Canoe Expeditions on and Around Vancouver Island

Juliane Bell

Land Acknowledgement

We respectfully acknowledge that the land I am presenting from is on the Unceded Traditional Territory of the K'ómoks First Nation, the traditional keepers of this land.

About Me

- Hi, my name is Juliane Bell!
- I am a Paddle Canada lake and river tandem canoe instructor, sea kayak instructor, and sea kayak guide.
- I have a YouTube Channel with detailed information guides about all the routes I paddle.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoXXH08j_98hIW69xYdX8GN3eDBncjfW0



About Me

- Canoeing is my greatest passion and my favourite form of paddling.
- I used to be an elementary school teacher and learned how to canoe through my school board.
- It has since taken over my life and budget!





Portage Routes on and Around Vancouver Island

Portage Routes

The two portage routes on/around Vancouver Island include:

- Sayward Canoe Route near Campbell River
- qathet (Formerly Powell Forest) Canoe Route near Powell River

If you're an elder you may have heard of the Nitinaht Triangle, near the West Coast Trail. This route is no longer maintained by Parks Canada and has been closed for years.

However, I have exciting new intel for you! The Ditidaht Trail Guardians have been revitalizing this route.

Sayward Canoe Route



















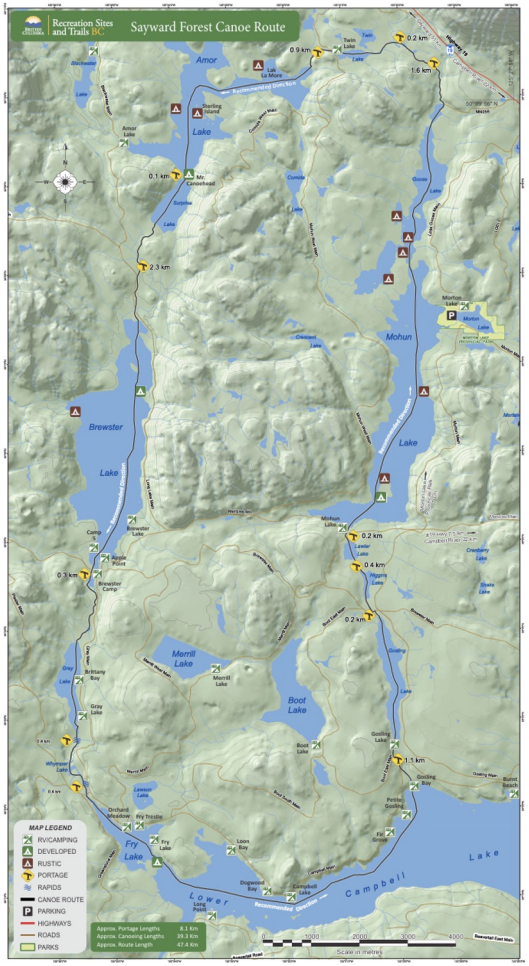




Sayward Canoe Route Overview

- Is located about 45 minutes from Campbell River
- Typically takes 2-5 days to paddle (4 is a nice amount of time)
- Includes a delightful variety of scenery: lakes, creeks, mountain views, this trip has it all!
- No fees or reservations for backcountry sites, first come first serve.
    - Front country sites cost $20 for a party of 6.

Portage Length	Canoeing Length	Total Distance
8.1km	39.3 km	47.4 km


Recreation Sites and Trails BC
Sayward Forest Canoe Route
Amor Lake
Mohun Lake
Brewster Lake
Morrill Lake
Boot Lake
Fry Lake
Lower Campbell Lake
0.9 km
0.2 km
1.6 km
0.1 km
2.3 km
0.2 km
0.4 km
0.2 km
1.1 km
0.3 km
MAP LEGEND
RV/CAMPING
DEVELOPED
RUSTIC
PORTAGE
RAPIDS
CANOE ROUTE
PARKING
HIGHWAYS
ROADS
PARKS
Approx. Portage Lengths 8.1 Km
Approx. Canoeing Lengths 39.3 Km
Approx. Route Length 47.4 Km
Scale in Metres

Route Difficulty

This route is a great first overnight canoeing trip. However, if you're doing the route it shouldn't be your first time in a canoe!

You should know the following skills:

- How to steer using a j-stroke (not switching from side to side to steer)
- What to do during a capsize

The wind can pick up on the larger lakes.

Getting There

- Download the offline maps from Google maps ahead of time as you will lose service
- It took us 30 minutes from the turn off (near Ripple Rock trail) to get to the Morton Lake parking lot
- The roads were bumpy but we fared okay in our non 4WD, low clearance vehicles (A Toyota Prius and a Toyota Alphard)





Where to Park

- Morton Lake provincial park is the most popular spot to park and start the route. There is parking designated for people completing the canoe route.
    - Don’t leave valuables in your car. We had someone try to steal our roof rack from the top of the car.
- I have also heard you can park near Brewster Lake campsite. Just don’t use up a camping spot!





Gear Considerations

- Do not pack like you are going on a sea kayaking trip or a river canoeing trip. Pack like you are going on a backpacking trip.
- I didn't get any cell service in the park except for a portion of Upper Campbell Lake. I suggest bringing a satellite phone if you have one.
- Store your essential gear (sleeping bag and clothes especially) in waterproof gear.
    - We used a portage pack and a barrel. Dry bags in a backpack work just fine.
- Most of the outhouses did not have toilet paper. Bring your own TP just in case!
- Bring cash in case you decide to camp at a front country site.
- You can use a canoe cart for most (but not all!) of the portages on this route.
- The only potable water is at Morton Lake. Bring a water treatment method.

Bear Safety

- We did see a black bear on one of our trips!
- There are no bear cache facilities on the trip. Bring a barrel, bear bag, or other system to store your food and other scented items.
- Carry bear spray and keep it accessible.
- There are no garbage facilities along the route. Be prepared to pack out your food with you.

When to Paddle?

- May through September is largely considered the best time to paddle the route due to weather conditions and water levels.
- Water levels tend to be higher in early summer.
- By August, water levels can get really low. This can mean wading in deep mud during some sections.
- I have done the route in June and September and had perfect weather and conditions both times.

What to Paddle?

People have completed this route in a canoe, SUP, and kayak.

I would personally suggest using a canoe, and not a kayak for the following reasons:

- Kayaks are heavier and harder to portage. They are harder to maneuver on a kayak cart.
- You can put a backpack in a canoe. If you use a kayak, you have to load and unload your gear into a pack for the portages. It is harder to portage a kayak solo.

Consider using a lighter weight canoe. I saw people portaging a very heavy canoe with a motor and they were pretty miserable!

Best Campsites (In my opinion)

- The island campsites on Mohun Lake, Goose Lake, and Amor Lake are spectacular. It's so special getting to camp on an island on an island!
- The Brewster Point Rec Site has a lovely beach, so if the tent platforms are full there is overflow. Amazing swimming, and a picnic table.
- Fry Narrows is also great. There is a rope swing!
- We didn't love Gray Lake campsite, but they do have designated spots for canoeists. There is a dock you can swim out to, that was really fun.
- Mr. Canoehead is a big campsite so great if you have a group.

Overview of Approximate Completion Times

- Mohun Lake to Portage 1 1 hour 20 minute paddle
- Portage 1: Goose Lake to Unnamed Lake 40 minutes
- Unnamed Lake 5 minute paddle
- Portage 2: Unnamed Lake to Twin Lake 15 minutes
- Creek + Twin Lake 35 minute paddle
- Portage 3: Twin Lake to Amor Lake 25 minutes
- Amor Lake 1 hour 15 minute paddle
- Portage 4: Amor Lake to Surprise Lake 10 minutes
- Surprise Lake 15 minute paddle
- Portage 5: Surprise Lake to Brewster Lake 35 minutes
- Brewster Lake 1 hour 30 minute paddle
- Portage 6: Brewster Lake to Creek Before Gray Lake 20 minutes
- Creek to Gray Lake 45 minutes
- Gray Lake 25 minute paddle

Overview of Approximate Completion Times cont.

- Portage 7/Rapids: Gray Lake to Whymper Lake 30 minutes
- Wading through rapids Whymper Lake 20 minute paddle
- Portage 8/Rapids: Whymper Lake to Fry Lake 20 minutes wading through rapids
- Fry Lake 45 minute paddle
- Lower Campbell Lake 1 hour 20 minute paddle
- Portage 9: Lower Campbell Lake to Gosling Lake 25 minutes
- Gosling Lake 20 minute paddle
- Portage 10: Gosling Lake to Higgins Lake 15 minutes
- Higgins Lake 15 minute paddle
- Portage 11: Higgins Lake to Laurier Lake 35 minutes
- Laurier Lake 5 minute paddle
- Portage 12: Laurier Lake to Mohun Lake 15 minutes
- Mohun Lake 1 hour 30 minute paddle back to launch point

qathet Canoe Route










Play (k)





qathet Canoe Route Overview

- Is located near Powell River
- Typically takes 4-6 days to paddle (we did it in 4 which made for long days)
- No fees or reservations for backcountry sites, first come first serve.
- Maps
  - https://www.sunshinecoastcanada.com/blog/post/52-weeks-of-trails-week-33/
    - You can email Sunshine Coast Tourism for a paper copy
  - I also really like the BRMB (Backroads Mapbook) App

Route Difficulty

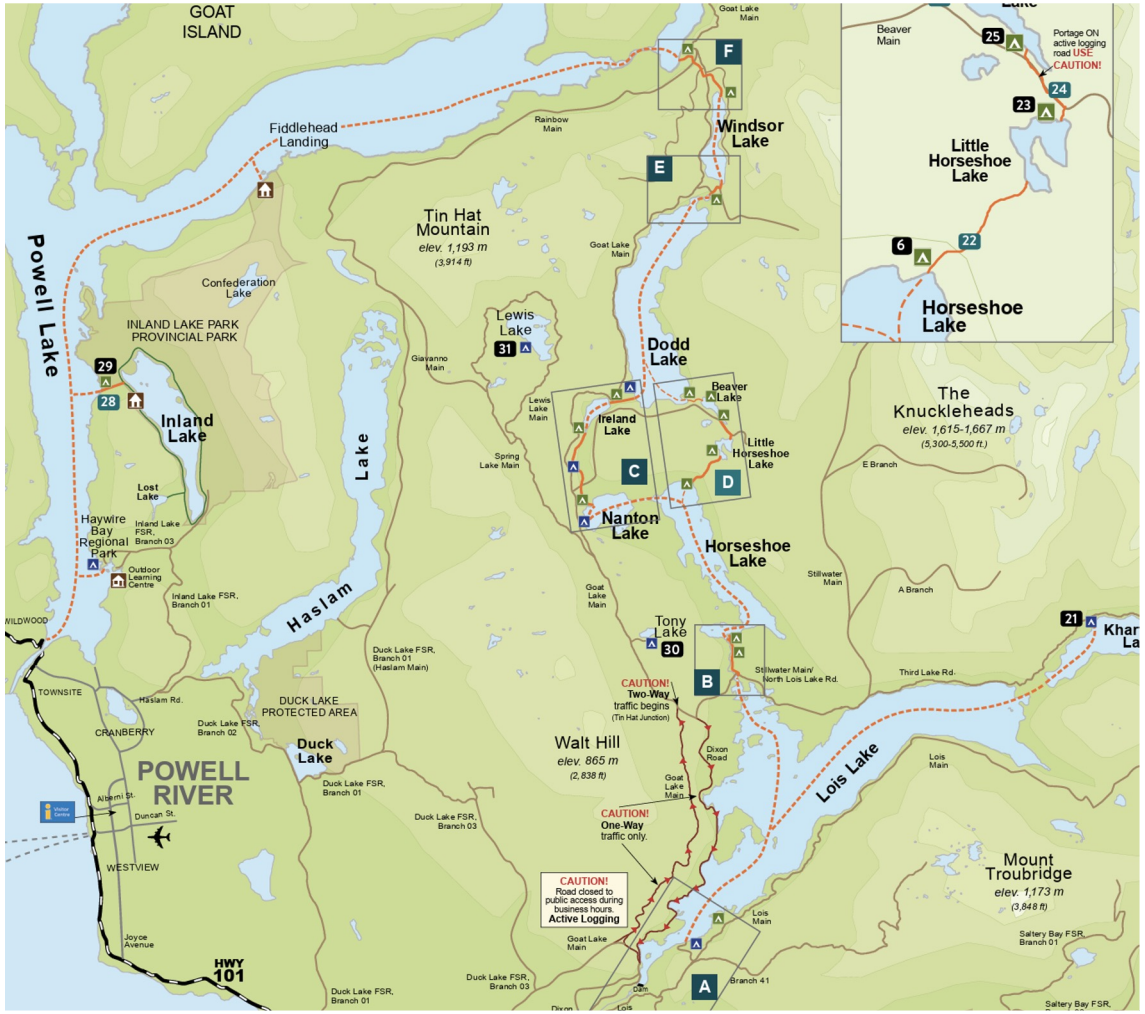
I would not suggest the full version of this route for your very first canoeing trip.

You should know the following skills:

- How to steer using a j-stroke (not switching from side to side to steer)
- What to do during a capsize
- How to safely portage your canoe

I do not recommend this route for total beginners because:

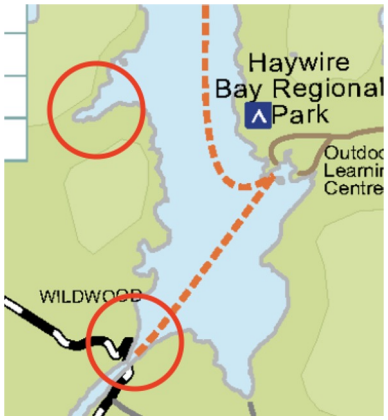
- Powell Lake predictably gets very windy
- The Windsor to Goat portage is very steep and challenging
- The route is not canoe cart friendly


GOAT ISLAND
Fiddlehead Landing
Powell Lake
Confederation Lake
INLAND LAKE PARK PROVINCIAL PARK
Inland Lake
Lost Lake
Haywire Bay Regional Park
Outdoor Learning Centre
Inland Lake FSR, Branch 03
Inland Lake FSR, Branch 01
Haslam Lake
Haslam
WILDWOOD
TOWNSITE
Haslam Rd.
CRANBERRY
DUCK LAKE PROTECTED AREA
Duck Lake FSR, Branch 02
Duck Lake
POWELL RIVER
Visitor Centre
Alberni St.
Duncan St.
WESTVIEW
Joyce Avenue
HWY 101
Duck Lake FSR, Branch 01
Duck Lake FSR, Branch 01 (Haslam Main)
Duck Lake FSR, Branch 03
Tin Hat Mountain
elev. 1,193 m
(3,914 ft)
Rainbow Main
Goat Lake Main
Windsor Lake
Fiddlehead Landing
Giavanno Main
Lewis Lake
Lewis Lake Main
Spring Lake Main
Dodd Lake
Beaver Lake
Ireland Lake
Little Horseshoe Lake
Nanton Lake
Horseshoe Lake
Stillwater Main
A Branch
E Branch
The Knuckleheads
elev. 1,615-1,667 m
(5,300-5,500 ft.)
Tony Lake
Stillwater Main/ North Lois Lake Rd.
Third Lake Rd.
CAUTION! Two-Way traffic begins (Tin Hat Junction)
Walt Hill
elev. 865 m
(2,838 ft)
Dixon Road
Lois Lake
Lois Main
CAUTION! One-Way traffic only.
CAUTION! Road closed to public access during business hours. Active Logging
Mount Troubridge
elev. 1,173 m
(3,848 ft)
Saltery Bay FSR, Branch 01
Branch 41
Dam
Saltery Bay FSR,
Beaver Main
Portage ON active logging road USE CAUTION!
Little Horseshoe Lake
Horseshoe Lake
Khar La
A
B
C
D
E
F
6
21
22
23
24
25
28
29
30
31

Where to Park

- This route is not a full circle, you do not end where you started.
- We parked our car at Lois Lake dam. The road was completely fine to drive on in our Prius.
- We ended at the Shingle Mill Beach, and took a taxi back to our starting point. (Check out the pub while you're there!)
  - https://powellrivertaxi.ca/
- You can also organize a shuttle
  - https://www.sasquatchtrailsbc.com/
- You can also park at Mowat Bay.

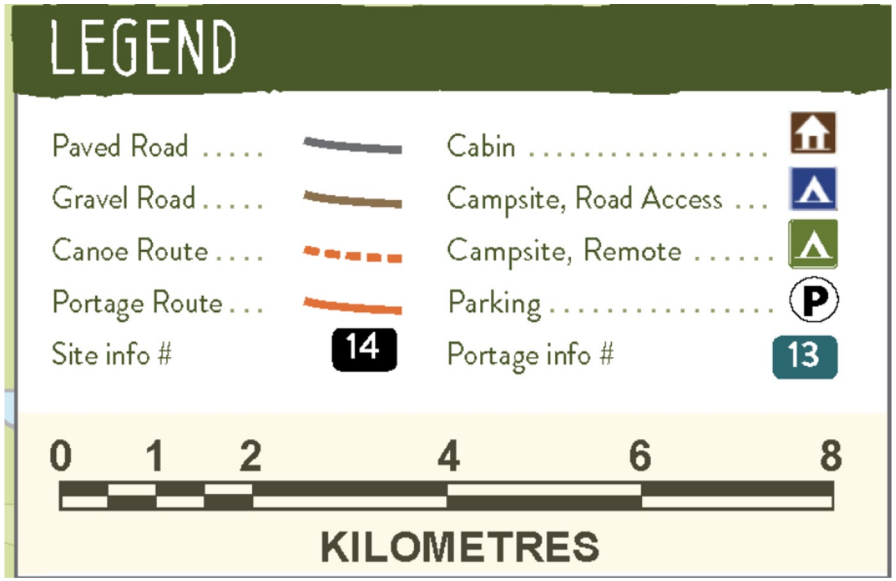




Starting Point Considerations

- Starting at Lois Lake is the most popular option.
  - This is because you get to go downhill with your gear on the Windsor/Goat portage.
  - However, it means you are most likely fighting the prevailing winds on Powell Lake.
- You could also start at one of the road access campsites on the route, if you wanted a shorter or modified trip





Gear Considerations

- Do not pack like you are going on a sea kayaking trip or a river canoeing trip. Pack like you are going on a backpacking trip.
- I didn't get any cell service in the park except for a portion of Powell Lake. I suggest bringing a satellite phone if you have one.
- Store your essential gear (sleeping bag and clothes especially) in waterproof gear.
    - We used a portage pack and a barrel. Dry bags in a backpack work just fine.
- Most of the outhouses were well stocked with toilet paper. Bring your own TP just in case!
- You can NOT use a canoe cart on this trip. **Trust me, we tried. Why did we try? I don't know.**
- Bring a water treatment method.

Bear Safety

- There are bear cache facilities at every site we saw on the trip. Bring a barrel, bear bag, or other system to store your food and other scented items just in case the cache is full.
- Carry bear spray and keep it accessible.
- There are no garbage facilities along the route. Be prepared to pack out your food with you.
- There are black bears and grizzly bears in this area.

When to Paddle?

- May through September is largely considered the best time to paddle the route.

What to Paddle?

I would personally suggest using a canoe, and not a kayak for the following reasons:

- Kayaks are heavier and harder to portage. The trails on this route are NOT suitable for kayak carts.
- You can put a backpack in a canoe. If you use a kayak, you have to load and unload your gear into a pack for the portages. It is harder to portage a kayak solo.
- I think portaging a kayak at the Goat Windsor portage would be extremely difficult and dangerous.

Consider using a lighter weight canoe.

Please note!

- We had to “leap-frog” most of the portages. This meant we carried our canoe, and had to go back to carry our bags. Some people carry their bags and their canoe at the same time.
- The average novice canoeist in good shape who knows how to steer can cover 4 km per hour in good conditions.
- You can expect a portage to take about 20 minutes per km. Remember, if you are leapfrogging your canoe and one load of bags, this triples the distance.
    - The exception to this rule is the Windsor Goat portage which is really steep.

The Portage from Hell: Windsor Lake to Goat Lake

- This portage is very challenging.
- 2.4 km
- 4 hours including a short lunch break.
- It starts off on moderate terrain.
- You cross over a flat logging road.
- Then you start a long, steep, decent towards Goat Lake.
- The frequent canoe rests help a lot.
- Goat Lake is one of the prettiest lakes + campsites in my opinion.

Best Campsites (In my opinion)

- Horseshoe Lake
  - Really large camping area and spread out. This could be a great spot to come for a two day trip.
- Windsor Lake
  - Another backcountry site. Beautiful location and close to the grueling portage.
- Goat Lake
  - Peaceful, pretty, quiet campsite.

Itinerary Idea

If you want to keep each day approximately the same length, this is my suggestion (The time is moving time NOT including breaks).

- Day 1: Lois Lake to Nanton Lake (4 hours moving)
- Day 2: Nanton Lake to Dodd Lake (4 hours moving)
- Day 3: Dodd Lake to Windsor Lake (3.5 hours moving. You could portage your canoe down the Windsor Goat portage that day so that you only have to bring your gear down the next day)
- Day 4: Windsor Lake to Fiddlehead Hut (6 hours moving, but means you don't get to paddle Powell Lake first thing in the morning)
- Day 5: Fiddlehead Hut to Shinglemill Beach (4.5 hours moving)

Overview of Approximate Completion Times

- Lois Lake: 2 hours
- Portage to Horseshoe Lake: 45 minutes (using a canoe cart)
- Horseshoe Lake to Nanton Lake: 1 hour
- Nanton Lake to Nanton-Ireland Portage: 30 minutes
- Portage from Nanton to Ireland Lake: 2 hours (using a cart, not recommended)
- Ireland Lake: Less than 30 minutes
- Portage to Dodd Lake: 1 hour (leapfrog method, carried gear)
- Dodd Lake: 1.5 hours
- Portage to Windsor Lake: 1 hour (leapfrog method, carried gear)
- Windsor Lake: Approximately 30 minutes, but didn't record time
- Windsor-Goat Portage: 4 hours (including lunch break) (leapfrog method, carried gear)
- Goat Lake to Tin Hat Hut: 2 hours
- Paddling Powell Lake from Fiddlehead Landing to Shingle Mill Beach: 4.5 hours (including breaks)

Lake Routes on and Around Vancouver Island

Lake Routes

The two primary lake routes with marine campgrounds on/around Vancouver Island include:

- Buttle Lake in Strathcona Provincial Park
- Main Lakes Chain on Quadra Island

Gear Considerations

- You can pack a little heavier for since there is no portaging.
- Cell service is spotty in Main Lake park and I got no service on Buttle Lake.
- Store your essential gear (sleeping bag and clothes especially) in waterproof gear.
  - We used a portage pack and a barrel. Dry bags in a backpack work just fine.
- Most of the outhouses are pit toilets and did not have toilet paper. Bring your own TP.
- There is no potable water. Bring a water treatment method.

When to Paddle?

- May through September is largely considered the best time to paddle here.
- **Main Lake:** Water levels tend to be higher in early summer. There are some of the lakes you cannot reach in low water conditions.

What to Paddle?

If your boat is equipped for storing backcountry gear you could paddle anything that is comfortable for you.

Bear Safety

- There are bear cache facilities at every site we saw for both lake areas. Bring a barrel, bear bag, or other system to store your food and other scented items just in case the cache is full.
- Carry bear spray and keep it accessible.

Main Lakes Chain





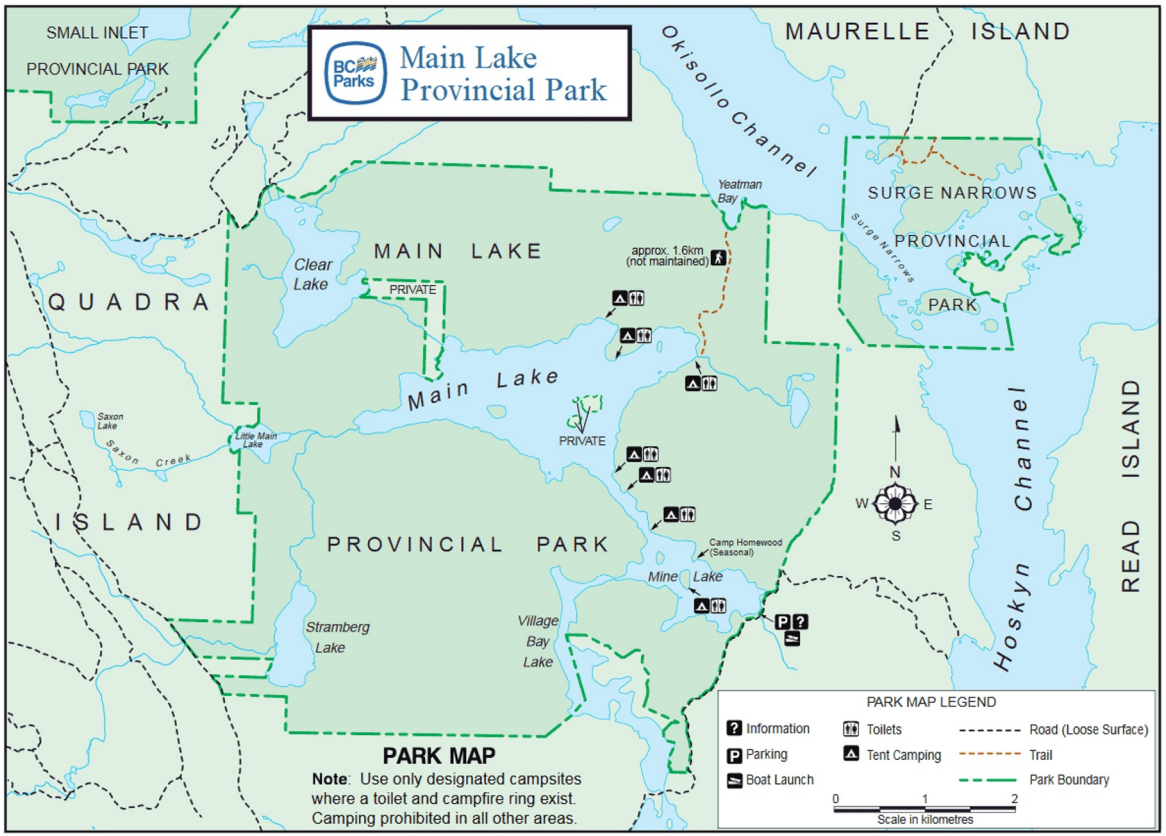




Main Lakes Overview

- Is located on Quadra Island
- You could explore part of it in one day, or spend multiple days luxuriating in this beautiful spot!
- Gorgeous, warm lakes, beautiful, quaint campsites, and a fun variety of paddling options make this a super fun trip.
- Fees are paid through BC Parks. Sites are first come, first served.




Main Lake
Provincial Park
SMALL INLET
PROVINCIAL PARK
MAURELLE ISLAND
Okisollo Channel
Yeatman Bay
SURGE NARROWS
PROVINCIAL
PARK
Surge Narrows
MAIN LAKE
approx. 1.6km
(not maintained)
Clear Lake
PRIVATE
QUADRA
ISLAND
Main Lake
Saxon Lake
Saxon Creek
Little Main Lake
PRIVATE
N
W
E
S
PROVINCIAL PARK
Camp Homewood
(Seasonal)
Mine Lake
Stramberg Lake
Village Bay Lake
Hoskyn Channel
READ ISLAND
PARK MAP LEGEND
Information
Parking
Boat Launch
Toilets
Tent Camping
Road (Loose Surface)
Trail
Park Boundary
0
1
2
Scale in kilometres
PARK MAP
Note: Use only designated campsites where a toilet and campfire ring exist. Camping prohibited in all other areas.

Campsite Overview

- Campsites are unnamed on the map
- All designated campsites have pit toilets or outhouses, fire pits, bear caches, and picnic tables at some sites. Tent space ranges from small and limited to very spacious.
  - Mine Lake: One island campsite
  - Channel (Mine Lake → Main Lake): Three campsites along the channel
  - Main Lake: Three campsites — Yeatman (east side), Howard's (north end), and North Bay (north bay)



Lakes Overview

- Village Bay Lake – Launch point, cabins, connects to Mine Lake via a winding creek known by locals as The Gut
- Mine Lake – Small, island campsite, good swimming, links to Main Lake.
- Main Lake – Largest lake, three campsites.
- Little Main Lake – Access via Shadow Brook, muddy approach.
- Clear Lake – Shallow creek access, often not passable in summer.
- Stramberg Lake – Off creek near Little Main, often not passable in summer.

Route Difficulty

This route is a great beginner trip.

You should know the following skills:

- How to steer using a j-stroke (not switching from side to side to steer)
- What to do during a capsize



Getting There

- To reach Main Lake Provincial Park, take the ferry from Campbell River to Quadra Island (about 10 minutes).
- From the ferry terminal, it’s roughly a 30-minute drive to the park.
- The final stretch to Village Bay Lake is along a well-maintained gravel road.

Where to Park

- Village Bay Lake Launch – Gravel road access just before the bridge. Small parking lot and outhouse. Scenic launch with many private cabins on the shoreline. Connects to Mine Lake.
- Main Lake Launch – Located inside the park with a parking lot and outhouse. Provides direct access to Main Lake and nearby campsites.



Best Campsites (In my opinion)

- Channel Site 3 – Sandy beach, spacious, great swimming, and the only full outhouse in the park.
- Yeatman Site (Main Lake) – Very large, lots of tent space, good amenities, and access to a 1.6 km hike.
- Mine Lake Island Site – Beautiful, quiet island setting with excellent swimming (though landing is steep and tent space limited).



Buttle Lake

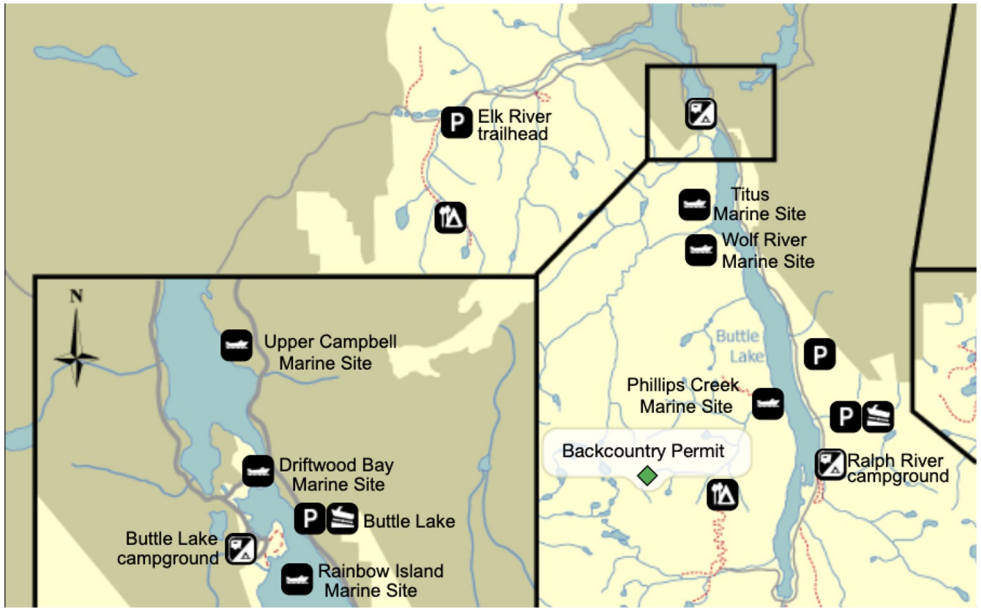






Buttle Lake Overview

- Is located in Strathcona Provincial Park
- You could explore part of it in one day, or spend multiple days checking out the various campsites.
- Fees are paid through BC Parks. Sites are first come, first served.



Campsite Overview

Buttle Lake Boat Launch

- **Upper Campbell Lake Marine Site** – I have not been there but I think it has the standard amenities
- **Rainbow Island Marine Site** - An island on an island!!!

Lupin Falls Day Use Area

- **Titus Marine Campsite**
- **Wolf River Marine Campsite** – Close to a beautiful waterfall

Auger Point Day Use Area / Karst Creek Boat Launch

- **Phillips Creek** – gateway to the Marble Meadows hike

All sites have tent pads, picnic tables, outhouses, and fire pits.

Route Difficulty

I would classify Buttle Lake as an intermediate trip because the winds can be intense and unpredictable.

Even paddling across the lake could become treacherous in extreme winds.

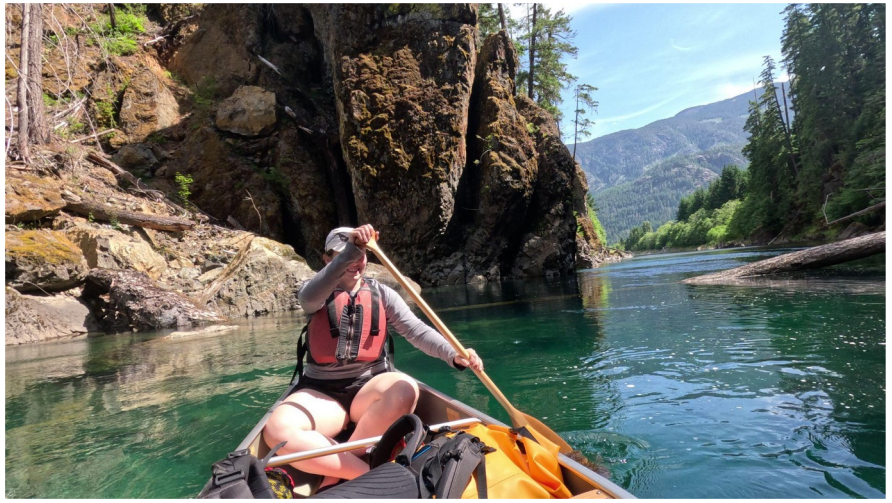
You should know the following skills:

- How to steer using a j-stroke (not switching from side to side to steer)
- What to do during a capsize

The campsites are not well marked! We would have had difficulty finding them without the BRMB app.

Getting There

- Download the offline maps from Google maps ahead of time as you will lose service
- Roads are fully paved and there is clear signage



Where to Park/ Launch

Boat Launches

- Buttle Lake
- Karst Creek

Day Use Areas (hand launch only)

- Auger Point
- Lupin Falls



Super Secret Hidden Cabins and Backcountry Canoes

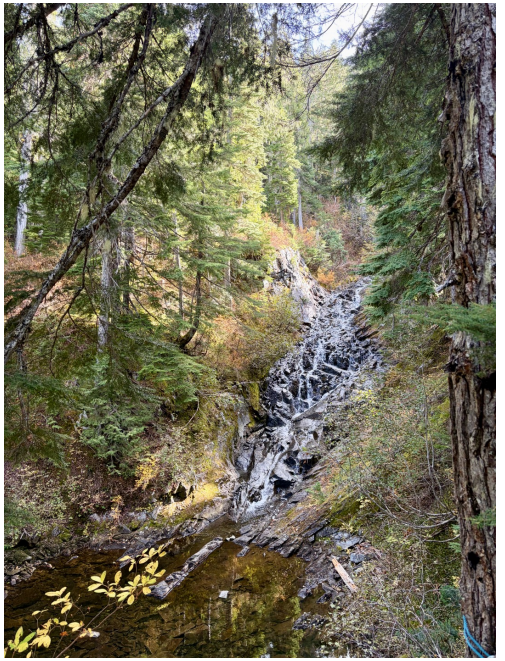
Divers Lake Cabin

- Is located in Strathcona Provincial Park
- Can park at Raven Lodge.
- Hike to Divers Lake. The route is on AllTrails. You could theoretically walk through the woods but it’s very dense brush.
- There are canoes near the lake and hidden in the forest. Bring your own paddles and PFDs.
- Canoe to the end of the lake. Watch for the creek.
- Walk up the creek, and there is a beautiful cabin in the woods! There is an outhouse here.
- Across the lake from the cabin on the rocky bluff is a nice lookout and bench.













Kludahk Trail

- Runs parallel to the Juan de Fuca trail along the San Juan Ridge.
- 40km, 3-5 day backpacking trail. Multiple access points.
- Cabins are available for day use for anyone. Overnight use is only for club members. All huts have tent pads.
- Some of the cabins have canoes that you can use to explore the lakes!
- The canoes are pretty rickety!



Wye Lake

No cabin. There is a camping area with outhouse and shelter.





Blueberry Hill Cabin

The prettiest in my opinion!





Noyse Cabin

The biggest lake.






NOYSE CABIN RULES
Take nothing
BUT
PICTURES
leave nothing
BUT RIPPLES
Waste nothing
but
TIME
'KOC'

What's Next?

What About Ocean Canoeing?

- I would consider ocean canoeing in these parks because they have sheltered areas and options to avoid long crossings.
  - Broken Group Islands
  - Desolation Sound

Honourable mentions/lakes I want to check out!

- Great Central Lake
  - A long windy lake. Options to camp at Scout Recreation Site or the trailhead for Della Falls
- Cowichan Lake
  - Plenty of campsites and rec sites to explore
- Sproat Lake
  - Campsites and rec sites to explore, could paddle to a remote cottage perhaps!

Off the beaten path

- Woss Lake
  - To check out the little known, soon to be revitalized Oolichan Grease Trail. There is a wilderness site at the end of the lake with tent pads, an outhouse, and a cooking shelter.
- Nimpkish River
  - The only multi day river route I am aware of on Vancouver Island

Upcoming Canoe Lessons on Vancouver Island

- SKILS is offering a Paddle Canada Intermediate Moving Water Tandem course on the Gold River March 20th-21st
- Shawn Kangro is offering an Advanced Coastal Canoeing course on Read Island March 5th – 8th
- Elements Adventure Company is offering a 4 -day Tandem Canoe Intensive and a Solo Canoe Intensive March 19th-22nd
- Watch Victoria Canoe and Kayak Club and South Island Club for other opportunities

Best Rivers for Canoeists

I have paddled

- Cowichan River
- Lower Chemainus River
- Lower Puntledge River
- Lower Oyster River
- Middle Gold River

I have not paddled yet

- Nanaimo River
- Campbell River
- Sooke River
- Stamp River
- Salmon River



My winter goal is to create maps for class 2 rivers on the island that don't exist on Paddle Maps already!

Questions?

