

SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA WATERFOWL HUNTING GUIDE

The Skagit Wildlife Area office and Headquarters Unit is located two miles south-west 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 northern Snohomish counties and is managed by the Washington 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 of the Wildlife Area are located within Skagit Bay Estuary, from the mouths of the North and South Forks of the Skagit River southward toward Stanwood or South Skagit Bay provide natural habitat for wintering waterfowl, and as a result, provide public hunting opportunities.

Approximately 400 acres of the Skagit Wildlife Area are in agricultural enhancements that benefit waterfowl. Agricultural enhancement projects are implemented on the Island, Samish, Leque Island, and the Johnson/De Bay Slough Hunt Units. These Units are typically planted in crops such as barley, corn, fava beans, millet, or winter wheat and left un-harvested to provide food resources for wintering waterfowl.

Waterfowl hunting opportunities can be 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, available food resources, and waterfowl numbers.

Mallards, green wing teal, pintail, and wigeon make up a majority of the dabbling duck populations. Snow geese are plentiful in the region throughout the season, though hunting opportunity on public land is limited. Small numbers of Canada geese are also present 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 week-day hunting can take advantage of the potentially less crowded conditions during the week. Week-end hunting conditions can be quite challenging, but if hunters are courteous and obey the "15 Shell" limit regulations on the Samish, Johnsons/DeBay Slough and Island Units, hunting can still be very productive.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

- Check the current season legal hunting hours, which change weekly. They are found on the last page of each year's Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game Seasons pamphlet. These regulations may also be found online at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/regulations/> Most hunters download the regulations to their smartphones or cut out the hunting hours section from the pamphlet and carry a copy in their wallet.
- 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, Johnson/DeBay Slough and 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
- Lead shot is illegal on all Units of the Skagit 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 the Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game pamphlet at the beginning of every season for any new or changed regulations specific to hunting snow geese in Skagit County.

SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA/HUNT UNITS and ACCESS AREAS

North Fork Access- The North Fork Access offers waterfowl hunting opportunities for both dabbling ducks and snow geese. Hunters 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 opportunities to pass shoot from areas near the dike or set up decoys in the inter-tidal area. The area offers a chance for hunting snow geese and ducks as they fly from the bay to the fields. Please note that the entrance road

and parking area are posted as a “Safety Zone”. Discharge of shotguns is only allowed on the dike or inter-tidal area.

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 bayfront 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 Unit boat launch or the Skagit County Parks boat launch in Conway. This unit offers around 140 acres of managed fields that are annually planted with crops such as barley, corn, fava beans, and millet, all of which are left standing for waterfowl. Approximately 50% to 75% of the area is 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 available at this site which provides boat access to the entire south fork of the Skagit River, and also to Skagit Bay. WDFW-owned 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 intertidal areas of eastern Skagit Bay. Ducks and snow geese can be hunted here, by pass shooting or hunting over decoy spreads. Car-top 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 is a mix of agricultural fields (typically offering corn stubble and barley), shallow ponds, and grass fields. The area south of Highway 532 is scheduled to be fully restored to intertidal estuary habitat in the near future. The Unit offers duck and goose hunting from the existing tidal areas, and can provide excellent decoy hunting opportunities. Beware of tidal fluctuations as the water levels change can with the tides. Leque Island a

good location for duck and snow goose hunting, as it is a local flyway between Port Susan and Skagit Bays. This area is also a pheasant release site from mid-September until November 30.

Samish Unit –The Samish Unit is a very popular hunting site located on the north end of Padilla Bay, on the way to Samish Island. The Samish Unit consists of 410 acres of grass, ponds, and agricultural fields. Approximately 180 acres of crops are planted on the site annually, typically consisting of barley, corn, and fava beans. There are 23 shallow ponds that were developed in partnership with Ducks Unlimited. Work has been done in recent years to open up and provide better habitat and hunting conditions in the ponds. Funding for the agricultural enhancements on this Unit is provided through the Washington State Duck Stamp program. 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 15 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 Unit is a Private Lands Quality Waterfowl hunting site providing the public with hunting opportunities from designated blinds located on mowed sheet water areas within the fields of native grass plant communities. Parking access is limited on this Unit.

Johnson/DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit – The Johnson/Debay Slough Hunt Unit is a 23 acre field and the adjacent slough that can be a productive hunting site, especially mid- to late season. The Unit is planted with barley, corn 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's Slough Swan Reserve (WAC 232-16-800) just west of Clear Lake on Francis Rd. Please review the game reserve descriptions and maps before hunting this area. The Unit is a field hunting site and should be hunted with decoys. The 15 shell limit is also a regulation on this Unit.

Skagit Bay Estuary – The Skagit Bay estuary extends from the Skagit River North Fork to the Skagit River South Fork, and south to Stanwood or the South Bay area. The entire area is approximately 12,000 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 Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, with a few private ownerships and one Game Reserve (Skagit Delta Game Reserve, WAC 232-16-340).

The Skagit Bay estuary and bayfront is quite diverse, offering habitat ranging from open saltwater, mud flats, low marsh (grass), to a high marsh of cattails, brush and taller woody vegetation. The areas at the mouths of the North and South Forks are a maze of channels, cut by both tidal action and currents for the various sloughs. Most bayfront hunters set up on the edge of the vegetation line, and, in the higher marsh, in channels and back waters. Some prefer to hunt the open water on Skagit Bay.

The entire bayfront can offer good shooting, but the most popular areas are on the South Fork and the North Fork of the Skagit River downstream from the more popular boat launch access areas.

Fir Island Farms Unit- The entire unit is within the Fir Island Farm Game Reserve (WAC 232-16-780) for snow geese. **Hunting is not allowed**, this reserve provides forage and a resting place for snow geese within the Skagit Valley.

Several boat launch sites are available. On the Skagit Wildlife Area, the Headquarters Unit boat launch on Freshwater Slough is one of the most popular, providing accesses 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, 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 area. 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 area. Excellent hunting can be provided on all of the Units that may be accessed from these launch sites.

Hunting the bay front is not a “spur of the moment” hunt. 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 horsepower motor.
2. When hunting the bay, more decoys are typically better. 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 an occasional snow goose.
3. Life jackets for all passengers are mandatory, and all of the additional 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. Float-coats or 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 8-foot 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 are 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 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, scout possible hunting areas in late summer, acquire the equipment that is legally required and that will enhance your hunting experience, and you will reap the rewards of hunting the Skagit Bay estuary.

Use this as a very “basic” guide. Successful waterfowl hunting in any major waterway or open water area requires a lot of research in order to have a safe and successful hunt. Feel free to contact us with additional questions that may not have been addressed in this guide.

Good Hunting, be Safe!

Skagit Wildlife Area Staff

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