

# Discover Vancouver Island

By Leah Gray, PPSA, BPSA, AFIAP, FCAPA

*Photography is the culmination of planning,  
technique, vision, composition, and perception,  
brought together in one instant –  
with a little (or more) editing.*

–LEAH GRAY



*Hunter Moon over Mount Baker*  
This is the Hunter moon shot over Mount Baker, looking east this past  
October near my home (500mm F 7.1/250 sec ISO 200)



*Killer Fin*  
Orca Whale coming at our boat in drizzling rain (600mm F4 1/1250 sec ISO 1000)

Living on the west coast of Canada near Victoria on Vancouver Island is extraordinary, particularly for a photographer. The southern tip of Vancouver Island is the warmest place in Canada year-round, with a "Mediterranean" type of climate. We are in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains in Washington State, so it is not nearly as rainy as Vancouver on the mainland of British Columbia. We typically have pleasant dry summers and mild wet winters. Snow comes occasionally. Further up Vancouver Island, the weather is more typically Canadian, although generally much milder than the rest of Canada.

My personal photography interests range from macro and tabletop to studio, wildlife, landscapes, and fine art. I look for the big pictures, and the small intimate images around me. I have an equally crazy photography partner, so we both work on finding opportunities to photograph. With an island at our doorstep that is 500km long (320 miles) and is 3,175,000 hectares (9,493,171 acres) there is a lot of material for a dedicated photographer to capture. Living close to the ocean, we have many ocean-dwelling creatures to photograph. Biggs Killer whales have been spotted more often this year than previous years along the coast and Humpback whales have become more common. To see whales, the easiest solution is to book a whale-watching tour. It's difficult to get close to whales these days as tour operators are under strict guidelines to not disturb the whales and keep a good distance away, although whales have been known to come over and visit a boat.

It is difficult to handle a large lens in a small boat, and ocean waves make it hard to focus. The moisture-laden atmosphere close to the surface doesn't help. Newer cameras and lens combinations have made photography easier, but the longer distances to a subject make capturing an image more difficult, but not impossible.

I joined a group of friends who recently chartered a boat to visit the Sea Lions in the Juan de Fuca strait. We timed our arrival for the late afternoon light and were rewarded with some good images.

*Northern Orca*  
Orca Whale near Campbell River shot in drizzling rain (600mm F4 1/2500 sec ISO 1600)



We've had close encounters with Pacific White-sided dolphins as well. They sometimes come up beside your boat, enticing one to photograph them. It's time to grab a smaller lens and concentrate on timing the perfect shot while retaining some shutter speed. This image was shot at 100mm with only a bit cropped off the bottom of the frame.



*Surging Ahead*  
This Pacific white-sided Dolphin rode the waves beside our boat (100mm, F 7.1 1/2500 ISO 800)

Bald Eagles are on the agenda at the beginning of July every year. We take a day trip out of Campbell River, further up the island, and photograph the eagles swooping down to take Pacific Hake fish in an area of strong rapids between the islands. The fish



*North to the Eagles*  
This tour boat is surrounded by Eagles at the ocean rapids (300mm F 7.1 1/250 ISO 800)



*Adult Bald Eagle*  
(500mm F7.1 1/2000 ISO 1600)

float to the top when they're caught in the rapid tides as their swim bladders distend. There are hundreds of eagles lined up for the feast each day. The trick is to time the tidal change with the light. The photography can be difficult but rewarding.

The coastal shoreline yields many other subjects. Shorebirds and waterfowl winter along or near the island. We see the common varieties, and often a few uncommon ones. Great Blue Herons are always around and fun to photograph at any time of year. Because they are common, I look for something unusual in my captures.



*Leading the Way*  
A Female Bufflehead duck stretches her wings and appears to be leading the group (600mm f4 1/5000 sec ISO 400)



*Female Duck in Flight*  
A female Mallard (840mm F5.6 1/800 sec ISO 800)

When the haunting song of the male Varied Thrush

*Eight*  
A Great Blue Heron is preening (840mm F5.6 1/1000 sec ISO 800)





Varied Thrush (600mm F41/640 sec ISO 800)

greet us in the winter months, we look forward to capturing his image. They typically come down from higher elevations when insects become scarce. This relative of the American Robin was captured in a friend's backyard in mid-March. This is an opportunity to play with our speedlights.

By March each year we start to watch for owls nesting. The Great Horned Owls nest earlier followed by Barred owls. There are a variety of hawks and, of course, Bald Eagles in the area. With the number of photographers flocking to owl nesting sites, we haven't been pursuing these opportunities in recent years.

The larger mammals on the island include the Black-tailed deer, Roosevelt elk, Black bears, Coastal Sea wolves and the largest concentration of Cougars in the world. There are no Grizzly bears here, although there have been reports of an occasional male bear swimming across from the mainland in the north area of the island. To date, there have not been any females.

We photograph Black bears when the salmon are running in the autumn. There are several good locations on the island, but some of the areas have become quite popular with large numbers of photographers entering these spaces in recent years.

This Black bear was seen across the river from us. In this area, the bears are generally on the far side of the river, and the photographers on the near side. This bear, the only one to appear that day, wandered out at dusk, as we were packing up to leave. It's difficult to photograph a black bear against dark vegetation with almost no light. Fortunately, it turned its head and its eyes reflected the light in the sky behind us.

There are areas up-island where photographers can join

*The Black*  
A Black bear peers at us from across the river (600mm F4 1/400 sec ISO 12,800)

a boat tour for a day trip across to the mainland to photograph Grizzly Bears in Bute, Toba and Knight Inlets. We have also traveled much further north to the Khutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary north of Prince Rupert on the mainland to photograph bears in June.

There are many smaller mammals on the Island; the Vancouver Island Marmot being the rarest. It is only found only in the mountains on Vancouver Island. We do not have coyotes, fox, moose, badgers, porcupines, skunks, or chipmunks.

Besides wildlife, we have many other subjects to capture. The landscapes on the island are always captivating. In recent years, I've tried to remind myself to include "hand of man" in my images and have enjoyed more varied subjects. I have the luxury of visiting my favourite locations time after time, perfecting my captures. Spring and Fall are best for landscapes, as the variable weather gives us interesting subjects and light.

*Glassy Beach in Sydney*  
A longer exposure to smooth out the ocean waves. (16mm F22 30 sec ISO 100)



*Oceanside Morning*  
A foggy morning image of driftwood on Island View Beach near Victoria, BC (16mm F20 0.5 sec ISO 100)



*Siblings*  
These second-year grizzly cubs were without their mother and busy foraging on their own. They took time out to play. This image was the PSA 2018 Nature image of the year. (300mm F4 1/640 sec ISO 400)



*Soft Morning*  
Oak Bay Marina near Victoria, B.C. (300mm F16 1/200 sec ISO 400)



*Mossy Depths*  
Moss-covered tree trunk in water (840mm F5.6 1/800 sec ISO 1600)



*Wild Calypso Orchids*  
A focus stacked image (60) (180mm F8 1/6 sec ISO 100)

In February, we look for the wildflowers to start blooming. We have our favorite spots among the 48 parks in the Victoria area. Each week there is something new to photograph. The trick is to arrive at sunrise before any breezes come up—or friendly dogs bounce up to see why you are lying on the ground with a camera and video light. Those same prime spots for wildflowers are also good for mushroom photography in the fall.

Victoria is known for its gardens. Butchart Gardens is world famous, but there are many lesser-known gardens such as Hatley Castle, Finnerty and Abkhazi Gardens, Beacon Hill Park, and the Gardens at the Horticultural Centre of the Pacific. They all have wonderful displays of flowers almost all year, that are easy to access and many have no fees.

Like many people, we are proud of where we have chosen to live. The opportunities for photography are varied, satisfying, and I rarely need to wear more than light gloves when photographing.

### **Leah Gray, PPSA, BPSA, AFIAP, FCAPA**

Leah is a Canadian Association for Photographic Art (CAPA) certified judge. She teaches photography at the McTavish Academy of Art on Vancouver Island and works for Seaside Magazine in Sidney, B.C.



Leah's interests are diverse. Having begun photographing sports, specifically football, almost 20 years ago, she has since expanded to wildlife, macro, black and white, portraits and other genres of photography.

In 2021, Leah earned a PPSA and a BPSA for her portfolio of horses in France. She earned an AFIAP distinction that same year. In 2018, Leah's image "Siblings" was awarded the PSA Nature Image of the Year over the best Nature and best Wildlife images worldwide. In 2020 she was awarded an FCAPA award from the Canadian Association for Photographic Art for her photographic accomplishments.

Leah has 17 gold medals, 6 Best in Show, and over 150 other awards in PSA International Salons and other competitions since October 2017. She has over 800 acceptances.



*Blue and Gold*  
A flower from Hatley Castle gardens (278mm F5.6 1/100 sec ISO 400)

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