

# NESTING BIRDS OF MITLENATCH ISLAND



## GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL

About 1,000 pairs of Glaucous-winged Gulls nest on Mitlenatch Island. This large gull with grey wing tips is the common gull of Georgia Strait. Adults start arriving in April to stake out breeding territories (a small circle in the grassy rock outcroppings), which are fiercely defended until their young fledge.

Eggs, which are buff to pale olive and spotted or blotched with darker brown, begin to appear about late May, with the first eggs hatching in late June (the incubation period is about 27 days). Almost as soon as the young hatch they can move around. Instinctively they peck at the red spot on their parent's bill. This stimulates the parent to regurgitate warm partly digested food, which the chick devours.

By the end of August most young gulls have left the island. Banding studies indicate that most of the grey-brown juveniles winter within 100 km (60 miles) of Mitlenatch.

In addition to Glaucous-winged Gulls, Pelagic Cormorants, Double-crested Cormorants, Pigeon Guillemots, and Black Oystercatchers nest on Mitlenatch Island.

## PELAGIC CORMORANT

There are about 173 Pelagic Cormorant pairs nesting on Mitlenatch. These birds build nests of seaweed and grass, cemented together with guano, on narrow ledges on the steep cliff faces. The 4 to 6 eggs are light bluish white. Pelagic Cormorants feed on small fish.

## DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT

There are about 26 Double-crested Cormorant pairs on Mitlenatch. They build stick nests on flatter ground on the crest of steep cliffs.

## NORTHWESTERN CROW

The Northwestern Crow is one of the more conspicuous birds on Mitlenatch Island. Their bulky platform nests, built in the pine forest, thickets, and sometimes on the ground, hold 3 to 4 bluish green, brown mottled eggs. Crows are omnivorous, relishing crabs, clams, berries, seabird eggs, carrion, and regurgitated gull food.

## PIGEON GUILLEMOT

Pigeon Guillemot nest under large boulders and driftwood and in rock crevices near the water. Nests are lined with a few chips of rock, shell, or wood. The 2 eggs are very pale grey with small dark blotches. Guillemots feed on small fish. A few minutes of watching guillemots lounging on the rocks (each with a freshly caught fish in their beaks) is a great way to observe the diversity of local small fish.

## BLACK OYSTERCATCHER

Black Oystercatchers nest on the beach above high tide line. Oystercatcher nests are a "scrape," a depression on the ground, lined with small pebbles and shell fragments. The 2 to 3 eggs are light grey with small dark blotches. If an oystercatcher is agitated, exhibiting alarm behavior (calling and pacing) or even walking away you may be near a nest and should immediately leave. When an oystercatcher leaves its nest, crows, ravens, and other predators will rush in to steal eggs or eat chicks. Oystercatchers feed on shellfish, especially limpets.



In 2010, MIST, a volunteer organization, was formed to support Provincial Park's mandate to provide protection for Mitlenatch Island. A large part of the organization's focus is to maintain the volunteer warden program, which is crucial for visitation and conservation of the island.

Volunteer wardens are present throughout the late spring and summer months. Their primary role is the protection of nesting birds. They contribute to an avian monitoring program and an ecological restoration initiative. Wardens also provide visitors with information, keep detailed records of visitation and natural history, clear trails, remove invasive plants, and maintain outhouses.

**MIST is a self-sustaining organization. It is grateful for all donations, which can be made to the volunteers at the cabin or by mail:**

To Ken Graham (MIST volunteer and treasurer)  
11565 - 84<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Delta BC, V4C 2L9

**FOR FURTHER INFO CONTACT**  
[www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks)



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## Mitlenatch Nature PROVINCIAL PARK



## WELCOME TO MITLENATCH ISLAND

Why is a tiny (36 hectare) rocky island the largest seabird colony in the Strait of Georgia?

Mitlenatch provides safe nesting sites to ground nesting birds like gulls and cormorants (which are vulnerable in less isolated sites to predators like cats, dogs, rats, and human disturbance).

And, nestled mid-strait in an area of rich tidal mixing and upwellings, the waters around the island are rich with forage fish for growing chicks.

As a Provincial Park, Mitlenatch provides special protection for birds, terrestrial, and marine plants and animals. But if nesting seabirds are disturbed, they may fly off their nests leaving eggs and chicks open to predation by other gulls, Northwestern Crows, Common Ravens, and Bald Eagles.

**Therefore we ask you to follow some easy guidelines to protect this special place:**

- **Land only on the middle of the beaches** on either side of the island (Camp Bay on the south and Northwest Bay on the north.) Shores encircling the bays are prime nesting areas.

- Visitors must **stay on paths**.

- **Pets are not permitted.** Dogs in particular can quickly create panic in a colony.

- When approaching the Observation Blind **keep your party together and move slowly**. This will reduce the gull's anxiety and allow you to observe their behaviour and "family life" more easily.

- **Do not remove anything** from the park (including flowers, bones, feathers, shells, stones...)

- Nesting cormorants are **very easily disturbed**. Nesting cormorants are **best viewed quietly and at a minimum distance of 50 m from a slow moving boat**.

- **Please don't feed any animals** — human food can harm wild animals; they can quickly become habituated and aggressive.

## HOW DID MITLENATCH BECOME A PARK?

Mitlenatch was once owned by the Manson family of Cortes Island. They raised cattle and sheep on the island. Cattle were butchered on island and the meat rowed to nearby Comox. Sheep were ferried to the island in spring and removed in late autumn. To discourage "mutton pickers" the family lived on the island in a driftwood cabin during 1892. All that remains of the Manson family's activities are introduced grasses and apple trees.

In 1959 the Province of British Columbia purchased

Mitlenatch from the Manson family estate and in 1961 it was designated as a Provincial Nature Park. Within the park boundary, which extends 300 m (1000 feet) offshore from the island, no marine harvesting is permitted. This includes: oysters, abalone, crab, sea cucumbers, shrimp, and prawns. Fishing for fin fish is also prohibited within this boundary, as well as within the Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) which extends beyond the park boundary.

Please be sure to check the local Fisheries and Oceans Canada offices for up to date information.

## WHAT DOES "MITLENATCH" MEAN?

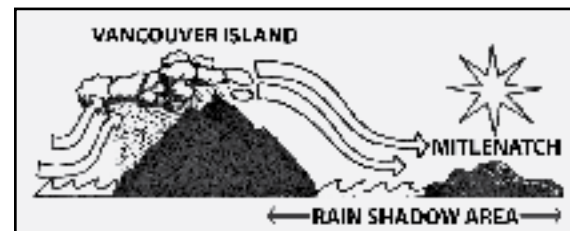
Mitlenatch is a First Nations word with a number of meanings. In Coast Salish it has been translated to "calm waters all around." In the Sliammon language, "metl" means calm and "nach" means posterior. Calm (waters) behind is an apt description of the island during stormy weather. To the Kwagiulth people "mah-kwee-lay-lah" means "it looks close, but seems to move away as you approach it."

## GEOLOGY

The bedrock of Mitlenatch Island is a volcanic basalt that formed from lava. Note its dark colour. The large, light coloured granite boulders scattered here are glacial erratics, dragged by ice from the last ice age, from nearby Bute Inlet.

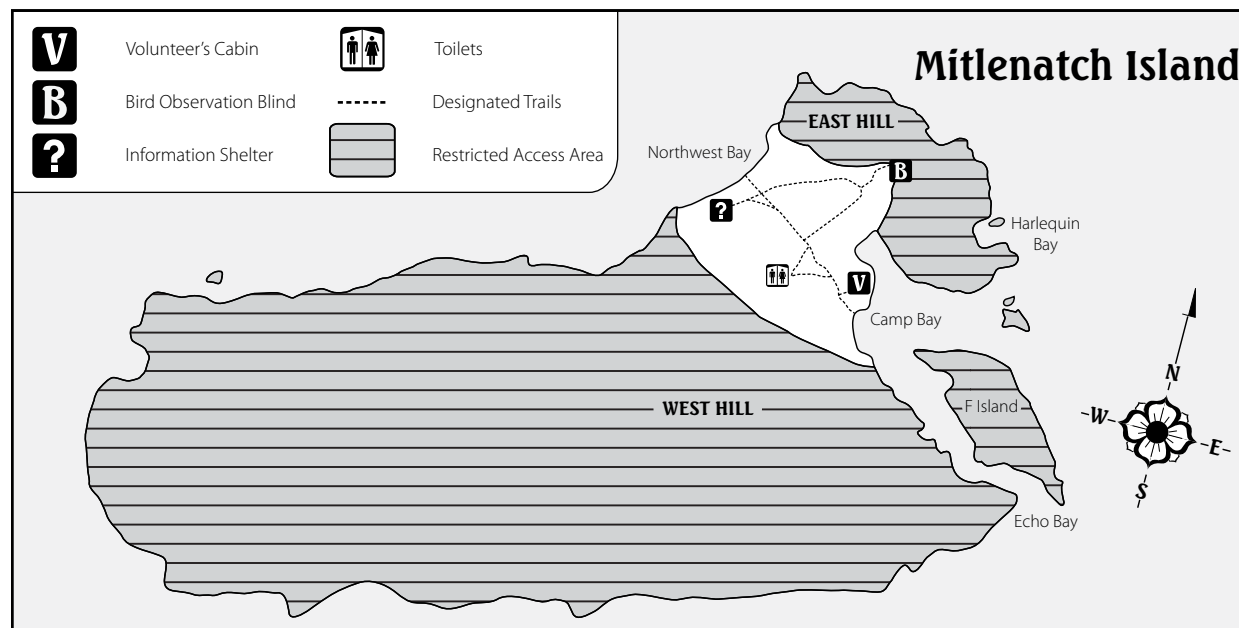
## CLIMATE

Due to prevailing summer westerlies and the rain shadow effect of the high mountains of Vancouver island, this rocky island receives less than 75 cm (30 inches) of rain each year. In summer almost desert-like conditions are ideal for sun-loving plants, including Prickly Pear Cactus (look for it growing on the rocks on the upper trail from Northwest Bay to the bird blind).



## TREES

The shallow dry soils of Mitlenatch are not well suited to trees. Recent suppression of fires (which occasionally swept the island historically) has allowed shore pines to colonize the meadows. Other trees on the island include Douglas-fir, bitter cherry, Scouler's willow, black hawthorn, red alder, and trembling aspen.



## SPRING AND SUMMER FLOWERS

From late April, Mitlenatch's meadows flower with a procession of blooms. Early spring sea blush, fawn lilies, camas, shooting stars, and chocolate lilies are quickly followed by tiger lilies, stonecrops, wild onions, bluebells, fireweed, and brodiaeas.

By late summer the show is over; dry grass turns golden and the meadows rattle with seedpods.

## WESTERN TERRESTRIAL GARTER SNAKE

Don't be alarmed if you see a large, dark snake. These harmless snakes are some of the largest garter snakes in British Columbia. On Mitlenatch they may grow to more than 90 cm (36 inches). Dark grey with black markings, they blend into the rocks along the beach, where they are often seen sunning, swimming, and feeding on small fish such as sculpins and blennies.

## MARINE MAMMALS

Mitlenatch is a favourite haul out for Harbour Seals and our two species of sea lions, Northern (Steller's) and California. Harbour Seals find safe haven on the island for pupping during the summer months. Sea lions are generally present only in late autumn until late spring. River Otter can often be seen swimming close to shore. Harbour Porpoise and Killer Whales are frequently seen off shore. Killer Whales, which move quickly, hugging the island, are mainly "transient" whales hunting Harbour Seals. These whales eat marine mammals, in contrast to the local "resident" Killer Whales, which feed on salmon.

## MARINE LIFE

Low tide reveals a brilliant mosaic of intertidal life on the island's rocky shores. Explore tide pools to find colourful small fish and marine invertebrates, including sponges, sea anemones, and sea stars (at least twelve species of sea stars have been found here).

Eelgrass beds in shallow bays are rich with small fish, such as shiners, pipefish, sculpins, sand dabs, and greenling.

