Baynes Sound attracts large rafts of gulls, water birds & sea lions • Brant Geese, Rufous Hummingbirds & swallows arrive • Herons begin nesting, Bald Eagles lay eggs • Salmonberries, trilliums, red-flowering currants bloom • Gold star & blue-eyed Mary bloom • Salamanders migrate with first warm rain • tree frog chorus begins

Mid: Trumpeter Swans depart; Turkey Vultures & first warblers arrive • Brant Geese numbers peak; migrating shorebirds arrive • Stinging nettle ready for picking; cottonwoods scent the air • Pink & white fawn lilies, yellow violet, wild ginger, Pacific bleeding heart, sea blush & larkspur bloom

Late: Yellow Warblers arrive; migrating shorebirds depart • Swainson's Thrushes sing • Dogwood, calypso orchids, camas & lupins bloom • Black Bears & Vancouver Island Marmots come out of hibernation

Summer: June, July, August

Early: Nighthawks arrive • Summer-run Chinook enter Puntledge River • Salmonberries ripen, oceanspray blooms • Fawn season • Low daytime tides best for viewing of tidepool marine life

Mid: Flowers such as globeflower, marsh marigold and shooting star bloom in Paradise Meadows • Harbour Seal pups may be seen on beaches

Late: Bald Eagles fledge • Vancouver Island Ptarmigan can be found in Strathcona Park mountains • Crickets chirp • Blackberries & huckleberries ripen • Pink Salmon runs begin • Young Western Toads migrate from wetlands • Vancouver Island Marmots go into hibernation

Autumn: September, October, November

Early: Fall-run Chinook enter Puntledge River; Pink Salmon runs end; bears, gulls & eagles feast on salmon • Sandhill Cranes migrate south over valley • Red Squirrels gather cone seeds for the winter • Chanterelle mushrooms emerge after first autumn rain • Subalpine blueberries ripen • Swallowtail Butterfly spins chrysalis for winter • Quantities of seaweeds deposited on beaches

Mid: Fall Chinook runs end; Coho & Chum salmon runs begin • Turkey Vultures depart; Trumpeter Swans return for winter

Late: Winter storm season begins with high winds & waves • Chum Salmon runs end; aroma of dying fish along the rivers

Winter: December, January, February

Early: Coho Salmon runs end • Black Bears enter shallow hibernation • Christmas Bird Counts take place

Mid: Overwintering waterfowl found throughout Comox Valley & Baynes Sound • Backyard feeder birds appear • Bald Eagles begin courtship & nest building • Best harvest time for shellfish • Highest tides in winter

Late: Trumpeter Swans commonly seen • Varied Thrushes, Red-winged Blackbirds sing • Owls begin calling • Hazelnut catkins & pussy willows appear, skunk cabbage blooms • Winter storm season ends

Comox Valley Nature Viewing Guide



Courtenay River Estuary PHOTO Krista Kaptein



Helliwell Provincial Park PHOTO Art Martel

Viewing Tips

Plan your visit according to season, tides & time of day. Best wildlife viewing is at dawn and dusk. Explore a variety of habitats. Learn more by using field guides.

Respect Wildlife

- Avoid sensitive habitats and nest sites.
- Be patient. Move slowly and quietly.
- Watch wildlife from a distance, use binoculars or camera with zoom lens.
- Do not feed, touch, approach or chase wildlife.
- Avoid wildlife that seems abandoned or injured: to report 1-800-304-9968.

Protect the Environment

- Stay on designated roads and trails.
- Leave what you find for others to enjoy.
- Practice 'Leave no Trace': pack out what you pack in. Pick up after pets. Put garbage in on-site bins, or take garbage with you.
- Do not touch organisms in tidepools.
- Always keep pets under control, or leave them at home.

Stay Safe

- Learn how to be 'bear-safe': bearaware.bc.ca
- Always yield to heavy equipment on logging roads.
- While driving, watch out for wildlife crossing roads.
- Be aware of local hunting season information.

Respect Others

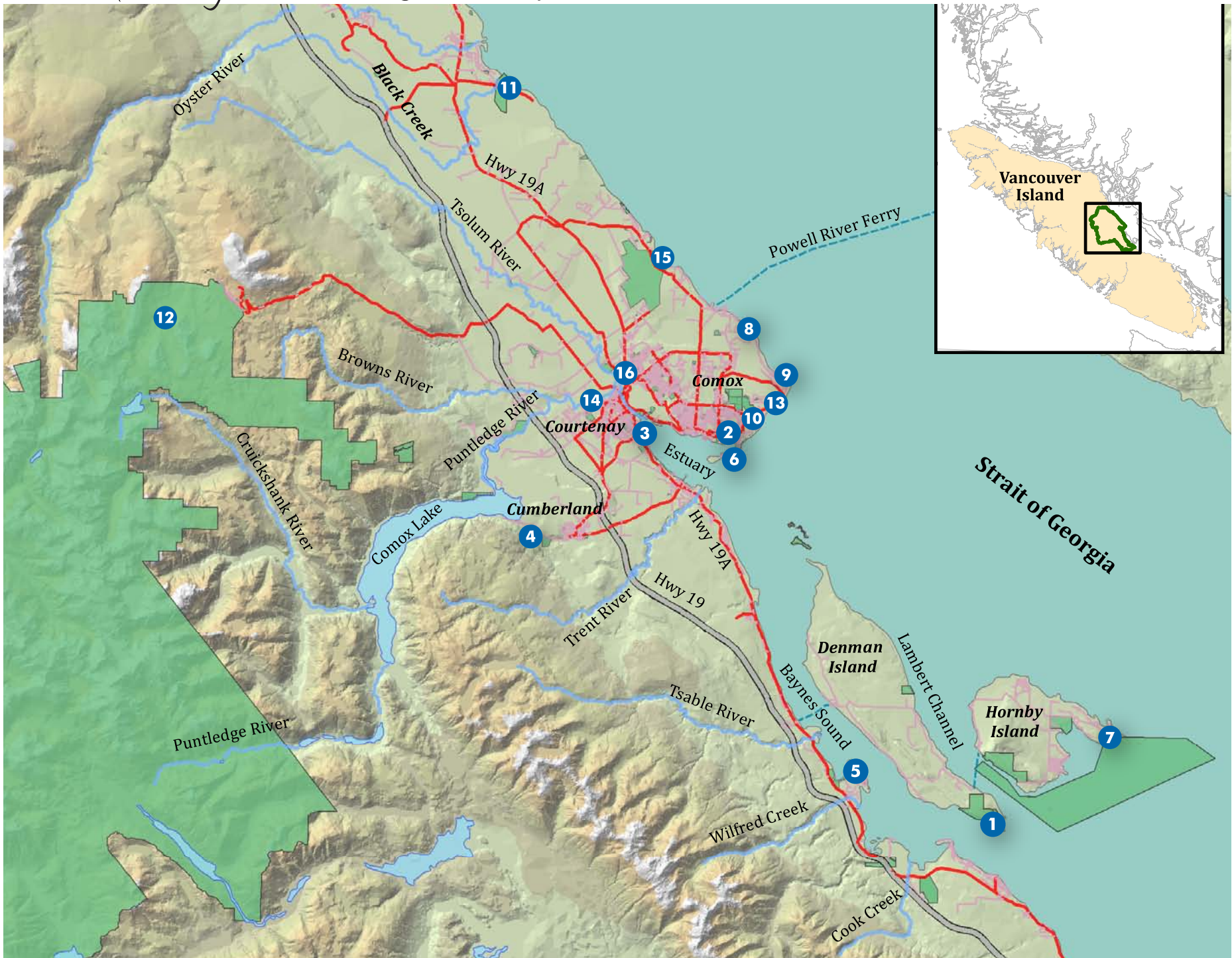
- Do not enter private property without owner's permission. Leave gates as found.
- Be considerate of other visitors.
- Respect the rights of First Nations people who use many wilderness areas.

Report all Poachers and Polluters



British Columbia has laws to protect our environment and wildlife. If you see others harming wildlife or polluting the environment, report the incident to the nearest conservation officer or local Ministry of Environment office (1-877-952-7277). Cell #9277.

Be aware that there may be seasonal or jurisdictional changes to any of the sites. CVNS assumes no responsibility for any damages arising from the use of information in this brochure.

Comox Valley Nature Viewing Guide Map



Comox Valley Nature Viewing Guide - Map Sites 1 - 5

Name	Main Access	Description	Habitat	Highlights	Regulations/Facilities
1 Boyle Point Provincial Park	<i>Ferry from Buckley Bay to Denman Island. Cross Denman, go to end of East Rd. Parking lot.</i>	At southern tip of Denman Island. 163 ha. Park bounded on three sides by cliffs, limited land access to foreshore. Viewpoint at Boyle Pt. 1.3 km from the parking lot along sloping trail.	Douglas-fir forest, sandstone escarpment.	Pelagic Cormorants on Chrome Island; old growth Douglas-fir; Bald Eagles & nest. Views of sea lions, marine life, Baynes Sound, and the Chrome Island Lighthouse.	    
2 Brooklyn Creek Park	<i>Roadside parking at east end Cedar Ave.</i>	Brooklyn Creek Park 3.4 ha.	Riparian 2nd growth forest; salt marsh; tidal flats.	Good example of stream restoration; early spring flowers; fish viewing from bridges; extensive salt marsh & tidal flats at low tide; Bald Eagles & nest, waterbirds.	  
Mack Laing Park	<i>Roadside parking at east end Comox Ave.</i>	Mack Laing Park 2.5 ha.			
Macdonald Wood Park	<i>Roadside parking at south end Croteau Rd.</i>	Macdonald Wood Park 3.4 ha.			
3 Courtenay River Estuary	<i>Parking lot at Rotary Viewing Stand across from 2600 Comox Rd.</i>	1200 ha. Courtenay River Estuary (Comox Bay) ; 250 ha. adjacent floodplain fields. Shoreline around Estuary, from Trent River Estuary to Goose Spit. 1.6 km flat paved path around Airpark.	Estuary; tidal flats; salt marsh; Sitka spruce forest; restoration of Garry oak ecosystem	Extensive tidal flats & intertidal life at low tide; seals; Bald Eagles & nest, herons, Trumpeter Swans in winter, numerous waterbirds, shorebirds; camas, shooting stars & marsh hollyhock in salt marsh.	     
Courtenay Riverway and Airpark	<i>Parking lots at 2788 Mansfield Dr; at east end 20th St.</i>				
4 Cumberland Marsh	<i>Parking area below Jumbo's Cabin at 2425 Comox Lake Rd. across from west end of Dunsmuir Avenue.</i>	40 ha. Coal Creek Historic Park	Freshwater marsh; riparian 2nd growth forest; meadow; revegetating coal slack hills	Extensive marshes; Beaver activity; nesting sapsuckers, Wood Ducks, Canada Geese in spring; yew trees; wild ginger in spring; ethnobotanical plants, variety of butterflies; possible Black Bears.	  
Cumberland Community Forest		60 ha. Cumberland Community Forest			
5 Fanny Bay Conservation Area	<i>23 km south of Courtenay. From Hwy 19A turn east onto Ships Point Rd. Roadside parking at west end of Tozer Rd.</i>	160 ha. Conservation Area, northwest side of peninsula, around Fanny Bay.	Salt marsh; cobble/rocky beach; sandy beach; cobble & mud flats; alder grove wetland; 2nd growth forest.	Variety of habitats (especially intertidal). Seals, sea lion viewing; waterbirds ; swallow boxes.	     
Ships Point Park	<i>Parking area at end of Park Rd.</i>	0.37 ha. Ships Point Park at south point of peninsula.			

Legend

 dogs on leash	 camping	 interpretive signs	 pit toilet	 bike rack at parking area
 picnic shelter	 bikes on some trails	 horses on some trails	 summer indoor washrooms	 handicap access
 picnic table	 no bikes on trails	 nature viewing platform	 bench(es)	

Comox Valley Nature Viewing Guide - Map Sites 6 - 10

Name	Main Access	Description	Habitat	Highlights	Regulations/Facilities
6 Goose Spit and Willemar Bluffs	<i>Parking lots along Hawkins Rd. in Goose Spit Park at bottom of hill.</i>	2.4 km. long sand spit partly enclosing Courtenay River Estuary (Comox Bay) ; fed from Willemar Bluffs. Flat beach to tip of spit at low tide. Roadside viewing possible. Stairs up to the bluffs.	Sand bar; cobble beach; rocky beach; sand & glacial till bluffs.	Dynamic erosion & deposition; waterbirds in winter; Brant Geese in spring; rare plant & insect species; intertidal life in summer; tiger beetles & sand wasps in bluffs.	     
7 Helliwell Provincial Park	<i>Ferry from Buckley Bay to Denman Island. Cross Denman. Ferry to Hornby Island, go to end of St. John's Point Road . Parking lot.</i>	Rocky headland at southeastern Hornby Island. 69 ha. Forest and Garry Oak meadows. 2,803 ha. cover the marine environment etc., encompassing Flora Islet. 7 km. of moderate trails along bluffs & through forest.	Coastal bluffs; meadow; old-growth Douglas-fir forest; Garry oak forest; cobble beach	Winter waterbirds; Garry oak & old growth Douglas-fir; abundant wildflowers including rare species ; cacti; views of marine life, Strait of Georgia & Coast Mountains.	   
8 Kin Beach Provincial Park	<i>Parking lot at 1700-1712 Astra Rd.</i>	Northwest of Kye Bay on the Strait of Georgia. 6.3 ha. park; 0.3 km of shoreline, 0.8 km. flat circuit around perimeter.	Sandy coastal meadow; sand & cobble beach; 2nd growth forest.	Among the earliest spring flowers in the Valley; ethnobotanical plants. Good location for stargazing due to lack of lights.	   
9 Kye Bay	<i>Parking area at Parkway Rd at bottom of hill down Kye Bay Rd.</i>	Extensive sand flats on east side of Comox Peninsula; approx. 90 ha. at low tide; reef extending approx. 1 km. into Strait of Georgia; roadside viewing possible.	Sand & cobble beach; brackish lagoon; coastal bluffs; 2nd growth forest.	Extensive sand flats at low tide; views of Vancouver Island mountains from end of reef; quantities of seaweed in autumn; waterbirds in winter; shorebirds; dynamic shoreline.	  
10 Lazo Marsh	<i>Roadside parking on Lazo Rd. .4 km east of Guthrie Rd junction.</i>	50 ha. marsh & wooded area w/ 0.8 km flat loop trail on north side of Lazo Rd. 0.9 km. one-way trail on south side Lazo Rd; small hills.	2nd growth forest; freshwater marsh & wetlands.	Close encounters with forest birds; viewing of waterbirds in marsh.	   
Northeast Comox Conservation Area	<i>Parking area at north end of Torrence Rd.</i>	77 ha. forest watershed surrounding marsh, many km of trails; some small hills.			   
Lazo Wildlife Park	<i>Parking area at west end of Sandpines Rd.</i>	3.2 ha. meadow, 0.2 km. flat path overlooking seasonally flooded agricultural fields.	Ponds; sandy meadow.	Good viewing of winter waterbirds esp. Trumpeter Swans.	   

Legend

 dogs on leash	 camping	 interpretive signs	 pit toilet	 bike rack at parking area
 picnic shelter	 bikes on some trails	 horses on some trails	 summer indoor washrooms	 handicap access
 picnic table	 no bikes on trails	 nature viewing platform	 bench(es)	

Comox Valley Nature Viewing Guide - Map Sites 11 - 16

Name	Main Access	Description	Habitat	Highlights	Regulations/Facilities
11 Miracle Beach Provincial Park	22 km north of Courtenay. From Hwy 19A turn east on Miracle Beach Drive. 2 km to parking lots.	At the mouth of Black Creek at Elma Bay on the Strait of Georgia. 137 ha. park. 7 km shoreline, 2 km of wide flat trails.	2nd growth forest; stand of mature forest; riparian; estuary; salt marsh; sandy beach.	300-400 yr old Douglas-fir; large Sitka spruce; woodpeckers; extensive sandy beach; fish viewing in autumn. Interpretive Centre from June - September.	
12 Paradise Meadows, Strathcona Provincial Park	From Exit 130 on Hwy 19, 17.5 km west up Strathcona Parkway. 2.5 km along Nordic Rd to parking lot.	Approx. 190 ha. portion of Strathcona Provincial Park. Subalpine, elevation 1100-1200 m. 2 km. wheelchair accessible boardwalk loop, 3.2 km. meadows & ponds loop with some steps. Many km. of hiking trails beyond.	Subalpine fen; meadow; mountain hemlock forest.	Variety of subalpine flowers; high elevation old-growth forest; views of mountains; Steller's Jays, Gray Jays; possible Black Bears & Vancouver Island Marmots near roadside. Summer tvInterpretive Centre.	
13 Point Holmes and Cape Lazo	Parking area on Lazo Rd. at boat launch across from Southwind Rd.	Shoreline from Willemar Bluffs to Cape Lazo; about 1 km. shoreline beside Lazo Rd. Roadside viewing possible.	Rocky, cobble & sandy beach; sand & glacial till bluffs.	Best site for rocky & cobble beaches with associated intertidal life; good site for winter storm-watching; early spring flowers; herons, Bald Eagles, swallows, winter waterbirds.	
14 Puntledge Park	Parking area at 1111 First Street.	Confluence of Morrison Creek & Puntledge River : 4.1 ha. wooded area; longest trail 0.4 km; mostly flat , short hills, steps.	Riparian 2nd growth forest.	Best place for fish viewing in autumn, and birds feeding on salmon carcasses; abundant spring flowers; many wildlife habitat trees.	
Rotary Riverside Trail and Masters Greenway	Roadside parking at north end of Rod & Gun Rd.	Wooded area 0.8 km. trail along Puntledge River. Some steps & hills.			
15 Seal Bay Forest and Nature Park	Parking lot at 2100 Bates Road	Large 2nd growth forest, on the Strait of Georgia, with an escarpment face down to the waterfront. Forest: 563 ha. woods on west side of Bates Rd; Nature Park: 152 ha. includes Melda's Marsh. Over 30 km trails.	Older 2nd growth forest; riparian along ravine; fresh-water marshes; rocky beach.	Large tract of older 2nd growth forest; variety of habitats; <i>vancouveriana</i> trembling aspen, sedge & crabapple wetland unique to Vancouver Island.	
16 Tsolum River Floodplain Trails	Parking lot at Comox Valley Exhibition Grounds at 4835 Headquarters Rd.	12 ha. wooded area along Tsolum River, confluence of Towhee Creek & Tsolum River; longest trail 1 km; wide flat trails.	Riparian 2nd growth forest.	Abundant spring flowers: particularly trillium, pink & white fawn lily; Bald Eagle & nest; salmon spawning in river & creek; good variety of trees in relatively small area.	

Legend

- dogs on leash
- picnic shelter
- picnic table
- camping
- bikes on some trails
- no bikes on trails
- horses on some trails
- nature viewing platform
- interpretive signs
- pit toilet
- summer indoor washrooms
- bench(es)
- bike rack at parking area
- handicapped access