



SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA WATERFOWL HUNTING GUIDE

The Skagit Wildlife Area is located two miles southwest of Conway, from exit 221 on Interstate 5. The Skagit Wildlife Area is a very popular site for northwest waterfowl hunters, and offers hunting opportunities for both ducks and geese. The Skagit Wildlife Area is also popular for other wildlife orientated activities such as bird watching, photography, hiking, and kayaking.

The Skagit Wildlife Area is approximately 16,000 acres, located in Skagit and Snohomish counties and is managed by the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife. A majority of the waterfowl hunting sites are on or adjacent to Port Susan, Skagit, and Padilla Bays.

The intertidal marsh areas on the Skagit Bay estuary, between the mouths of the North and South Fork of the Skagit River provide natural habitat for wintering waterfowl, and as a result, provide excellent hunting opportunities.

Approximately 450 acres of the Skagit Wildlife Area are in agricultural food plots that benefit waterfowl. Agricultural food plots are planted on the Island Unit, Samish Unit, and the Johnson/De Bay Slough Hunt Unit. These Units are typically planted in cereal grains such as barley, corn, or winter wheat and left un-harvested to provide food resources for wintering waterfowl.

Waterfowl hunting opportunities are excellent throughout the season. Peak dabbling duck populations occur in mid to late November and gradually decline as the season continues into late January. Hunting can remain productive for the duration of the season depending on weather and waterfowl numbers.

Mallards, green wing teal, pintail, and wigeon make up a majority of the dabbling duck populations. Snow geese are plentiful throughout the season, and provide another excellent hunting opportunity on the Skagit Wildlife Area. Small numbers of Canada geese are also available during the early and regular seasons.

The Skagit Wildlife Area is a very popular public hunting area, and at times may receive heavy hunting pressure. Weekdays are generally less crowded, and hunters that

are able to arrange their schedule to allow weekday hunting can take advantage of the potentially less crowded conditions during the week. Weekend hunting conditions can be quite challenging, but if hunters are courteous and obey the “15 shell” limit regulations on the Samish and Island Units, hunting can still be very productive.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

- Check the current season legal hunting hours, which change weekly. Please see the last page of the annual WDFW’s Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game Seasons pamphlet, for further information. These regulations may also be found online at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/regulations/> It is a good idea to carry a copy with your hunting license.
- Carry a tide book and understand how to use it. The tides for Skagit Bay are identical to Seattle tides. Use a Puget Sound Tide Guide, refer to the Seattle tide tables and do not make any corrections. The easiest tide guides to use have the daily graphs depicting the high (flood), and low (ebb) tides. Puget Sound tide guides are available at most outdoor equipment stores.
- Note the 15-shell restrictions at the Samish and Farmed Island Units (as well as the Spencer Island Unit near Everett). According to WAC 232-

16-770, “It is unlawful to have in possession more than 15 shotgun shells or to fire (shoot) more than 15 shells in one day” on these Units. Hunters are not allowed to return to their vehicle or boat for more shells after entering the field with their 15 shells. On the Farmed Island Unit, shells left in a boat on the island are considered in the hunter’s possession and are counted toward the 15-shell daily possession limit.

- Lead shot is illegal on all units of the Skagit/Snoqualmie Wildlife Area for any type of hunting or shooting. According to RCW 77.15.400, “if you are convicted of violating the above requirements, there is a mandatory \$1,000 fine and loss of small game hunting privileges for 2 years.” A list of approved non-toxic shot types is found in the Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game Seasons pamphlet.
- Pack it in, pack it out. Please respect your Wildlife Area by removing shell casings and other litter.
- Check for any new or changed regulations specific to hunting snow geese and hunting snow geese on Fir Island.

SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA/HUNT UNITS and ACCESS AREAS

North Fork Access - The North Fork Access is a popular waterfowl hunting area, for both dabbling ducks and snow geese. Pass shooting is the most popular type of hunting here. Hunters typically use boats or hunt the tides on foot with small sets of decoys. Access to the area is from the west end of Rawlins Road on Fir Island.

Jensen Access - The Jensen Access provides good waterfowl hunting options. Hunters pass shoot from areas near the dike or set up decoys in the intertidal area. The area offers a chance for pass shooting snow geese as they fly from the bay to the fields.

Headquarters Unit - The Headquarters Unit has traditionally been the most popular and heavily hunted unit on the Skagit Wildlife Area. The Headquarters Unit was restored to intertidal estuary during the summer of 2009, and hunting access is now dependent on tide levels. This unit can be hunted on foot during low tides (with chest waders), or from small boats during higher tides. The area still provides access for “boot” hunting in the marsh during low tides. The marsh is accessible by hiking the Wylie Slough dike trail to the south until you reach the end of the trail. Both pass shooting and decoy hunting methods are available on this site. A ramp is

available for launching car-top boats, canoes, and aqua pods from the boat launch parking lot.

A boat launch ramp is also available on the Headquarters Unit of the Skagit Wildlife Area. This launch site provides access to the Skagit Bay marsh via Freshwater Slough (Skagit River South Fork) and also access to the Island Unit.

Island Unit - The Island Unit may be accessed by boat from the Headquarters boat launch or the Skagit County Parks boat launch in Conway. This unit is 250 total acres and approximately 165 acres are planted to cereal grains such as barley and corn that are left standing for waterfowl food. Almost 50% of these fields are flooded with “sheet water” using water control structures. This management practice further enhances the area for wintering waterfowl, and decoy hunting. The area is a very popular site for waterfowl hunting, even though it is accessible by boat only. The Island Unit has the 15-shell limit regulation, and if all participants obey that law, it improves the hunting on the site dramatically.

Milltown Access - A private boat launch is on this site and is legal for the public to use. It provides boat access to the entire S.F. Skagit River, and also to Skagit Bay. Milltown Island is immediately adjacent to the launch site and can also be hunted by boat. Please respect the neighbors and obey posted signs in order to keep this launch site available to hunters.

Big Ditch Access - Big Ditch provides access to the Skagit River South Fork and the tidal areas of eastern Skagit Bay. Ducks and snow geese can be hunted here, by pass shooting and hunting over decoy spreads in the tidal areas. Car top and small trailerable boats can be launched here as well.

Leque Island Unit - The Leque Island Unit is located between Stanwood and Camano Island, to the north and south of Highway 532. The 35 acres to the north has been restored to intertidal estuary, and is available for “boot” hunting with chest waders, during low tides, and small boat hunting during high tides. The south side is 215 acres and may be intertidal, depending on the condition of the dikes. Call for a current status report, or scout the area before planning your hunt. . An estuary restoration project of 75 acres on this area is tentatively planned. If implemented, the project will preserve 150 acres for managed wetland habitat, agricultural enhancements, and field hunting. The Unit offers duck and goose hunting from the existing tidal areas, and provides excellent decoy hunting opportunities. Beware of tidal fluctuations as the water levels change with the tides. Leque Island is a very good location for duck and snow goose hunting, as it is a local flyway between Port Susan and Skagit Bays.

Samish Unit -The Samish Unit is located on the north end of Padilla Bay, on the way to Samish Island. The Samish Unit consists of 410 acres of grasslands and agricultural fields. Approximately 240 acres of barley and sometimes

corn are planted on the site annually. Funding for the agricultural enhancements on this Unit is provided through the Washington State Duck Stamp Program. There are 23 shallow ponds that were developed in partnership with Ducks Unlimited. Water control structures also allow a high percentage of the area to be flooded with sheet water during the hunting season. Primary hunting methods on this site are with the use of decoys, in both the developed ponds and in the open fields. The fifteen shell limit is also a regulation on this Unit.

Samish River Unit -The Samish River Unit is 105 acres on the mouth of the Samish River and Samish Bay. This site provides waterfowl hunting opportunities on mowed sheet water areas in the fields of native grass plant communities. Parking access is limited on this Unit.

Johnson /DeBay Slough Hunt Unit - The Johnson/DeBay Slough Hunt Unit is 35 acres and can be a very productive hunting site. The unit is planted with barley, corn and or potatoes depending on the year. The unit is small, and can only accommodate four to five hunting parties. The unit is located east of the Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve, just west of Clear Lake. The unit is a field hunting site and should be hunted with decoys.

Skagit Bay Estuary - The Skagit Bay estuary extends from the North Fork Skagit River to the South Fork Skagit River, and south to Stanwood or the South Bay area. The

entire area is approximately 16,000 acres, and provides prime waterfowl hunting from a boat or by foot during low tides. A majority of the area is public land, owned by Department of Fish and Wildlife, with a few private ownerships and two game reserves, which are usually well posted.

The Skagit Bay terrain is quite diverse; it includes open saltwater, mud flats, low marsh (grass), to a high marsh of cattails, brush and taller woody vegetation. The entire area is a maze of channels, cut by both tidal action and currents from the various sloughs. Most “bay front hunters” set up on the edge of the vegetation line, in the higher marsh, channels and back waters. Some prefer to hunt the open water on Skagit Bay. The entire Skagit Bay can offer good shooting, but the most popular areas are on the Skagit River South Fork and North Fork marsh areas, downstream from the more popular boat launch access sites..

Several boat launch sites are available. On the Skagit Wildlife Area the Headquarters Unit, the boat launch on Freshwater Slough is one of the most popular, providing access to the South Fork area, and a majority of the central portions of Skagit Bay. The other Wildlife Area launch site is on the Big Ditch Access south of Conway and west of the Pioneer Highway. This site is only usable for car top boats or small trailered boats. The access site does not have a developed launch ramp, but the smaller boats can be launched off the side of the road/dike. This

is also a popular site for launching canoes, kayaks, or other types of paddling boats.

There are three other popular launch sites located adjacent to Skagit Bay. One is the “pay for launch” site at Blake’s Resort on Rawlins Road on Fir Island. This site provides direct access to the Skagit River North Fork.. The Skagit County Parks launch ramp located on the east side of the Conway/South Fork Bridge is also a popular launch site that provides access to the Island Unit, the Milltown Island Unit and Skagit Bay. The other is the Milltown Access launch ramp. This site is privately owned, is surfaced with crushed rock, and is available to the public. This site provides access to the Skagit River South Fork. Excellent hunting can be provided on all of the areas that may be accessed from these launch sites.

Preparation and good equipment are necessary for hunter safety and a successful hunt. A list of suggested equipment and hunting gear are as follows:

1. A well camouflaged boat, at least 14 feet in length, and equipped with at least a 20 hp motor capable of planing the boat.
2. When hunting Skagit Bay, more decoys will usually improve your hunting success. Most hunters prefer to have at least three dozen duck decoys, and often enhance their “spread” with six to twelve goose decoys. Usually these would be snow goose decoys, as they can work as

confidence decoys, and may also bring in a occasional snow geese.

3. Life jackets for all passengers are mandatory, and all of the additional U.S Coast Guard required safety equipment for the size of boat that you are using. The best recommendation is that life jackets are worn at all times. If you can find a life jacket that you can shoot in, that's a plus. The newer self inflating life jackets are perfect for hunting use.
4. Having a GPS, cell phones, tide books, powerful flash lights, and survival gear are also recommended, as the Skagit Bay Estuary can be a very dangerous boating environment.
5. Aerial photos are the best type of "map" for use in the estuary. It is quite easy to get lost in the marsh, so be careful to pay attention to the routes that you are taking on your hunt.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the local search and rescue teams conduct several rescues each hunting season. The most common rescue is for hunters who have become stranded "high and dry" with their boats during a low tide. Hunters should use the "Seattle" tide tables. No corrections need to be calculated into the height or time of the printed Seattle tides. Hunters usually have from two to three hours before and after a "slack" flood tide to safely navigate Skagit Bay, although there can be numerous variables. Some of these can be river conditions, barometric pressure and wind. At least an eight foot plus (8 ft.+) tide is necessary to navigate a majority of Skagit Bay. Be sure and check

the local NOAA marine weather forecast. If winds are predicted to be over 15 to 20 knots, be extremely cautious if you planning a hunting trip to the Skagit Bay area under those conditions. Staying within the protected channels and sloughs would be a good option for hunting during high winds.

Take your time getting to know the area, and the skills necessary to hunt the Skagit Bay estuary. It can be one of the most rewarding and aesthetically pleasing hunts on the entire Skagit Wildlife Area, but can also be one of the most challenging areas to learn how to hunt and hunt safely. Do the necessary research, acquire the equipment that is legally required, and consider purchasing some of the optional equipment that we have recommended. Taking these steps will make hunting safer, enhance your hunting experience, and you will reap the rewards of hunting the Skagit Bay estuary.

Successful waterfowl hunting in any major waterway or open water area requires basic research, and additional preparation in order to have a safe and successful hunt. Feel free to contact us with additional questions.

Good Hunting, be Safe!

Skagit Wildlife Area Staff

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