

The Site Guide

Stanley Park, Vancouver, British Columbia

by *Brian M. Kautesk*¹

Location Downtown Vancouver, B.C.

Description Stanley Park is a multi-use recreational park, adjacent to downtown and residential Vancouver, and situated on a peninsula jutting directly into Vancouver Harbour (Burrard Inlet). The shoreline, totally accessible by over 5 miles of paved seawall promenade, is mainly rocky, with a few areas of mudflats, and two public beaches. This walkway permits exceptional sea-birding from shore. The water around the park is deep and cold. The main part of the park is second growth forest, predominantly Douglas-fir, Western Red Cedar, Western Hemlock, Broadleaf Maple, with Vine Maple and Red Alder in openings, and a general understory of Salal and Salmonberry (a magnet for hummingbirds in April). There are many trails that go deep into the secluded woods, where determined birders can, with time, find the Hutton's Vireo. Much ornamental planting is present in the southern part of the park, attracting great numbers of passerines. Maximum elevation of the park is about 230 feet above sea level. Also within the park is an aquarium, children's playground facilities, flower gardens,

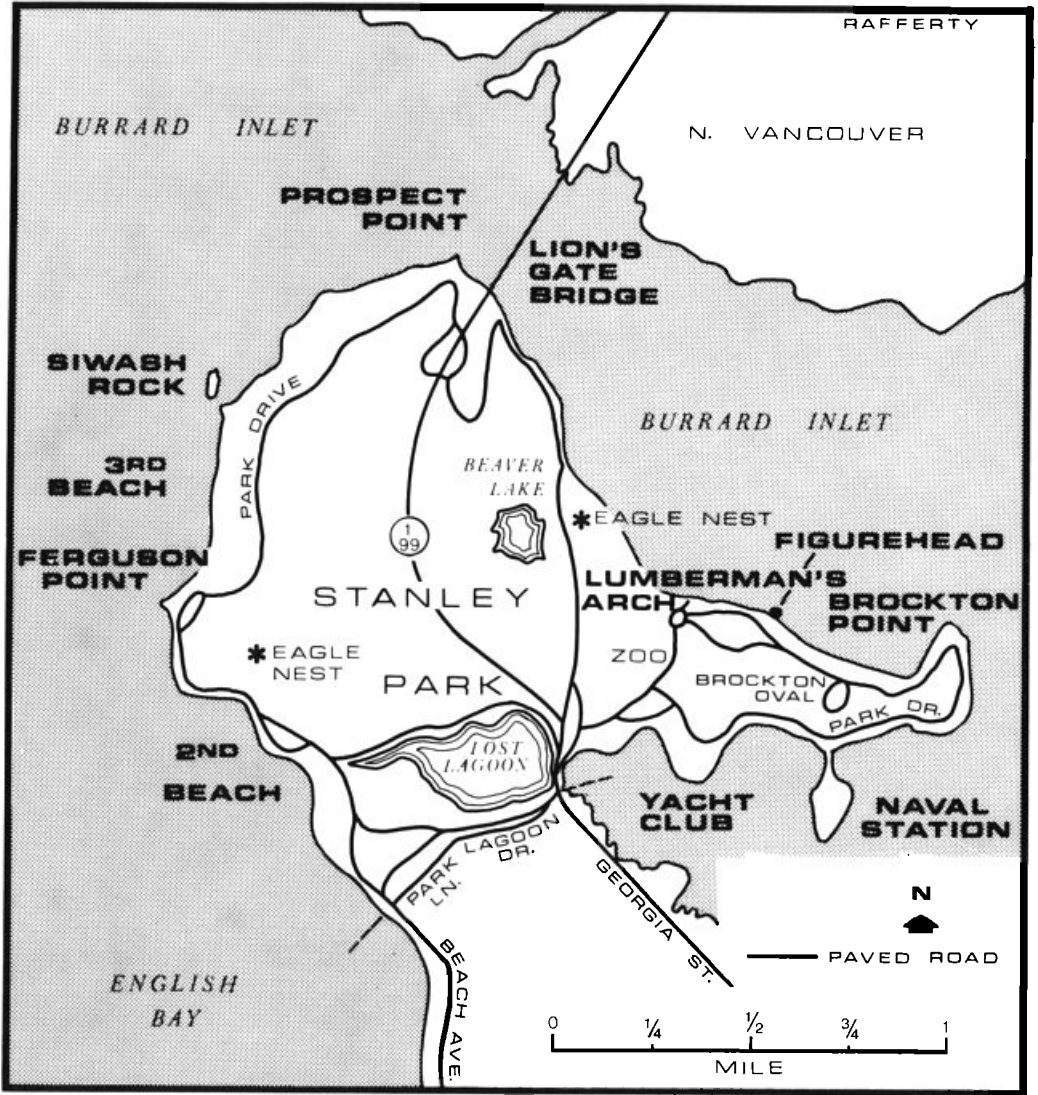
totem poles, and other historical artifacts.

Access From Vancouver International Airport drive north through the city to the downtown area. Stanley Park is easily found, being that large green patch in the center of any Vancouver City map. To avoid traffic congestion, approaches to the park should be made either via Beach Avenue, or Burrard and Georgia Streets. I recommend the latter for those following my birding itinerary, outlined below.

Accommodations No problems of course, being in the heart of a major city. In pleasant weather, various concession booths throughout the park are open. Camping is not allowed in the park.

Birdwatching Long known as a prime birding area, it has been only in the most recent years that the park has been studied methodically and its secrets brought to light. Although not an official bird sanctuary, the park is clearly "bird-oriented" and, if worked properly, can give excellent results. Sea birds and land birds highlight the very varied

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avifauna, which has produced such diverse rarities as Yellow-billed Loon, King Eider, Smew, Skua, Sabine's Gull, Forster's Tern, Pygmy Owl, Black-and-white Warbler, Palm Warbler, and White-winged Crossbill, to name just a few. On one October day in 1975 I found a Harris', a Tree, and a White-throated Sparrow, all in the park at the same time, all considered rather "good birds" in the Lower Mainland. However, all too many birders are tempted to drive around the park by car, stopping for brief glimpses here and there. To really know the park, and to reap the harvest from it, one must bird on foot. I will begin by describing the Stanley Park seawall and its birds of interest.

Park your car somewhere by the side of the road, or adjacent to the zoo, and begin the seawall promenade in the eastern part of the park. When the tide is out and a "wave" is on, check the mudflats near the Yacht Club and Deadman's Island for shorebirds. In winter beyond the Naval Station large rafts of scap and wigeon may include a Tufted Duck or European Wigeon. At Brockton Point gulls often congregate, sometimes in numbers, and this is the best place in the park to study terns (August, September). In winter all the sea ducks including Oldsquaw can be seen in the vicinity and one should look for Common Murres well offshore.

During the fall (late July to October) if there is a good herring run, the entire eastern part of the park's waters may be crowded with Bonaparte's Gulls, and the rarer small gulls, especially the Franklin's, should be watched for. In the fall (mainly October) the Broad-leaf Maples above the seawall are frequented by Yellow-rumped Warblers and fringillids and should be checked for vagrants. In winter, grebes, loons and cormorants abound all around the seawall. One of the park's chief attractions is the nesting, in summer, of Pigeon Guillemots, on Prospect Point cliffs. Birds fly to and from their nests carrying food, chattering noisily and passing very

close to observers. I once found a nest only 15 feet above the actual seawall. Summer sea-birding is confined to alcids generally; doubtless the Marbled Murrelet also nests in the park, adults being very numerous in summer, often with young; a nest fugitive young was found near Lost Lagoon in 1970. Check the bushes and trees on the cliffs for passerines.

In winter watch for the Harlequin Ducks here. Proceeding west along the seawall, we come to Siwash Rock. Wandering Tattler has been seen here more than once and Glaucous-winged Gulls nest on the rock, whereas in winter, cormorants of two or three species roost in trees nearby. Once you are on the western part of the seawall, the ocean must be watched carefully, for the possibility of pelagic strays increases owing to the broader ocean area. Although not recorded in early summer in the park itself, areas just a few miles west have recorded Sabine's Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake and the odd jaeger in early June, and the summer visitor may have a lucky sighting. In winter great numbers of sea ducks and other waterbirds occur from the Rock to the west entrance of the park. Common Mergansers also nest in the vicinity and they can be seen with their large broods throughout the summer here and at other places around the seawall. Third Beach is often good for passerines, as are the trails running from there to Lost Lagoon, roughly parallel to the seawall, where both Chestnut-backed and Black-capped Chickadees (along with other species) can easily be hand-fed.

Returning again during the fall to the ocean, Parasitic Jaegers (often in mobs of up to four or five) may be watched, chasing the terns and gulls, often very close to the seawall. September and October are the best months, jaegers being especially active after the huge rafts of Western Grebes arrive at the end of September. Afternoon is the best time to watch the jaegers, often even after sunset, but this depends on the feeding conditions at the time. Ferguson

Point is the best spot in the park for shorebirds (and loafing gulls). During migration waves (especially during storms) many species have been recorded, but usually in small numbers. Peep are the usual fare in spring and fall, with other species being possible, Sanderling and Black (and perhaps Ruddy) Turnstones in winter. Storms around the first of May may drop off almost anything.

Having completed the seawall, we come to the nucleus of the park, the Lost Lagoon area, which again must be birded on foot. The entire area in the southern part of the park, even up to the adjacent apartment buildings on Lagoon Drive, encompass the very best passerine birding in the Vancouver area. Ornamental and exotic plants, good gardening by the Parks Board, predominance of maple, birch and alder species in an open area "parkland" setting, and geographical location are the prime reasons. When a warbler wave is on, this area is the match of any. Work it completely, from the tree rows above the seawall, around the golf course and tennis courts, the areas behind the parking lot (near the apartments) and down the path towards the lagoon, checking all the habitat entirely around the lagoon. This area is excellent for wintering passerines and raptors. We frequently watch Goshawks attempting to catch the numerous park squirrels in this area! I find White-throated Sparrows every year in this area during migration, and during early November of 1973, a Philadelphia Vireo spent at least two or three weeks foraging in Sycamore Maples beside the tennis courts' tea house. A few of these maples are also planted just south of the Second Beach pool and also near the Brockton Oval restrooms. These trees are singular magnets for passerines during spring and mainly during late fall. Lost Lagoon itself hosts an introduced population of Mute and (Australian) Black Swans, as well as attracting large numbers of ducks from October to April. Tufted Ducks have been occur-

ring annually (mainly in October–November) and are the lagoon specialty, although by no means guaranteed. Ducks move freely to and from the lagoon, late afternoon being the best time to watch the night-roosting flocks collect. Many Double-crested Cormorants use the lagoon in the winter and Wood Ducks nest in the summer. Gulls loaf on the south bank during the winter and a Western Gull or two is usually present along with a few Thayer's. When the lagoon is partially frozen during the winter, many more gulls stand on the ice edge, and must be studied carefully. You should see more Thayer's then, and perhaps a larid rarity. When the Bonaparte's Gull migration is at its peak, up to one thousand or more may be seen at dusk flying east to west over and into the lagoon, before leaving to sleep on the ocean.

At the west corner of the lagoon, by the stone bridge, you can hand-feed Red-winged Blackbirds in the non-breeding season, as well as see many other passerines. The Park's resident pair of Bald Eagles is present most of the year and nests in one of two nest sites (marked on the map). It raised two young in 1975. Ravens are regular and probably nest in the park. Check Beaver Lake and the trails around it for migrant passerines in spring and fall (especially August–September). This is a good spot for Townsend's and Black-throated Gray Warblers, as well as rails, chiefly the Sora. Trumpeter and Whistling Swans are kept as display birds here. Check for the odd shorebird when there is exposed mud, and watch for hawks. The trail running directly to the ocean (beside the zoo pens) is a good spot for passerines at any time, as is the area behind Lumberman's Arch and the zoo. Great Blue Herons are so abundant in the park that most birders simply ignore them. There is an active heronry near the zoo.

Rating Spring **** Summer *** Fall
**** Winter ****



Three of the birds of Stanley Park, Vancouver. Top, Western Grebe, photo/ Joseph Van Wormer. Left, Tufted Duck, photo/ Russ Kinne. Below, Smew, photo/ Philippa Scott. All from Photo Researchers, Inc.

