

The “Migratory Bird” Refuges



What Are Migratory Birds?

While some birds live in one area year-round, “migratory birds” make regular seasonal flights from one area to another. These birds usually fly between wintering areas and summer breeding grounds. Although many species go north and south, others travel between coastal breeding areas and the open sea. Migration allows them to escape the short days and low food supplies of winter, only to return to raise their young when days are longer and food supplies more abundant. “Migratory” birds include many species of waterfowl, shorebirds, seabirds and songbirds.



Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge

Ducks, hawks, salmon and sand shrimp live side by side at Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. Salt marshes lie adjacent to freshwater marshes, and mudflats quickly turn to thick forests. Located on the delta where the Nisqually River flows into Puget Sound, this refuge is managed to protect the diversity of habitats and wildlife species found there. Ten different habitat types, ranging from salt marshes, mudflats, and estuaries to freshwater marshes, grasslands, and forests are the home of 177 species of birds, 27 species of fish, 35 mammals, and 5 reptiles and amphibians.

Migratory waterfowl are of special importance at Nisqually. Up to 20,000 ducks and 300 geese find food, water, and shelter here during their spring and fall migrations, and many stay throughout the winter. Other migrants such as goldfinches, warblers, and swallows arrive in the spring and stay at Nisqually throughout the summer to nest and raise their young.

Other “resident” birds may be seen at Nisqually all year long. Great blue herons are a common sight in the marshes and grasslands, while red-tailed hawks soar overhead and nest high in cottonwood trees along the river.



Why Do They Come Here?

Like people, migratory birds need food, water and shelter. Both Nisqually and Dungeness National Wildlife Refuges have abundant supplies of water and offer a smorgasbord of foods to suit a variety of avian tastes. Shorebirds may feast on mudflat invertebrates while goldfinches prefer the fluffy seeds of thistles and dandelions. These refuges also have protected places where birds can find shelter from high winds and storms, and where they are safe from harassment by people. Migratory birds use Nisqually and Dungeness at different times and in a variety of ways. Some birds come in the fall and stay throughout the winter, while others arrive in the spring to raise their young through the summer months. Other birds stop for only a few days to eat and rest before continuing their fall and spring migrations.

Do Other Animals Live Here Too?

The variety of habitats found at Nisqually and Dungeness National Wildlife Refuges make them the home of a wide variety of wildlife. In addition to migratory birds, many “resident” birds such as the great blue heron live at these refuges throughout the year. Land mammals such as raccoons, weasels, and black-tailed deer also live and raise their young at Nisqually and Dungeness, as do marine mammals such as harbor seals and sea lions. Clams, crabs, sand shrimp and other invertebrates abound in the mudflats and many kinds of fish inhabit the surrounding waters.



Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge

Dungeness Spit is formed by eroding soil, wind, and water currents, and stretches for five and one-half miles along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. It breaks the rough sea waves to form a quiet bay, sand and gravel beaches, and tideflats where wildlife can find food and protection from wind, waves, and pounding surf. The bay and estuary of the Dungeness River produce micro-organisms that form the base of the food web, feeding a variety of wildlife including waterfowl, seabirds, shellfish, anadromous and ocean fish. Shorebirds and waterfowl feed and nest along the beaches, while seals haul out of the water to rest in the sun. The tideflats are the home of crabs, clams, oysters, and other shellfish. Shorebirds such as turnstones, phalaropes, and sandpipers may be seen searching for food along the water's edge.

As many as 30,000 waterfowl stop briefly at Dungeness each fall on their journey south for the winter and north in the spring. Up to 10,000 spend the winter at the refuge. Black brant, a species of goose that depends on eelgrass for its food, is present throughout the winter months and during spring migration.



Wildlife Observation — Fall migration (Oct.-Nov.) is the best time to see large numbers of birds, and many stay throughout the winter. Nisqually has an observation deck and three photo blinds; Dungeness has an overlook with spotting scope.

All of Turn Island and five acres on Matia Island are also managed as Marine State Parks. They provide boat mooring areas and facilities for camping and picnicking. Toilets are provided but no water is available on these islands. The rest of Matia Island except the designated Wilderness Trail is closed to the public.

Clamming — Visitors may dig for clams at Dungeness but are subject to Washington State shellfish regulations. (Shellfish may be toxic from red tides from May through October. Inquire locally about conditions.) All oysters are privately owned and may not be harvested by the public.

Pets, fires, jogging, or camping are not permitted on these refuges. Bicycles and motorbikes are not permitted on refuge trails.

A detailed illustration of a Red-throated Diver (Griffon) standing on a light-colored surface. The bird is shown in profile, facing right. It has a long, dark neck, a sharp beak, and dark plumage with lighter patches on its wings and tail. The background is a plain, light color.

- Read about the wildlife of Washington Islands at Lake Ozette, Rialto Beach, Second Beach, Ruby Beach, and Kalaloch along the Washington coast.
- Information about San Juan Islands NWR is located at marinas and resorts throughout the San Juan Islands.

