Visitors to Olympic National Park erupt with a collective cheer when a heart-shaped spout rises above the mottled back of a gray whale. They are witnessing a small part of the world’s longest mammal migration—the journey of Eastern Pacific gray whales from their calving grounds in Baja, Mexico to feeding areas in the Bering and Chukchi Seas off Alaska.

From March to early May visitors to the Washington coast can watch whales surface, spout and dive, with their 10-foot tail flukes disappearing into the sea. Lucky observers might spot a full leap, called a breach, or see spyhopping—when whales raise their heads straight up for a look around. Bluffs near Kalaloch in Olympic National Park, or Cape Flattery on the Makah Indian Reservation, are good spots to scan the protected waters of the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary for whales, other marine mammals and seabirds.

**Longer than a School Bus**

Gray whales, which can grow up to 50 feet long, have distinctive white blotches of barnacles and sea lice on their gray skin. Rather than having dorsal fins, like black and white orcas, gray whales have 6-12 knobby knuckles on their backs. Males and solitary females are the first to migrate north, followed by females with their young calves born in warm lagoons in Mexico. At sites like the mouth of the Quillayute River at La Push, whales often come close to shore to feed on crustaceans and worms in bottom sediments, leaving behind a plume of mud.

**Saved From Extinction**

It hasn’t always been so easy to watch these humbling giants. Gray whales were nearly hunted to extinction over a century ago, mostly targeted in their calving lagoons in Baja. Whaling stations in Washington and British Columbia contributed to the decimation of populations of humpback, blue, sperm, fin and sei whales. But with protection, many whale populations are recovering. Threats still remain from boat collisions, entanglement in fishing gear, ocean acidification, variability in prey, noise pollution and offshore drilling activities, but Eastern Pacific gray whales now number over 20,000. About 200 linger off Washington all summer as part of what biologists call the Pacific Coast Feeding Group. Humpback whales are also returning to Washington waters, with over 200 feeding locally in recent summers, delighting whale watchers.

So pack a lunch, warm clothes and binoculars and head to the coast this spring! Celebrate with the Quileute tribe at their annual Welcoming of the Whales at La Push. Scan for the smooth, shiny heads of harbor seals and sea lions, the furry bobbing heads of sea otters, the slicing black dorsal fins of orcas, or the telltale spouts and massive backs of our largest mammal neighbors. All have benefited from human actions to protect and recover their populations. In return we are rewarded with a thrilling and rare glimpse into their ocean lives.

Public and private agencies worked together to rescue this young gray whale trapped by low tide on a Kalaloch beach in August 2017. They protected its skin with wet sheets. Then, after digging a trench in the sand, rescuers were able to help the whale turn and swim to freedom on a high tide.
For information see www.nps.gov/olym or call (360) 565-3131 or see nps.gov/olym/planyourvisit/campgroundstatus.htm for current status.

Roads in these areas remain open year-round weather permitting. Note: Olympic Hot Springs Road in the Elwha is subject to winter flooding and may close with short notice.

For safety, all vehicles, including 4WD traveling above Heart O’ the Hills on the Hurricane Ridge Road between Queets and Port Angeles, must carry tire chains. From November 24, 2017 through April 1, 2018, it is open 9-4 weather permitting Friday-Sunday, plus holiday Mondays (January 1, 15 and February 19, 2018), as well as December 26-28. Closed Monday-Thursdays during this winter season the road closes to uphills traffic at 4:00 p.m. and all vehicles must be below the Heart O’ the Hills gate by 5:00 p.m. After April 1 the road may be open as weather, staffing and road conditions allow. By early May the road is usually open 24 hours a day.

Snowshoe Walks: From December 16, 2017 through April 1, 2018, snow permitting, this easy to moderate walk is offered at 2:00 p.m. on weekends and holiday Mondays (January 1 and 15, February 19). The walk lasts 1.5 hours and covers less than a mile. Group size is limited to 25 people. Drop-ins start at the Hurricane Ridge Information Desk 30 minutes before the walk.

Snowshoe Walks for Community Groups: Clubs, youth groups or schools can request a 2-3 hour walk for groups of 7 to 25 people. From December 16, 2017 through April 1, 2018, these 1-2 hour walks are offered on weekends and holiday Mondays (January 1 and 15, February 19). Snow safety. Reservations must be made in advance by calling (360) 565-3131.
Before heading out, check at the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center for current avalanche conditions. Wear an avalanche beacon, carry a probe, snow shovel and the 10 essentials (see page 8), and avoid avalanche terrain such as cornices, gullies and steep lee slopes.
Cross-Country Skiing and Snowshoeing

With easy access and 15 to 20 miles of routes, Hurricane Ridge is the focus of cross-country skiing and snowshoeing in Olympic National Park. Though winter explorers of all abilities can enjoy the area, fast, easy, beginner ski terrain is limited to the meadows above the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center. Backcountry skiers can explore several slopes and bowls in the area. No trails are groomed or marked; however, two routes use unpaved roads which can usually be navigated.

NOTE FOR SNOWSHOERS, WALKERS, SNOWBOARDERS AND SKIERS: Due to part to help everyone enjoy this area. Snowshoers, walkers and snowboarders, please stay to one side to avoid damaging the ski tracks on trails, and do not snowshoe or walk through the downhill ski area.

Before heading out on any trip remember to register at the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center and check current avalanche conditions. Below are descriptions of routes in the Hurricane Ridge area.

The Meadows

The meadows above the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center offer gentle, easy terrain for everyone and excellent views in fair weather. Because the meadows are exposed to sun and wind, they can be icy or wind packed.

Hurricane Hill Road

1.5 mi/2.1 km one way

Starting just west of the visitor center, this trail first descends steeply, then follows the rolling, moderate ridge line along the unpaved Hurricane Hill Road (see above) and descends through meadows and forests into the Elwha Valley. There are several south-facing slopes near the beginning which are good for backcountry skiing. The Wolf Creek Trail is seldom snow-covered by forest. After a steep climb, the route crosses below Steeple Rock and onto a meadow which is easy terrain for everyone and excellent views in fair weather. Because the meadows are exposed to sun and wind, they can be icy or wind packed.

Other Areas

Four cross-country ski trails and two snowshoe trails are good for backcountry skiing. The Wolf Creek Trail is seldom snow-covered in fair weather. Because the meadows are exposed to sun and wind, they can be icy or wind packed.

Hurricane Hill Route

1.6 mi/2.6 km one way

This route starts at the end of the Hurricane Hill Road route and climbs 700 feet to the summit of Hurricane Hill. There are several very steep sidewalls if users follow the summer trail route, so some extra caution under icy or elevated avalanche hazard conditions. At an alternate, skiers and snowshoers can follow the ridge line, which has fewer steep sections. Be careful to stay off cornices that build up along the side of the ridge. Under good conditions, advanced skiers, advanced snowshoers or skiers should find this a rewarding trip with good views and some nice slopes.

Obstruction Point Road: Waterhole to end

4.3 mi/6.9 km one way (Obstruction Point Road is 7.8 mi/12.5 km one way)

This route begins mid-way along the unpaved Obstruction Point Road (see description above for the first 3.4 miles to Waterhole). After Waterhole, the route gains 900 feet, climbing steadily for 0.5 miles to open slopes on Eagle Point. In clear weather, views can be spectacular but steep sidewalls and exposure to storms make this a difficult route. It is recommended only under good conditions for experienced skiers. Travel beyond Obstruction Point can entail steep terrain with high avalanche potential.

Sunrise Ridge

2.1 mi/3.4 km one way

Begin this route by crossing below the intermediate ridge top and tube park, then climbing to the right of the ski hill (stay right of the trees). After crossing under the top of the ski area’s intermediate ridge top, this route follows a narrow ridge toward the south side of Mount Angeles. There are several avalanche prone areas along the way, so skiers should be aware and caution under unsettled conditions. Be especially careful to stay off cornices that form along the ridge and side ridges. Several nice slopes on the side east descent to the Hurricane Ridge Road.

For other routes on the Olympic Peninsula, refer to guides such as 100 Best Cross-Country Ski Trails in Washington, by Tom Kemmagall and Vicky Spring. Snowshoeing Routes: Washington by Dan Nelson, or Backcountry Ski and Snowboard Routers: Washington by Martin Volkmann.

Avalanche!

Olympic Mountain terrain and weather create ideal conditions for avalanches. Before heading out, check the northeast avalanche area forecast at www rêve, and talk to the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center for current local conditions. Wear beacons and carry a probe and snow shovel. The hazard levels range from low to extreme. Even in low hazard conditions avalanches can occur on some slopes. While avalanche forecasting is important, backcountry travel should be avoided. Certain terrain features like steep gullies that funnel snow, unstable cornices (see below), or dark cliffs in warm spring days, can cause the hazard. The survival rate for avalanche victims is very low. If you or a companion are caught in an avalanche, take these steps in your rescue attempt:

- Ensure the safety of survivors.
- Mark where victims were caught and last seen.
- Quickly search downhill from the last seen points for clues.
- Search the debris below the last seen points by probing in a grid pattern with probes, ski tails or poles.
- Keep searching! The victim could be inches away from your boots.
- Send an extra person for help.
- If you are caught, make swimming motions and try to keep yourself on top of the snow. As the snow begins to slow down, push the snow away from your face to create an air pocket.

Avalanche! Safety Guidelines

Keep searching! The victim could be inches away from your boots.
- Search the debris below the last seen points by probing in a grid pattern with probes, ski tails or poles.
- Keep searching! The victim could be inches away from your boots.
- Send an extra person for help.
- If you are caught, make swimming motions and try to keep yourself on top of the snow. As the snow begins to slow down, push the snow away from your face to create an air pocket.

Snow Sliding

Snow sliding is a favorite pastime for some, but it has also been one of the most dangerous activities at Hurricane Ridge. Serious injuries, even permanent disabilities occurred when people collided with trees, other sliders, or lost control and ended up in the road. For safety, only tubes provided by the ski area are permitted in their tubing park. The tubing park operated by the Hurricane Ridge Winter Sports Club in the downhill ski area. Only tubes provided by the ski area are permitted in their tubing park.

Sliding is not allowed anywhere else in the Hurricane Ridge area or along the Hurricane Ridge Road.

Perspectives

Learn more about your park at the free Perspectives winter speaker series. Talks are at 7 pm on the second Tuesday of the month, November through April. Due to renovations at the Olympic National Park Visitor Center, talks will be at the Port Angeles Library, 2210 South Peabody St., Port Angeles. Refreshments provided by Friends of Olympic National Park.

December 12 – Orca Archaeology: A Retrospective

Paul Gloerson, Chief of Cultural Resources – retired, Olympic National Park Over 30 years ago a smallville at the Orselle village cremated buildings and unpaculated a moment of rich village life and Makah tradition. Evidence of this tragedy surfaced in 1996, offering an extraordinary view of the past. Learn about this discovery from Paul Gloerson, who worked on the excavation.

January 9 – Geology and Earthquakes on the Olympic Peninsula

Dawn Alm, Olympic College

Evidence on the landscape reveals the history of a massive earthquake and tsunami that struck this region in 700. Learn about these destructive geologic forces have shaped the dramatic and beautiful landscape in our backyard.

February 13 – Fishers on the Olympic Peninsula

Patricia Happe, Ph.D., Wildlife Biologist, Olympic National Park

Fishers were reintroduced to Olympic National Park in 2008 and 2010 and quickly spread throughout the Peninsula. Dr. Happe will share the latest results from the multi-agency monitoring of this forest carnivore’s comeback.

March 3 – A Final Assessment of Elwha Rejuvenation

Josh Chernow, Restoration Ecologist, Olympic National Park

Come learn the results of six years of ongoing efforts in the Elwha rivers and hear predictions on future vegetation changes. As aquatic revegetation methods develop and nature takes over, learn what worked and what didn’t.

John Calambokidis, Research Biologist, Cascadia Research

A dramatic response by multiple agencies led to the successful rescue of a stranded gray whale from a beach near Kalaloch in Olympic National Park. Come listen to those whose efforts helped rescue the whale and get an update on the latest gray whale research.
TRIP TIPS

for your Olympic adventures

Olympic is a park for all seasons. Visitors prepared for unpredictable weather can experience the beauty and solitude of winter without summer crowds. But winter is also the wet season. Flooding and storms can impact trails, roads and campgrounds. Stop at the Olympic National Park Visitor Center or Wilderness Information Center (WIC) in Port Angeles for current conditions, maps, tide tables and trail reports or check the park website www.nps.gov/olym. If you hike, be prepared and carry the 10 essentials, even for short hikes: extra clothing, extra food and water, map, compass, flashlight, knife, sunglasses, matches, fire starter/candle, and first aid kit.

If you plan to backpack into the park’s wilderness, learn about bear canisters, wilderness permits and fees at the above website, or stop by or call the WIC (360) 565-3100. For you and your pet’s safety, pets are not allowed on hiking trails or ski and snowshoe routes in the park.

MOUNTAINS

Hurricane Ridge provides the only winter driving access to the mountains. It is perched at 5,242 feet, 17 miles up a winding road from Port Angeles. See pages two and three for details on the November 24 to April 1 road plowing schedule and hours for the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center and gift shop, cafe and ski/snowshoe rentals. Friday to Sunday and holiday Mondays visitors can enjoy snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. A downhill skiing and tubing area is open weekends and holiday Mondays from early December to April 1. By early May the road is usually open 24 hours a day and wildflowers are blooming at the edge of melting snowbanks. Snow drifts can linger into summer, so many trails are covered and difficult to find until June or July.

Elwha has many low-elevation trails, though the road is prone to closure from flooding. Madison Falls is a 0.1-mile easy, paved walk to a waterfall. Check creeks for spawning coho salmon in early winter. Visit Glines Canyon Spillway Overlook to learn about Elwha River restoration. A nearby trail leads through revegetated areas that were once under a reservoir. Additional trails start at the end of the gravel Whiskey Bend Road.

Lake Crescent is a 624-foot deep glacier-carved jewel. Stroll 0.9 miles to Marymere Falls or take the 0.6-mile Moments in Time Loop. On the north shore of the lake, explore the Spruce Railroad Trail. Fairholme campground reopens in spring. See page two for concession seasons.

Sol Duc has many trails including Sol Duc Falls, a 0.8-mile walk from the end of the road. Check before you go as the road is often closed in winter. The campground is primitive in winter, but fully reopens in spring. Sol Duc Hot Springs Resort offers pools, food and lodging starting March 23.

Ozette has opportunities for boating, a small lakeside campground and trails to the coast.

Staircase offers a campground (primitive in winter) by the North Fork Skokomish River, old-growth forest, and several trails including the easy 2.0-mile Staircase Rapids Nature Trail along the river. Check before you go as the road sometimes closes in winter.

COAST

The winter coast is a dramatic place. Storms push tides higher, creating huge waves that easily move beach logs or trap hikers on rocks. But it’s exciting to see and feel the power of the surf and weather shaping the landscape. Exploration of winter tide pools is limited because the lowest tides are often after dark, but if you’re visiting in spring, check a tide table in case there’s a low tide during your visit.

Kalaloch offers an expansive sandy beach. Kalaloch Campground and Kalaloch Lodge, with a restaurant and convenience store, are available year-round. Short, easy trails lead to Beach 4 and Ruby Beach, and the 0.8-mile Kalaloch Nature Trail loops through coastal forest.

Mora offers a campground less than two miles from Rialto Beach. Along the beach, you can hike 1.5 miles north to Hole-in-the-Wall. Other opportunities include the 0.7-mile Second Beach and 1.4-mile Third Beach trails near La Push.

Ozette has two trails to the beach: a 3.3-mile trail to Cape Alava and a 2.8-mile trail to Sand Point. Both routes are partially on boardwalk. Be careful as the boardwalk can be very slippery when wet or icy. A popular 9-mile loop combines these two trails with a 3.1-mile beach walk. Near the ranger station are exhibits and a small lakeside campground.

TEMPERATE RAIN FOREST

Drenched in over 12 feet of rain a year, westside valleys nurture giant western hemlock, Douglas-fir, western red cedar and Sitka spruce trees. The verdant understory and moss-draped bigleaf maples create a magical scene year-round. Look for Roosevelt elk in these lowland river valleys.

Hoh Rain Forest offers a visitor center (reduced hours in winter, see page two) and campground. The 0.8-mile Hall of Mosses and 1.2-mile Spruce Nature trails show off towering old-growth conifers as well as maple and alder communities. Look for spawning coho salmon in nearby Taft Creek in early winter.

Quinault Rain Forest has two nature trails: the 1.3-mile Kestner Homestead and 0.5-mile Maple Glade Rain Forest trails near the park ranger station on the North Shore Road (currently not staffed). The USFS/NPS Ranger Station, lodging, restaurants and additional trails are located on the south shore of Lake Quinault in Olympic National Forest and upvalley.