

# Seymour Canal/Oliver's Inlet/Pack Creek

## Trip Information

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### General

Admiralty Island is a large island located to the west and southwest of Juneau. The island falls within the Tongass National Forest (est. 1907) and the majority of the island was designated as a National Monument in 1978 and protected as a Wilderness area in 1980. It is best known for the abundance of Brown Bears that call it home. The island is about 1650 square miles and has an estimated 1700 brown bears; more than all the lower 48 states combined. One of the best locations to view these brown bears is at Pack Creek in Seymour Canal. Access to Pack Creek is by permit only (see section on Pack Creek below). The 60 mile long Seymour Canal almost splits Admiralty Island into two pieces; there is a 0.75 mile wide land bridge between Seymour Canal and Oliver's Inlet. Seymour Canal is a world class paddling destination due to the pristine temperate rainforest, Wilderness character, marine and terrestrial wildlife, and the consistently calm waters.



Alaska Coastal Brown Bear



Windfall Harbor



Head of Seymour Canal

### Pack Creek Brown Bear Viewing Area

Pack Creek on Admiralty Island is located about 40 miles from Juneau and 20 miles south from the head of Seymour Canal. At the Pack Creek Brown Bear Viewing Area, you can enter the bears' world and watch these magnificent creatures in their natural setting. From its headwaters 4000 feet above sea level, Pack Creek descends rapidly to the salt water of upper Seymour Canal. Sediment picked up by the creek is deposited at its mouth, creating a 400-acre mud flat. These flats are an important source of food for many animals, including bears, which feed on clams, shellfish and other creatures.



Of course, the main reason bears are drawn to Pack Creek is salmon. Pack Creek supports healthy runs of pink and chum salmon, which return to spawn in their natal stream. Peak bear viewing usually follows the return of salmon to Pack Creek, usually the first week on July. Bear viewing is can also be good from the middle of May through the middle of June.



Bear viewing at Pack Creek dates back to at least the 1930s, when the area became popular with visitors from Juneau. In 1934 the Territorial Game Commission prohibited bear hunting within 20 square miles around Pack Creek. One year later, the Civilian Conservation Corps built a trail and a small tree stand overlooking Pack Creek (this stand was replaced with the current tower in 1990). In 1984 the Alaska Board of Game expanded the

hunting closure to include Swan Cove, Swan Island and Windfall Harbor -- a total of about 95 square miles. This is one of the few areas of Admiralty that is closed to bear hunting; more than 95% of the island remains open. The 60,800-acre Stan Price State Wildlife Sanctuary was created in 1990, and includes the Pack Creek drainage and the mud flats at the mouth of Pack Creek.

Today the area is jointly managed by the United States Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and permits are required to visit between June 1 through September 10.

- Shoulder Season:
  - June 1-July 4 and August 26-September 10
  - Adult - \$50, Senior (over 61) - \$25, Junior (under 16) - \$25
- Peak Season:
  - July 5-August 26
  - Adult - \$50, Senior (over 61) - \$25, Junior (under 16) - \$25

In addition to the fee, the USFS and ADF&G limit the number of visitors to 24 per day, with 12 of those being allocated to guided visitors and 12 to independent visitors. When you arrive at Pack Creek you will be greeted by a ranger at the South Spit who will provide an orientation and recommendations on where to go (either the Viewing Spit or the Observation Tower). The ranger will also review all of the rules to be followed while visiting Pack Creek - these include no food in any area other than the South Pit, staying together as a group when traveling, staying on the designated travel routes only, never leaving gear or personal belongings unattended and following any other directions provided by the rangers. It is important to know that the rules are in place in order to protect the bears, minimize human impacts, and to adhere to the rules that are contained within the Wilderness Act. There are no facilities on site, including bathrooms or shelter from the elements. Lastly, no bears or people have been harmed at Pack Creek since the area has been actively managed. In order to maintain this record all visitors must strictly follow the rules outlined by the rangers. This will ensure a safe and stress free environment for the bears that make their home at Pack Creek.

## Getting There and Itinerary

To get to Pack Creek there are several options, each requiring a varying amount of time, difficulty and cost.

### 1. Paddle From Juneau

Time: Generally takes 2-3 days, each way, just to get to Pack Creek

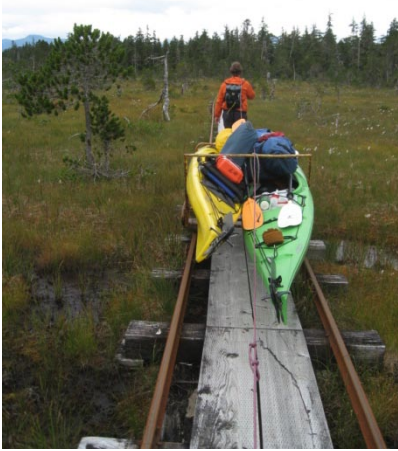
Recommended Experience Level: Should only be attempted by advanced experienced paddlers. There is a 2.5 mile crossing of Stephens Passage, which frequently has rough seas that are not safe for kayak travel. Also, Olivers Inlet can only be entered on a flood tide and exited on an ebbing tide due to tidal currents.

Hazards: Potential for rough seas, whiteout conditions due to fog, strong tidal currents (Right: picture of tidal rapids in Olivers Inlet), bears

Cost: \$0 if you can get yourself with boats to Sheep Creek off of Thane Road or the Douglas Boat Launch by Sandy Beach. If you need round-trip transportation, Above and Beyond Alaska/Alaska Boat and Kayak can provide that service at a cost of \$100.

Recommended Itinerary:





Day 1 – Paddle 13 miles from Sheep Creek (in Juneau) to Oliver’s Inlet, then portage your kayak to the head of Seymour Canal. Either stay at the State cabin or continue down Seymour as far as you choose to a suitable campsite.

Day 2 – The distance from the head of Seymour Canal to Pack Creek is between 18 and 20 miles depending on the route you choose to take. For most paddlers, it is recommended to paddle a portion of this distance and camp on the west side of Swan Island. For those up to the challenge, it’s possible to paddle all the way to Pack Creek and camp on Windfall Island. This will allow you to maximize your viewing time at Pack Creek. Be aware that there is a large tideflat (over 1 mile long) at the head

of Seymour Canal. If you do not depart from there at high tide, then it can be a long way to drag or carry your kayak(s)

Day 3 – From camp do a day trip to Pack Creek. Be aware that the water in Seymour Canal tends to become rougher in the late afternoon than any other time of the day.

Day 4 – Begin paddling back toward the head of Seymour Canal, if possible, make the portage and camp at the mouth of Oliver’s Inlet along Stephens Passage to be able to assess the conditions of the crossing.

Day 5 – Rise up early to take advantage of potentially calmer conditions and cross Stephens Passage and continue into Juneau.

## 2. Get a Water Taxi to Oliver’s Inlet and Then Paddle

Time: Generally takes 1-2 days, each way, just to get there (from Oliver’s Inlet)

Recommended Experience Level: Should only be attempted by intermediate-expert paddlers. It is about 20 miles from the head of Seymour Canal to the Pack Creek area and while the water is typically calm, strong winds from the south, southwest or southeast can create rough conditions.

Hazards: Rough seas and strong currents (to a lesser degree than option 1), bears

Cost: The cost varies by the company providing the water taxi, but expect to pay \$300-\$600 one-way for transportation for up to 6 people and 4 kayaks.

Recommended Itinerary: Same as above with the exception of the water taxi taking the place of kayaking to the head of Oliver’s Inlet. If you can have an early drop-off and the tides work in your favor, then you can make it close to Pack Creek in one day. The water taxi delivery will depend on the tides, as Oliver’s Inlet is only passable at high tide. You may be dropped off at the mouth of Oliver’s and be required to paddle in as the tide begins to flood. More than likely you will have time to begin paddling down Seymour Canal on the first day, which will allow you to make it to an excellent camping site on Windfall Island on the second day.

## 3. Fly In and Out on a Float Plane

Time: A 30 minute float plane ride and you’re there

Hazards: Rough sea conditions are infrequent, but typically occur in the afternoons. Bears are always a concern when on Admiralty Island.

Recommended Experience Level: Novice friendly approach

Cost: The cost varies depending on how many people are going. Ward Air and Alaska Seaplanes offer chartered flight service, inquire with them on prices. It is possible to rent kayaks that are stored on Windfall Island through Pack Creek Outfitters.

Recommended Itinerary: Accessing the area by float plane allows you to experience the area in as little time as a day-trip. However, it is recommended to spend two or more days in the Wilderness. A two-day trip will allow you time to explore Pack Creek on one day and the adjacent Windfall Harbor on the other. Additional days provide the opportunity to paddle/hike around the islands and rainforest found in Seymour Canal, spend an additional day at Pack Creek, or paddle toward another bear heavy area, Swan Cove.

## Campsites

- Stephens Passage
  - Douglas Island: There are good beaches to land just north of Stephens Passage in Gastineau Channel by Marmion Island on Douglas Island. Also on Douglas there are some good beaches to land and camp on that are just northwest of Marmion Island. Most of these sites do not have streams readily available.
  - Admiralty Island: East of the mouth of Oliver's Inlet is a long beach where good landing sites and camping above the high tide line can be found. Small streams can be found in some areas along this long beach.
- Oliver's Inlet State Marine Park Cabin (Seymour Canal cabin)
  - This cabin is a State owned and operated cabin at the head of Seymour Canal. It is accessed from Oliver's Inlet via a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile tramway that can transport kayaks and other small boats. By going online you can reserve the cabin for up to 3 nights for a maximum of 8 people (the cabin sleeps 6). The cabin has a kerosene heating system, but you must bring your own fuel. It can be rented for \$25/night during non-peak season and \$35/night during peak season.  
<http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/cabins/south.htm#oismp> for cabin information/reservations
- Seymour Canal
  - There is an abundance of camping potential in Seymour Canal. The majority of the shoreline has gently sloping beaches that are easy to land a kayak onto. Good camping can generally be found in the guard timber with some effort in most places. It is recommended to camp on the islands within Seymour Canal, as they generally have fewer bears. It is also recommended to try and camp on points so that your visibility is increased. Avoid camping where there are large tide flats, salmon streams, or prominent bear trails to help minimize the likelihood of an unexpected bear encounter. If possible, keep your camps on the beach.
  - Cabins – There are several privately owned cabins scattered throughout Seymour Canal. Please be respectful of these properties and only use them in an emergency situation. These cabins were all built prior to the formation of the Kootznoowoo Wilderness.
- Pack Creek Area
  - Swan Island – The west/southwest side of Swan Island has excellent camping in close proximity to the Pack Creek bear viewing area. Bears will frequent this island,





particularly in May-early June, so it is important to follow bear camping rules.

Unfortunately, there is a limited amount of water available.

- Windfall Island – There are two areas to camp on Windfall. The first is a beach on the northeast tip, the second is the small cove just west of Late Point on the southwest tip. There is no water available on Windfall Island. Above and Beyond Alaska and Pack Creek Outfitters both store kayaks by Late Point, and there is an established bear hang available for anyone to use.
- Staunch Point – Large groups can fit comfortably here, and water is available, just be aware that this area is frequently used by Above and Beyond Alaska (ABAK) while guiding overnight groups as well as day trips into Windfall Harbor. It would be best to contact the ABAK office (907-364-2333) to see if any groups will be there if you plan to camp here. ABAK stores kayaks at this site and there is also an established bear hang available to use in the woods near the stream.

## Leave No Trace

Olivers Inlet and Seymour Canal are entirely within the boundaries of the Kootznoowoo Wilderness and receives minimal impact from humans, particularly anywhere on the land. One of the great things about the area is that it looks the same as it did 100 years ago. As a paddler you are able to experience the feeling of being the first to explore this wild land. In order to preserve this Wilderness character it is important that you follow the seven Leave No Trace principles. Below are the seven principles as well as some guidelines for the Kootznoowoo Wilderness area.

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare: make sure that you have all of the appropriate route knowledge, clothing, gear, safety equipment and food so that you do not have to disturb the natural environment (i.e. cut pieces of trees to make a shelter because you forgot a tent)
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces: choose tent sites that will not destroy fragile plant life, camp on the beach if the tide allows it, avoid using the same footpaths to prevent social trails from forming (unless there are heavily impacted paths that already exist)
3. Dispose of Waste Properly: Pack out all trash – this includes biodegradable things such as apple cores or orange peels. If it didn't come from the environment you are in, then it shouldn't be left there. Human waste should be dealt with in the intertidal zone in areas where the current will flush the waste out to sea, if you choose to use toilet paper then pack it out or thoroughly burn it in a proper LNT fire! Please, please, please, do not leave used toilet paper anywhere!
4. Leave What You Find: Leave treasures for others to find, unless the “treasure” is trash left by previous travelers  
Minimize Campfire Impacts: Use a stove to cook on. If possible avoid making fires altogether, if you choose to make a fire then build a small fire in the intertidal zone (BELOW the high tide line, NOT in the forest), only burn wood up to the diameter of your wrist and make sure that everything is burnt completely, no one wants to see large charred pieces of wood floating around on or on the beach where they camp. Please, please, please do not make fire rings in the forest that scar the land for decades.
5. Respect Wildlife: Follow the Alaska National Marine Fisheries Service wildlife viewing guidelines and regulations by not approaching marine mammals closer than 100 yards and limiting time to observing one individual to 30 minutes. Keep your food in bear resistant containers or properly hang it to prevent the bears from getting into your food and becoming

habituated to people. Keep a clean kitchen free of micro food trash, we DON'T want to feed ANY wildlife...even squirrels, birds, voles, and mice.

6. Be Considerate of Others: If there are other travelers in the inlets, keep your visual and auditory impact to a minimum. Follow the other LNT principles so that future travelers can appreciate the Wilderness to the fullest extent.

## Marine Wildlife

Seals, porpoises, orcas, humpback whales, river otters, and sea lions can all be spotted in Seymour Canal. There are numerous seal haul outs on the smaller islands and care should be taken to try to not disrupt these seals. Seals are more wary of kayaks than motorized boats, so please try to stay more than 100 yards away from the seals hauled out on shore if at all possible. Sea lions and humpback whales are more common toward the mouth of Seymour and space should be given when encountering these marine mammals.

## Bears

Bears outnumber permanent human residence on Admiralty 3 to 1; it is important to follow bear camping guidelines. Food must be stored in bear resistant containers or properly hung from a sturdy branch at least 12' off the ground and 8' from the nearest tree trunk, ideally 100 yards from your tents. Food and other "smellables," such as toothpaste and deodorant, should be kept away from the tents at all times. Cooking should be done away from camp in the intertidal zone so that all the associated smells will be washed away by the ocean. When traveling anywhere on Admiralty Island you should also bring along bear spray and noise makers, such as whistles and signal horns. If you encounter a bear the first thing you want to do is group together tightly. Then, let the bear know you are there by talking to it in a loud, low voice. If it approaches you, stand your ground, particularly if you have food with you or are in the Pack Creek/Windfall Harbor area. Continue to talk to it loudly and make it clear that it needs to travel around you. If you do not have food and are not in the Pack Creek Zoological Area, then it is acceptable to back away slowly at a diagonal while continuing to face toward and talk to the bear.

## Other Wildlife

The pristine temperate rainforest of Seymour Canal is home to many other animal and bird species. In addition to its famous bears, it has the honor of having the greatest known concentration of nesting bald eagles in the world. The area is also heavily populated with Sitka black-tail deer, marten, mink, and river otters. Depending on the time of the year a variety of migratory birds can be found in the area, such as trumpeter swans, Canadian geese, arctic terns, buffleheads, white-winged surf scoters, harlequin ducks, and mergansers. Throughout the summer you will find a large number of birds, including marbled murrelets, loons, belted kingfishers, and rufous hummingbirds.