

# Channel Islands State Marine Park



Written and Provided by: Alaska Boat & Kayak Rental Shop

## General

Juneau's Channel Islands State Marine Park consists of 14 uninhabited islands located between 12 and 25 miles northwest of downtown Juneau.

The islands stretch from Auke Bay through Favorite Channel and are surrounded by the peaks of the Coastal and Chugach Mountain Ranges, and Admiralty Island. The islands in the marine park include: Aaron, Battleship, Benjamin, Bird, Coghlan, Cohen, Gull, Indian, Lincoln, North,

Portland, Ralston, Suedla, and the majority of Shelter. All of these islands are accessible within a days paddle from Juneau's road system or via a short water taxi ride.



The State Marine Park is home to an abundance of marine, terrestrial, and avian wildlife: humpback whales, Steller sea lions, orca, harbor seals, porpoises, Sitka black-tail deer, river and sea otters, bald eagles, and numerous other birds. There are numerous primitive camping sites and three state cabins.

## Getting There

The islands can be accessed by kayak or water taxi from one of several launch points along the Juneau road system. While the sea conditions are frequently calm, there are times when it would be unsafe to paddle from the islands back to the road system. Plan ahead and make arrangements for a water taxi transport from the road system to the islands or choose your paddling route based on expected weather conditions.



The common launch points are Auke Bay, Lena Cove, Amalga Harbor, Eagle Beach/Boulder Beach, and Mab Island Cove.

- Auke Bay Harbor (aka Statter Harbor) – Kayak or Water Taxi Launch
  - Located 11 miles from Downtown Juneau, 4 miles from the airport, and 2 miles from the Ferry Terminal

- Public boat launch for kayak use, location of the Alaska Boat & Kayak shop, launch site protected in any conditions, daily paid parking available, restrooms and showers available in Harbor Master's building
- Islands accessible: Battleship (2.5 miles), Coghlan (3 miles), Indian (2.5 miles), Portland (5.5 miles), and Suedla (3 miles)
- No camping allowed. Auke Rec campground is located 1 mile north of the ferry terminal

Map Credit: <https://www.rapidmedia.com/adventurekayak/categories/trips/5878-dream-departures-trip-channel-islands-alaska>

- Fritz Cove Road Site – Kayak Launch Only
  - Located about 3 miles from Auke Bay
  - Public kayak launch site with no facilities. Parking is available in a small lot 100 yards from the end of the road at the intersection of Fox Farm Trail and Fritz Cove Road
  - Kayaks must be carried down a narrow path to the beach. Approximately 150' at low tide.
  - No camping is allowed
  - Islands accessible: Suedla (0.75 miles), Coghlan (2-3 miles depending on which beach), Indian (3 miles), Portland (3.5 to 4 miles)
- Lena Beach Picnic Site – Kayak Launch Only
  - Located 15 miles from Downtown Juneau, 8 miles from the airport, and 3 miles from the Ferry Terminal
  - Picnic site, must carry kayaks from parking area down to beach, beach surface small to medium rocks approximately 250' at low tide, launch site protected from southerly winds, outhouse available, no drinking water, free parking in picnic area
  - Islands Accessible: Aaron (4 miles), Coghlan (5.5 miles), Cohen (3 miles), Indian (5 miles), Portland (6 miles), Shelter (2.5 miles)
  - No camping allowed. Closest camping is Auke Rec Campground 1.5 miles to the south.
- Amalga Harbor – Kayak or Water Taxi Launch Site
  - Located 24 miles from Downtown Juneau, 17 miles from the airport, and 11 miles from the Ferry Terminal
  - Public boat launch with kayak specific ramp, launch site protected in any conditions, outhouse available, no drinking water, free overnight parking
  - Islands Accessible: Aaron (5 miles), Benjamin (7.5 miles), Bird (2.5 miles), Cohen (4.5 miles), Gull (3.5 miles), Lincoln (7 miles), North (9.5 miles), Ralston (11.5 miles), Shelter (5.5 miles via Gull Island, 4.5 in direct crossing)
  - No camping allowed in harbor area. Can camp on beaches a half-mile to the north.
- Eagle Beach / Boulder Beach – Kayak Launch Only
  - Located 27 miles from Downtown Juneau, 20 miles from the airport, and 15 miles from the Ferry Terminal. Parking area is about 1 mile north of the Eagle Beach picnic area just past the tide flats of Eagle Beach
  - Small free overnight parking area off the Glacier Highway, 100' carry at low tide, small-medium rocks to high tide line, low tide launches are challenging due to medium to large slippery boulders, launch site is not protected and should only be used on calm days, no restroom or drinking water available

- Islands Accessible: Benjamin (2.5 miles), Gull (3.5 miles), Lincoln (5 miles direct crossing, 7 miles via Gull and Shelter Islands), North (4.5 miles), Ralston (11.5 miles via Gull-Shelter-Lincoln), Shelter (5.5 miles)
- Camping allowed on the beach. Possible on high tides of 16.5' or less.
- Mab Island Cove – Kayak Launch Only
  - Located 35 miles from Downtown Juneau, 28 miles from the airport, and 24 miles from the Ferry Terminal
  - Nondescript pull-off on side of Glacier Highway near mile marker 34, must carry kayaks from side of road down to beach, beach surface small rocks and tideflat mud, approximately 450' at low tide, launch site protected, no outhouse available, no drinking water, free parking on pull outs on side of the road
  - Islands Accessible: North (5 miles), Benjamin (7 miles to south end of island)
  - Primitive camping at the launch site

## **Recommended Itineraries**

The Channel Islands are close enough that they can be enjoyed on a day trip, yet are expansive enough that you could immerse yourself into the wilderness for a week.

- Day Trip
  - Auke Bay Area
    - Paddle from Auke Bay or Amalga to explore Suedla, Coghlan, Indian or Portland Islands. You can also paddle up into the Mendenhall Wetlands Wildlife Refuge area.
    - Area is generally protected from Auke Bay to Suedla, Indian, or Coghlan Islands.
    - Paddle distances of 4 to 12 miles to visit the various islands.
    - Views of Mendenhall Glacier. Wildlife viewing possible, but limited compared to other areas of the State Marine Park. Lots of boat traffic into and out of Auke Bay.
  - Lena Cove Area
    - Paddle north from Lena Cove to Aaron Island and Cohen Reef.
    - Crossing to Aaron Island from Cohen Reef is exposed to the wind
    - Paddle distances of 6 to 10 miles
    - Less boat traffic than Auke Bay and more likelihood to see marine wildlife.
  - Amalga Area
    - Explore Gull Island and the surrounding coast. There is an excellent sandy beach on the mainland east of Gull Island.
      - Make a 7 mile loop up the coast to the sandy beach (aka Boy Scout Beach), out to Gull Island and back to Amalga Harbor.
      - Views of the Herbert Glacier when you get away from the shore toward Gull Island.
      - Sea lions and whales frequent the area
    - Arrange a pickup and paddle one way to Boulder Beach with a possible stop at Benjamin Island (10 miles).

- Harbor seals spend time at the mouth of the Eagle River. Sea lions haul out on the west side of Benjamin Island. Can take a trail from the southwest point to a view on top of cliffs above the sea lions.
    - Whales are frequently seen around Benjamin Island.
    - Paddle a couple extra miles to view the lighthouse on Sentinel Island
  - Eagle Beach / Boulder Beach
    - Circumnavigate Benjamin Island with a stop on North Island – 9 miles
- 2-Day Trips
 

Bring camping equipment, food and water and spend a night on any of the islands.

  - Make any of the day trip options an overnight and camp on the islands
  - Arrange a water taxi to one of the State cabins or one of the more remote islands – Lincoln or Ralston Island.
  - Point to point paddle with an overnight stop at one of the islands
    - Auke Bay to Amalga with an overnight on Aaron – approximately 16 miles
    - Amalga to Boulder Beach with an overnight on Benjamin Island and the option to circumnavigate Benjamin – 10 to 14 miles
    - Amalga to Mab Island Cove with an overnight on Benjamin or North Island – 15 miles (10 miles from Boulder Beach)
  - Amalga to Lincoln Island
    - Caution – two more open crossings from the mainland to Gull and from Gull Island to Shelter Island
    - 16 miles total
    - Whales and sea lions very common from June through August in North Pass by the south Lincoln camp
- 3+ Days
  - Point to point paddle with overnight stops in multiple locations. Extend the 2-day itineraries and visit more islands.
  - Amalga to Lincoln. On the second day do a circumnavigation of Lincoln and Ralston Islands (14 miles around both, 12 miles around Lincoln) or just enjoy the wildlife in North Pass.
  - Continue north into the Point Bridget State Park area and paddle to a pickup in Echo Cove.

## Camping

It is possible to camp for free on 11 of the 14 islands and most of the islands have multiple sites that are suitable for camping. With the exception of three state cabins all of the camping on the islands is primitive camping. There are no picnic areas, tent platforms, or facilities available. Other than a couple of tannic streams and ponds on Lincoln and Shelter islands, there are no reliable water sources near the camping areas. Campers must follow Leave No Trace principles to keep the area clean and pristine for future visitors. If you are doing a multi-day trip you will either need to carry all the water you will need or fill up



from streams on the mainland shore. Camping specifics for each island are outlined in the Island Specific Information below.

## **Cabins**

There are three State cabins within the Marine Park: the Rupe Andrews on the northwest of Shelter Island, the Salamander Cabin on the northeast of Shelter Island, and the Lincoln Cabin on the east side of Lincoln Island. With the weather in Southeast Alaska, the cabins can be a great place to be guaranteed to stay warm and dry in the inclement weather. The cabins are available year-round.

Outside of the Marine Park but within a day's paddle are three additional cabins within the Point Bridget State Park. The closest located on the mainland shore just north of Mab Island is Camping Cove Cabin. At the mouth of Berners Bay, two miles west of Echo Cove are Cowee Meadows Cabin and Blue Mussel Cabin.

Visit the state website for more information, to check availability, or to reserve a cabin.  
<http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/cabins/south>

## **Island Specific Information**

### Aaron Island

- South Beach - Nice gravel beach on south shore of Aaron Island with space in the forest to camp as well. This site is exposed to southern winds and waves.
- Whales frequently pass by Aaron Island throughout the summer

Battleship Island – No good camping available.

### Benjamin Island

- Southeast Point Camp – Well established camp on the southeast point of the island. Frequently used camp that can accommodate large groups. It has two beaches to launch/land from, one faces south and the other east.
- Isthmus (Southwest Point) Camp – Well established camp on the southwest isthmus of the island. Site is used often and has good camping on the isthmus in early summer before the grass grows too tall, or in the woods. From this campsite a primitive trail leads through the woods for about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to an overlook above the Steller sea lion haulout. If you take this trail to view the sea lions DO NOT walk down onto the rocks and be quiet to not disturb them.
- Northwest Cove Camp – The cove on the northwest side of the island is an option for camping, but is not as nice of a beach or camping area as the other Benjamin sites. The north facing aspect makes it great for when there are southerly winds/waves
- A circumnavigation of Benjamin Island will almost guarantee sea lion encounters. Humpback whale sightings are also very common in this area. If paddling past the sea lion haulout on the west side of the island, stay at least 150 yards away from the shore. The sea lions are more nervous of kayaks than large boats and will flush from their haul out. Sea lions can be aggressive and have been known to chew on and bump kayaks.

- From Benjamin you can paddle to Sentinel Island where the Sentinel Island Lighthouse is located (on the southwestern end). There are minimal places to get out on Sentinel Island, the best is along the middle of the east side. From here you could walk up through the woods to the lighthouse. This island is not part of the State Marine park, but is still open for public use.

Bird Island - No good camping available. No spot to get out of the kayaks.

#### Coghlan Island

- Coghlan has some of the most easily accessible camping from Auke Bay Harbor. Camping is possible on the beach along the east shore and on the northwest of the island. The camping on the east side has a view of the Mendenhall Glacier and surrounding mountains. The northwest side you will see fewer boats and have a view of the Admiralty Island and the Chilkat Mountains in the distance.
- There is a lot of boat traffic in the area, particularly on the north end between Coghlan and Indian Islands.
- There is a beacon light used for Alaska Airlines to line up their approach to the airport.

Cohen Island – No good camping available.

#### Gull Island

- There are a couple of nice, small beaches on the south end of the island. It is also possible to camp with small groups in the forest.

#### Indian Island

- There are a couple of small beaches that you can land on and stretch your legs. It is possible to camp on these small beaches with small tides, but the camping is not as nice as other areas in the State Marine Park.

#### Lincoln Island

- South Beach in North Pass – One of our favorite camps in the Channel Islands. There is a long sand and gravel beach that has a nice flat bench to camp on above the high tides. It is also possible to camp in the forest as well. The beach is south facing and exposed to south and southwest waves.
  - North Pass is the waterway between the south end of Lincoln Island and the north end of Shelter Island. It has up to a 3 knot current and is shallower than the surrounding area. It causes an upwelling of water which concentrates the humpback whale and sea lions food (salmon, small fish, plankton, krill). As a result you can count on this area having whales almost every day from June through August. The downside is that the whale watching boats congregate in North Pass as well. With the long day light you can get the area to yourself early to the morning or late in the evening. Whales and sea lions often swim right along the beach providing beachside whale watching.
- East Side near the Lincoln Cabin – Both north and south of the Lincoln cabin are pockets that can make for good camping. This is a good option if the waves on the south beach are a little too big for landing and camping there and you need extra protection, but still want to be close to North Pass. There are a few small tannic streams in this area. Beware of the tide flats in some of

these areas. At low tide the beach may turn to medium to large barnacle and muscle encrusted boulders.

- Northeast Cove (ABAK's Beach) – On the northeast side of the island is a large cove that faces north (exposing it to large waves during a north wind). The east side of this beach is utilized by Above & Beyond Alaska (ABAK) as a site for guided day and overnight trips. The whole beach has a great high bench for camping at any tide and there is a larger tannic stream that flows on the far west side of the cove.
- The west side of the island typically experiences rougher sea conditions than the east side of the island.

#### North Island

- The south side of the island has a beautiful gravel beach. It's possible to camp on the beach or in the woods. The forest can easily be walked through from the south side to the north side. In south winds the beach is mostly protected from Benjamin Island. The closest water would be from streams in Sunshine Cove a couple miles to the northeast of North Island.
- Steller sea lions and humpback whales frequent the area around Benjamin and North Island.

#### Portland Island

- Portland Island has long stretches of beach that provide good camping on both the east and west sides of the island.
- There is a long tidal spit on the north end of Portland Island. Steller sea lions frequent this area

#### Ralston Island

- On the southwest side of the island is a beach that makes for good camping. It's also possible to camp in the woods here as well. The beach faces west toward the Chilkat mountains. This site is exposed to south and westerly winds/waves.
- On the north end of Ralston is Little Island. The sea lions move their haul out from Benjamin Island to Little Island in August.
- A spit of land will connect Ralston and Lincoln islands at low tide.

#### Suedla Island

- Camping is possible in the two small coves on the south side of the island on the beach or in the forest.
- From Suedla you can paddle into the Mendenhall Wetlands area where there are an abundance of birds and harbor seals.

#### Shelter Island

- The south end of Shelter Island is primarily privately owned and dotted with small homes and cabins.
- Along the east side are several areas to pull out and camp. In halibut cove on the northeast end of the island is the Salamander public use cabin. Camping is possible near the cabin in the woods or on the beach
- There's a cove on the north point that has decent camping on the beach above the high tide line. At low tide it is an approximately 250' carry. The beach has small to medium rocks. This can be a good alternative to the Lincoln South Beach camp if the winds are coming out of the south

- Camping near the Rupe Andrews cabin on the northwest side of the island is possible on the beach.

## **Tides and Currents**

The eastern side of the Inside Passage experiences mixed semidiurnal tides with a tidal range of up to 25 feet. Anytime you are camping in the Channel Islands State Marine Park it is important to be aware of the tides, particularly if you decide to pitch a tent on the beach. Many people have woken up in the middle of the night in a surprise waterbed. It is also important to carry all gear (including kayaks) well above the high tide line so it doesn't float away in the night. To ensure your kayak does not float away, always tie the boats off to a tree, boulder, or large beach log.

The currents in the area are difficult to predict and vary depending on the size of the tidal variation. In most areas the currents will not be a significant factor in your travel speed. The one notable exception is in North Pass. This is the area between the north end of Shelter Island and the south end of Lincoln Island. In this area the currents can be as fast as 3 knots.

## **Weather and Sea Conditions**

Juneau and the State Marine Park are in a temperate rainforest. As a result the typical summer weather is overcast with intermittent rain showers and average low temperatures of 49°F and an average high of 62°F. The temperature range can be between 38 to 89°F. Juneau has about 300 cloudy days a year and about 220 days with measurable precipitation. This sounds unpleasant, but often the cloud ceiling is above the mountains and the precipitation is light and intermittent.

The sea conditions tend to be mostly calm with a forecast of winds up to 15 knots and seas to 3 feet. Winds during low pressure usually come from the southeast and during high pressure come from the north. Paddling along the coast of the mainland and the islands the seas will be more calm than on the more open crossings. The weather and sea state can change quickly, so it is important to be aware of the forecast and paddle according to the "now-cast". Additionally, the seas are generally more calm early in the morning and later in the evening.

## **Leave No Trace**

The Channel Islands State Marine Park is a wild area that has a fair amount of boat traffic (during the summer), but minimal impact from humans on the land. One of the great things about the area is that it looks almost the same as it did hundreds of years ago. In order to preserve this wilderness character for future travelers it is important that you follow the seven Leave No Trace principles. Below are the seven principles as well as some additional guidelines.



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, avoid using the same footpaths to prevent social trails from forming
3. **Dispose of Waste Properly:** Pack out all trash – this includes biodegradable things such as apple cores or orange peels. A good rule of thumb, if it didn't come from the environment 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. You can also bring a trowel/small shovel and bury your poop in a “cat-hole” in the forest. To make a cat-hole, find a secluded spot in the forest at least 100' away from any possible camping areas, dig down at least 6” deep and 8” in diameter. Poop in the hole and then cover it bag up with the soil. If you choose to use toilet paper then pack it out or burn it completely in a LNT fire! DO NOT bury toilet paper or leave it exposed on the ground.
4. **Leave What You Find:** Unless it is trash left by previous travelers
5. **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, 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 or on the beach where they camp. Please DO NOT create fire rings and build fires inside the forest.
6. **Respect Wildlife:** Follow the Alaska National Marine Fisheries Service and Marine Mammal Protection Act 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 a clean kitchen free of micro food trash, we DON'T want to feed ANY wildlife...even squirrels, birds, voles, and mice.
7. **Be Considerate of Others:** If there are other travelers in the State Marine Park, 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, sea otters and sea lions can all be spotted in the Channel Islands State Marine Park. Seals are typically found near the river deltas and 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 and space should be given when encountering these marine mammals. Please follow the rules and regulations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act for wildlife viewing.

## Bears

While it is possible for a bear to swim out to one of the islands, their presence is rare. While spending time in the Channel Islands you should not need to be concerned with bears.

# Channel Islands State Marine Park

ALASKA

North of Juneau in Lynn Canal, the 14 unspoiled islands comprising this park offer the true Alaskan experience. Home to bald eagle, sealion, humpback whale, orca and a profusion of other marine birds and mammals, these islands offer untamed, rugged wilderness and breathtaking panoramic views of the coast with the snow-capped Chilkat Mountains rising beyond.



Day 1: Depart from ~~Auke Bay~~ Amalga Harbor and paddle to Lincoln Island. This island has fresh water, free camping and a rental cabin, making it an ideal location for a base camp.

Day 2: Explore the open headlands and sand and cobble beaches of Lincoln and Ralston Island. Keep a sharp eye for deer, beaver and whales. Enjoy outstanding salmon fishing.

Day 3 + 4: Benjamin Island is a haulout for Stellar sea lions and the perfect site for an overnight camp. From here, explore North, Gull and Bird islands. Relax on Gull Island's sandy beach before returning to Lincoln.

Day 5 + 6: A quick paddle to Shelter Island, where you'll find campsites, another cabin, dense forest and plentiful deer. Venture from here to Aaron and Cohen islands.

Day 7: Begin your journey back to civilization with one last overnight on tiny Indian Island.

Day 8: Pinball between Portland, Coghlan, BattleShip and Suedla islands before taking out at Auke Bay.

Info: [www.dnr.alaska.gov/parks/units/channelisl.htm](http://www.dnr.alaska.gov/parks/units/channelisl.htm)

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