


Sandy ☿ Island ☿ Marine Park

 *Solitude is hard to find on the shorelines of the Comox Valley.* Comox Harbour is almost entirely developed, Denman Island's shoreline is leased to oyster farmers, and the rest of Baynes Sound is lined with houses and highway. There is a refuge, though.

From Comox, Royston, or Union Bay, a small group of trees are barely visible off the Northern tip of Denman Island during high tide. As the tide rolls out, beaches, mudflats, and rocky shores quickly surface around that pocket of trees, turning its small, sandy shoreline into a huge expanse of open space; miles of uninhabited beach accessible only by boat.

At even moderately low tides, those beaches join with Denman Island's Northern tip as well as a couple smaller sand-and-shrub islands to the north, creating my favorite day-trip destination in the Comox Valley – Sandy Island Marine Park (informally known as Tree Island).

The Puntledge River, which feeds into Comox Harbor, is my launch point of choice. Comox Valley kayaks, the Air Park in Courtenay, and many other places along the riverside provide access to the water. From the mouth of the river I follow the west side of the harbor south along the coast of Vancouver Island, then cross Baynes Sound to Tree Island. Wind, waves and tide currents rarely pose a threat to kayakers in Baynes Sound, so a more direct route across the open water is also an option. For canoeist, however, waves can reach threatening sizes in 10 km/hr winds or stronger.

On my second trip this year, I was turned away by wind and waves and decided to recruit a paddling partner for another try. Two days later, we paddled past the Comox Spit to the open waters in relatively

calm weather. Suddenly, half way to Tree Island, head winds picked up, and two-and-a-half foot waves came tumbling towards us, submerging the nose of my canoe as it crashed through the crests. We quickly decided to turn around and paddle with the wind, which was the quickest way to get us safely back to shore. As the canoe anxiously surfed the waves rising behind us, we fought to keep ourselves from turning broad side and tumbling over in the white caps.

60 exhilarating minutes later, we sat on a marshy beach near Royston contemplating that small group of trees beyond the white caps. As I relaxed against a driftwood log and wondered if the weather would ever let me reach Tree Island again, I noticed a piece of bark moving a few inches away from my arm. Looking closer, I realized that was no piece of bark, but a beetle.

I pulled out my copy of *Insects of the Pacific Northwest* (an incredible field guide by Peter and Judy Hagar, and a must for macro-photographers) and looked the little guy up. "Part of the Ironclad family," the book read, "a group of beetles usually found on forest trees with conks or mushrooms growing on them (they feed on the fruiting bodies of the fungus)"; but this was no forest, and there were no mushrooms on this driftwood to eat. Clearly, this beetle was trying to reach Tree Island as well, most likely floating on a piece of driftwood, but had beached in Royston on the same waves.

From the Kayak Shop, Tree Island is a little more than 6 miles, but paddlers can make the trip significantly shorter by launching from Goose Spit in Comox (2.7 miles), which is a large sand bar/public beach that juts out into the harbor. Another option is to launch from Union Bay, a Vancouver Island Coast

community south of Sandy Island Marine Park. From there, it's only 1.5 miles across Baynes Sound to Denman Island, and less than a mile north to Tree Island along Denman's shoreline, which is far more natural than the developed shorelines of the Comox Valley.

Tree Island's forest, although small and contained, is somewhat sunken into the ground, making the forest floor sheltered from the wind and slightly warmer than the exposed shoreline. There's an aged beauty to its mix of arbutus, fir, and cedar. The floor is scattered with shrubs and younger trees while the canopy is dense with old giants.

Tree Island's most beautiful features are on the macroscopic level. Between the forest and the shoreline are stretches of stunted trees and shrubs and tiny wildflowers, like the Seashore Lupine, which only grows in these special habitats.

Even the ancient Firs in the forest are at their most interesting up-close. As Fir trees age, their bark turns to scales, like the skin of a reptile, or wrinkles into grooves, sometimes looking like miniature badlands. The trees of Sandy Island Marine Park are not only beautiful examples of old growth Firs, but have that characteristically tough and weathered skin that comes with living at the mercy of ocean weather.

Such a small section of forest floating in the middle of the ocean is always at risk of disturbance, and with a diversity of rare plants found in very few other places, it's important to make the human impact as minimal as possible. Accordingly, the park has sectioned off much of the woods and shrub-land areas as sensitive habitat, and asked visitors to stay on the trails.

For a longer hike, the beaches and mudflats will provide more terrain than anyone could fit into one day. One word of warning, though: be careful with your tea-mug.

I put mine down to take a picture of a small, lonely arbutus tree growing on a thin section of shrub-land almost a mile across the mudflats from my canoe. By the time I realized it was no longer in my hand, that arbutus tree was barely a spec on the horizon behind me.

Needless to say, it's even more important to watch where you place your canoe or kayak. The South and West shores are fairly safe, but park your boat on the North or East shores at high tide, and by low tide you'll find it a mile or two inland (I'd imagine trekking a canoe or kayak across a mile of mudflat is a lot harder than backtracking for a tea-mug).

Up from the West and South shores are a few camping spots that are almost always available, even in the summer, and a couple outhouses as well. Sandy Island Marine Park has a year-round campfire ban, though. In the peak of the summer the waters off the South shore often fill up with other boaters, but the North and East shores can always guarantee some peace and solitude.

For my final words, I offer a must-bring list for Sandy Island Marine Park: A marine radio to keep updated on those unpredictable winds, a camera with macro capabilities, an insect and plant field guide for the West Coast, a marine chart (so you know just how far inland your canoe or kayak will be at low tide), and a tea-mug that clips to your belt or backpack so it never gets left behind. 🐉