

SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA WATERFOWL HUNTING GUIDE



Waterfowl hunters in a blind on the Skagit Wildlife Area. Photo by Curran Cosgrove.

The [Skagit Wildlife Area](#) is a very popular site for Pacific Northwest waterfowl hunters and offers hunting opportunities for both ducks and geese. The Skagit Wildlife Area is also popular for other wildlife-related activities such as birdwatching, photography, hiking, and kayaking. The Skagit Wildlife Area office is on the Headquarters Unit, located two miles southwest of Conway, from exit 221 on Interstate 5.

The Skagit Wildlife Area is approximately 16,000 acres, located in Skagit and northern Snohomish Counties, and is owned and managed by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Most 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, south Skagit Bay, and the northern end of Port Susan Bay and portions of the mouth of the Stillaguamish River. These areas provide natural habitat for wintering waterfowl, and as a result, provide public hunting opportunities.

Currently, approximately 355 acres of the Skagit Wildlife Area are in agricultural enhancements that are managed to benefit waterfowl and waterfowl hunting. Agricultural enhancement projects are implemented annually on the Island, Samish, Samish River, South Padilla Bay, and the DeBay's Slough Hunt Units. These Units are typically planted with crops such as barley, corn, fava beans, millet, and winter wheat and are left unharvested to provide food 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. Cold snaps that cause standing water on nearby agricultural lands to freeze can create world-class conditions for waterfowl hunting on Skagit Wildlife Area units; with birds congregating on open sloughs, marsh and bayfront. Hunters should be aware that sheet ice can form on any body of water during these conditions and may cause significant access and safety concerns that vary throughout the day depending on tides and wind.

Mallards, green-winged teal, pintail, and wigeon are the main dabbling duck species present in this area. Gadwall, Northern shovelers, and various diving and sea ducks such as bufflehead, scaup, and goldeneye are among other waterfowl species that may be encountered, along with coots. 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 hunting seasons.

The Skagit Wildlife Area is a very popular public waterfowl hunting area, and at times may receive heavy public hunting pressure. Hunters who can arrange to hunt during weekdays or afternoons can enjoy a less crowded area, as weekend hunting conditions and early mornings can be quite challenging.

However, if hunters set up with sufficient distances between groups, are courteous to one another, and obey the “15 shell” limit regulations on the Samish, DeBay’s Slough Hunt Area, and Island Units, hunting can still be very productive. Blinds managed through the [WDFW Private Lands Hunting Access](#) program at the South Padilla Bay and Samish River Units are also subject to the 15-shell limit regulation.



Mallards, green-winged teal and other waterfowl feeding at low tide at the Headquarters Unit of the Skagit Wildlife Area.

Many of the Skagit Wildlife Area Units provide waterfowl hunters the opportunity to hunt from WDFW-provided blinds, but you can build temporary blinds or use layout blinds to field hunt from within these units. Due to the open, “big water” nature across much of the Skagit Bay Estuary Unit, additional distance between hunting parties can be necessary to avoid conflicting with each other’s hunts, especially later in season.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

- Check the current season legal hunting hours for migratory game birds, which change weekly. They are found on the last page of each year’s Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game Seasons pamphlet, [as well as on this webpage](#). Detailed 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.
- Safety Zones - Most Wildlife Area Units have Safety Zones around parking lots, entrance roads, and public roadways. **Hunters may transit through Safety Zones but may not shoot from or into a Safety Zone.** Take this into consideration when deciding where to set up for a hunt, especially when pass shooting. Maps are posted at most Unit parking lots depicting the Safety Zones and signs are posted along the Safety Zone boundaries.

- Waterfowl identification is an important part of being an ethical and legal hunter. Duck and goose identification guides are available [in the regulations](#) and [on WDFW's website](#). Some common dabbling duck species have restrictions on the number of birds allowed to be harvested per day (e.g., for the 2021-2022 season, hunters are allowed 2 hen mallards and 1 pintail of either sex per day. Check current regulations, as this is subject to change.). In northwest Washington, it is also important to know the difference between snow geese and swans. Trumpeter and tundra swans are illegal to hunt anywhere in Washington. Cues to look for when identifying waterfowl “on the wing” include size, shape, color pattern, flight speed and characteristics, and sounds or calls that the bird may make.
- Check the [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game Seasons](#) pamphlet at the beginning of every season for any new or changed regulations. Pay special attention to mid-season closures for ducks, geese, and scaup.
- Carry a tide book, understand how to use it, and learn how tides may affect your hunting area. It's not uncommon for water levels in the Skagit Estuary to change up to 10 feet throughout the day! The tides for Skagit Bay are similar to Seattle tides, which can be found online (<https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/>) or in any Puget Sound tide book available at most outdoor equipment stores. The easiest tide guides to use have the daily graphs depicting the high (flood), and low (ebb) tides. If hunting at the Leque Island Unit, use the Tulare Beach Station within the Puget Sound tide book for the most accurate daily tidal conditions.

Be aware that tidal forecasts are not exact, and both wind and water levels on the Skagit River can affect your hunt, especially after flooding events. Some areas of the river can be impassable with low tides and low river levels, while high flows bring logs and other debris downriver. Check [USGS](#) or [NOAA Northwest River Forecast Center](#) gauges for Mt. Vernon for current and predicted river levels.

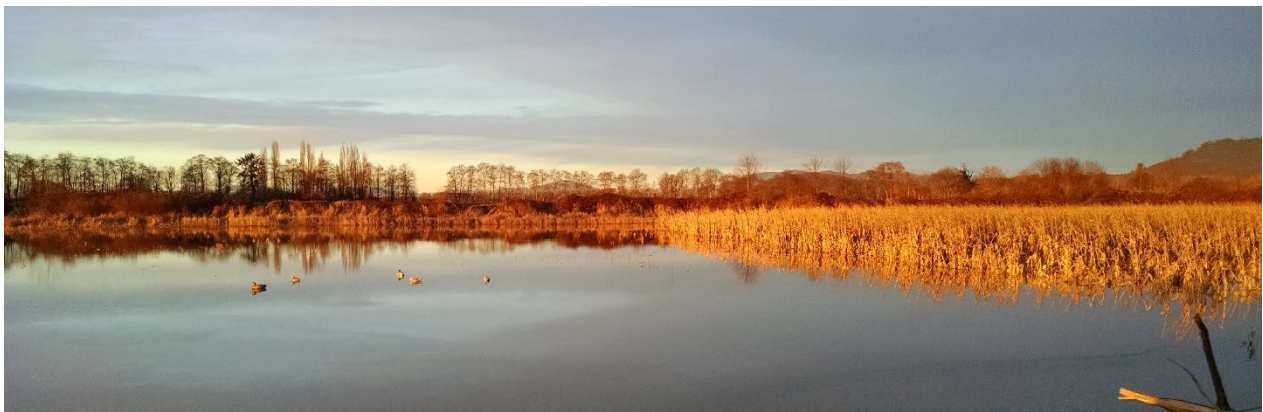


Kayaks are a versatile tool for waterfowl hunting the Skagit Wildlife Area, but these and other small boats come with inherent risks and require special attention to tides, weather, and safety precautions. This hunter wears a camouflage PFD, carries a marine radio, and uses seaworthy 10-to-12-foot kayaks as layout boats.

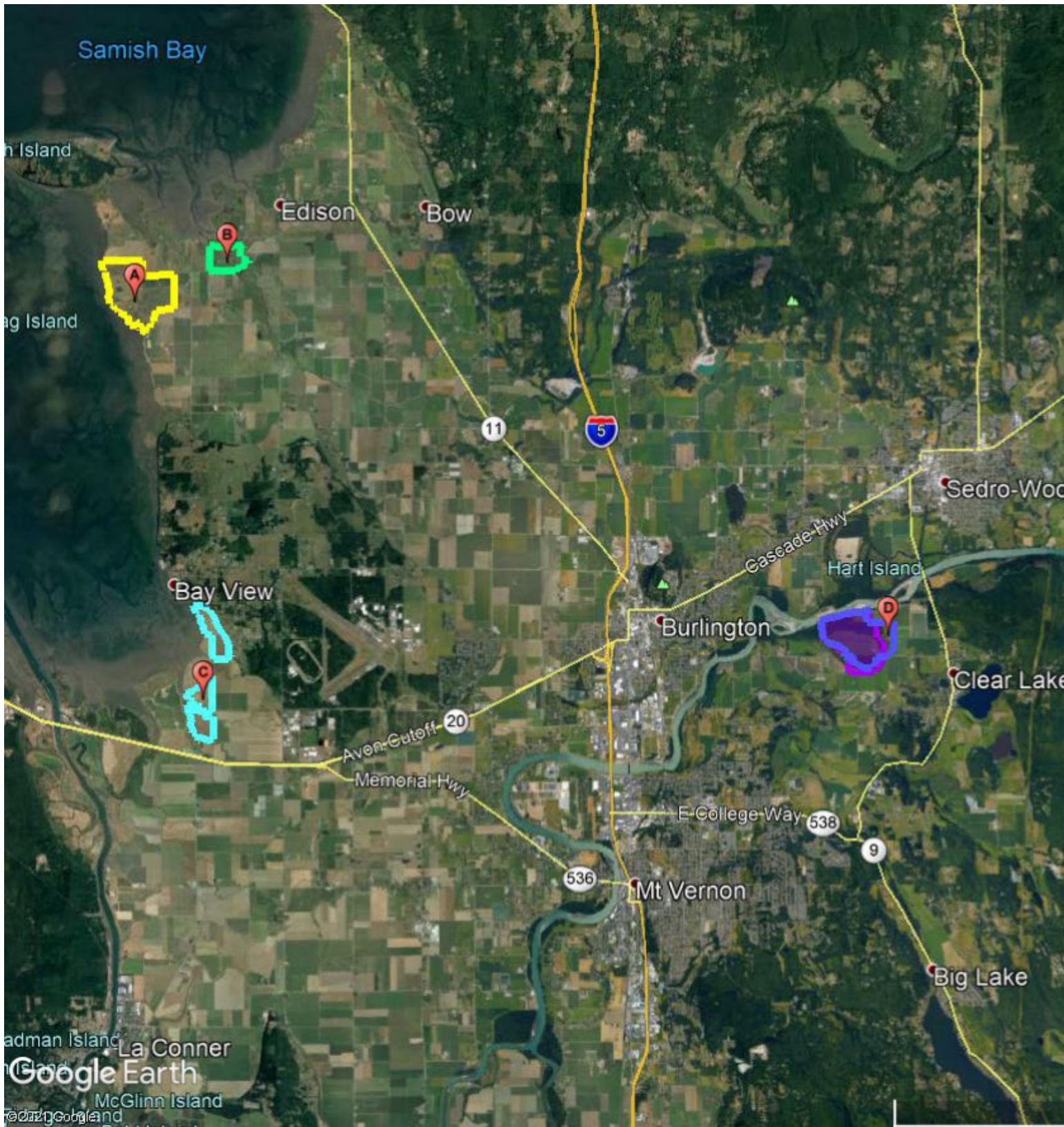
- Note the 15-shell restrictions at the Samish, Samish River, South Padilla Bay, DeBay's Slough Hunt Area, and Island Units, as well as the Spencer Island Unit of the Snoqualmie Wildlife Area near Everett. According to WAC 232-16-770, “It is unlawful to have in possession more than 15 shotgun shells 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 public lands and remove shell casings and other litter.

SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA/HUNT UNITS and WATER ACCESS SITES

Wildlife Area Unit	Total Acreage	Huntable Acreage	Foot Access/Boat Access	Tidal Influence	15 Shell Regulation Area
Headquarters	193	168	Foot Access, Boat Access	Yes	No
Samish	410	373	Foot Access	No	Yes
Debay's Slough	359	47	Foot Access, limited Boat Access to DeBay's Slough	No	Yes
Island	276	276	Boat Access	West Lobe- No East Lobe- Yes	Yes
Big Ditch	115	113	Foot Access, Boat Access	Yes	No
Leque	426	348	Foot Access, Boat Access	Yes	No
Milltown Island	299	299	Boat Access	Yes	No
Jensen	21	20	Foot Access	Yes	No
North Fork	163	163	Foot Access, Boat Access	Yes	No
Skagit Bay Estuary	10,003	10,003	Boat Access	Yes	No
Telegraph Slough	60	59	Foot Access	South of Hwy 20- No	No
South Padilla Bay	245	20	Foot Access	No	No
Samish River	104	10	Foot Access	No	No



Decoys at the Island Unit of Skagit Wildlife Area. Photo by Curran Cosgrove.

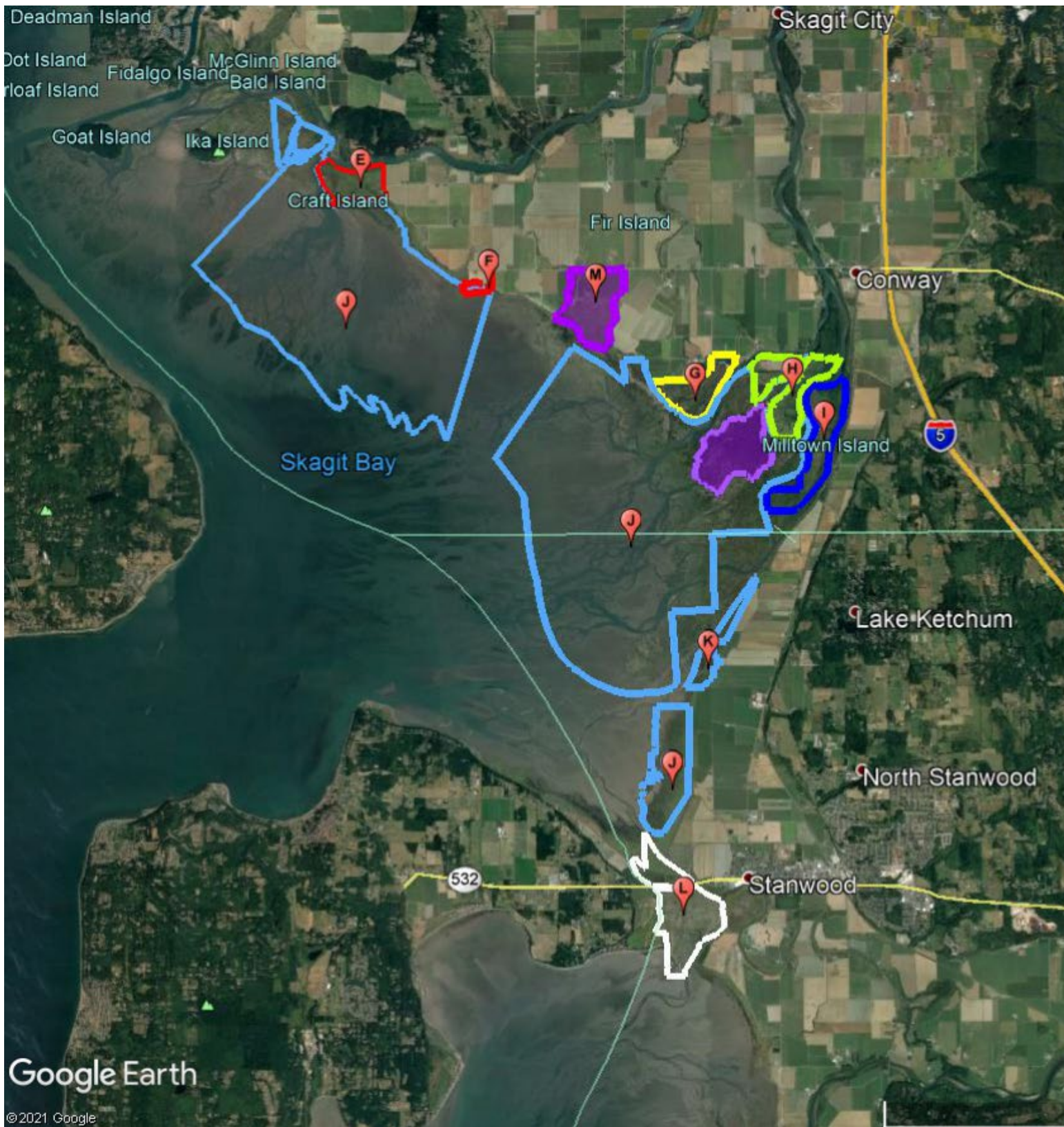


A. Samish Unit – The Samish Unit is a very popular hunting site located on the north end of Padilla Bay, on Samish Island Road. The Samish Unit consists of 410 acres of agricultural areas, grass fields, and ponds. Approximately 290 acres are intensively managed for waterfowl forage, including barley, fava beans, millet, hay fields, and areas of harvested and unharvested corn. There are 23 shallow ponds that were developed in partnership with Ducks Unlimited. Work has been done in recent years to reduce cattail and provide better habitat and hunting conditions within the ponds. Funding for the agricultural enhancements on this Unit is provided through the Washington State Duck Stamp Program. Water control structures throughout the Unit are used to manage water levels and allow for much of the area to be flooded with sheet water during the hunting season. Hunters primarily use decoys on this site in both the developed ponds and in the open fields. This Unit is subject to the 15-shell limit regulation.

B. Samish River Unit – The Samish River Unit is 105 acres on the mouth of the Samish River. The Hunt Area has been broken up into two defined Hunting Areas, each with a permanent blind, and are managed as Register to Hunt sites under the WDFW Private Lands Access Program. You can hunt from one of the two blinds or within one of the two defined Hunt Areas. The names of these two blinds are [Edison West](#) and [Edison East](#). To find out more information about these blinds and regulations please go to the Private Lands Access Program webpage at https://privatelands.wdfw.wa.gov/private_land/. Parking areas for the two blinds are at the two gates on the west side of the Unit. Maps posted at these gates indicate which parking area is designated for which blind. A 5 acre portion of this Unit near the defined Hunting Areas/blinds is planted with corn or barley. This area is subject to the 15-shell limit regulation.

C. South Padilla Bay Unit – The South Padilla Bay Unit is approximately 254 acres adjacent to the southeast end of Padilla Bay, just north of Highway 20 on Bayview-Edison Road. The three blinds on this unit are managed as Register to Hunt sites under the WDFW Private Lands Access Program to provide the public with hunting opportunities from designated blinds located adjacent to agricultural crops left standing, provided through a sharecrop lease between WDFW and a local farmer. The names of these three blinds are [Bayview 1](#), [Bayview 2](#) and [Bayview 3](#), and hunters are only allowed to hunt from the blinds. To find out more information and regulations about these blinds please go to the Private Land Access Program website at https://privatelands.wdfw.wa.gov/private_land/. There are three parking areas for the blinds. Information and maps are posted at the parking area that is designated for which blind you would like to hunt. This area is subject to the 15-shell limit regulation.

D. DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit – The DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit is a 23-acre field and adjacent slough that can be a productive hunting site, especially mid- to late season, but can only safely accommodate four to five hunting parties at a time. The Hunt Unit field is typically planted with barley and corn. The Unit is located east of the Johnson/DeBay's Slough Game Reserve (WAC 220-411-120) (area that is colored purple on the above map) just west of Clear Lake on Francis Road in Skagit County. Note that the Game Reserve includes the portion of DeBay's Slough south of DeBay Isle Road and all areas accessed from the Game Reserve parking lot at the west end of DeBay Isle Road. The Game Reserve is closed to all hunting. Please review the Game Reserve descriptions and map posted at the parking lot before hunting this area. The DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit is primarily a field hunting site and should be hunted with decoys. Hunters may use a small boat and launch into the northern portion of DeBay's Slough adjacent to the Hunt Area field (north of DeBay Isle Road, that is not part of the Johnson/DeBay's Slough Game Reserve). This Unit is subject to the 15-shell limit regulation.



E. North Fork Access – The North Fork Access offers waterfowl hunting opportunities for both dabbling ducks and snow geese. Hunters can access the area by boat or hunt the tides on foot with small sets of decoys. Walk-in access to the area is from the west end of Rawlins Road on Fir Island. Parking is allowed on the shoulder of the narrow county road and turnaround space is limited, so users are advised to not park a vehicle with a trailer

here. The nearest boat launches are at Blake's Resort on Rawlins Road or under the Rainbow Bridge in La Conner.

F. Jensen Access – Jensen Access provides opportunities to hunt from an area on the dike or set up decoys in the intertidal area. The area offers a chance for hunting snow geese and dabbling ducks as they fly along the bayfront or from the Skagit Bay to the agricultural fields on Fir Island. 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 within the adjacent intertidal area. It is illegal to discharge a firearm from or into a Safety Zone. This access site is popular with both hunters and bird watchers and may be quite crowded at times, especially in the afternoons.

G. Headquarters Unit – The Headquarters Unit was restored to intertidal estuary during the summer of 2009, and hunting access is now dependent on tide and river levels. This Unit can be hunted on foot during low tides (with chest waders), or from small boats during higher tides as well as within marsh along Freshwater Slough. A car-top boat launch is available for small boats, canoes, and aqua pods at the boat launch parking lot. Be aware that outgoing currents may become swift here during ebb tides. The area also provides access to the Skagit Bay Estuary Unit for "boot" hunting in the marsh, and stealthy hunters can be successful jump shooting at low tides. The Skagit Bay Estuary Unit is accessible by hiking the Wiley Slough dike trail southwest until you reach the end of the trail. Both pass shooting and decoy hunting are also available on this site.

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 Estuary Unit via Freshwater Slough and access to the Island Unit, portions of the Headquarters Unit and Milltown Island Unit.

H. Island Unit – **During a major flood in November 2021, a dike segment failed on the East Lobe of the Island Unit.** This area now has fluctuating water levels that are dependent on both the tides and river levels (intertidal). Area users should pay special attention to tides to ensure they aren't trapped on foot by rising water or that their boat is not stranded by lowering water. None of the agricultural fields on the East Lobe were planted with agricultural enhancement crops due to this change. The West Lobe of the Unit was not affected by the dike failure.

The Island Unit is accessible only by boat. The Island Unit currently offers approximately 40 acres of managed fields on the west lobe that are planted with millet along with natural recruitment of moist soil plants, all of which are left standing for waterfowl. Approximately 50-75% of the area is flooded with sheet water using annual precipitation and one water control structure. This management practice further enhances the area habitat for wintering waterfowl and decoy hunting. The area is a very popular site for waterfowl hunting and can be crowded on weekend mornings. The Island Unit has the 15-shell limit regulation, and if all participants obey that law, it dramatically improves hunting on the site. For updates, contact the WDFW Region 4 office at (425) 775-1311.

I. Milltown Access and Milltown Island Unit – A private boat launch is available off Pioneer Highway at Milltown Road which provides boat access to the south fork of the Skagit River and the Skagit Bay Estuary Unit. The WDFW-owned Milltown Island Unit is immediately adjacent to the launch site (to the west) and is accessible by boat only, though it can be hunted by boat or on foot depending on the tides and river levels. Please respect the neighbors and obey posted signs to keep this launch site available to hunters and fishermen.

J. Skagit Bay Estuary Unit – The Skagit Bay Estuary Unit extends from the Skagit River North Fork to the Skagit River South Fork, and south to Stanwood and the south Skagit Bay area. WDFW owns approximately 10,003 acres that and can provide prime waterfowl hunting from a boat or by foot during low tides. Most of the area is public land with a few private ownerships mixed in, so be sure to respect posted areas. **There are also**

two Game Reserves that are closed to hunting -- Skagit Delta Game Reserve, WAC 220-411-180 (colored in purple in above map) and Fir Island Farm Reserve, WAC 220-411-080 (colored in purple in above map).

The Skagit Bay Estuary Unit and/or bay front areas are quite diverse, offering habitat ranging from open saltwater, mud flats, low marsh (grass and sedge), 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 tidal action and currents of the various sloughs. Most bay front hunters set up on the edge of the vegetation line, in the higher marsh where cover is better for larger boats and groups, in places where sloughs intersect with river channels, and other back waters. Some prefer to hunt the open water on Skagit Bay. The entire bay front can offer good shooting, but the most popular areas are near the mouths of South Fork and the North Fork of the Skagit River.

K. Big Ditch Access – Big Ditch provides access to the intertidal areas of the eastern portion of the Skagit Bay Estuary Unit. Ducks and snow geese can be hunted here by pass-shooting (be aware of Safety Zone around parking area) or hunting over decoy spreads. An unimproved car-top boat launch is located at the access site.

L. Leque Island Unit – The Leque Island Unit is located between Stanwood and Camano Island, to the north and south of Highway 532 at Eide Road. The 35 acres to the north have been restored to intertidal estuary and is available for walk-in hunting with chest waders during low tides, and small boat hunting during high tides. The 215 acres to the south was recently restored to intertidal estuary habitat and is also available for walk-in hunting with chest waders during low tides, and small boat hunting along West Pass, South Pass and Davis Slough, and during high tides. There is access at Eide Road (next to the Camano Island Bridge) and the Davis Slough parking lot (just to the west of the bridge) for launching small boats, canoes, and aqua pods. The Unit offers duck and goose hunting from the intertidal areas and can provide decoy hunting opportunities.

Beware of tidal fluctuations as water levels can change with the tides, and deeper ditches and channels abound here because of recent restoration work. Use a Puget Sound Tide Guide and refer to the Tulare Beach station tide tables. The easiest tide guides have daily graphs depicting the high (flood), and low (ebb) tides. Puget Sound tide guides are available at most outdoor equipment stores. Leque Island is a good location for duck and snow goose hunting, as it is a local flyway between Port Susan and Skagit Bays and nearby farmlands.

M. Fir Island Farm Game Reserve Unit – As per WAC 220-411-080, **Hunting is not allowed on this unit** (colored in purple on the above map). This Game Reserve is managed to provide forage and a non-hunted resting place for snow geese that winter in the Skagit Valley.

BOAT LAUNCHES

Local Public Boat Launches	Accessible Skagit Wildlife Area Units
Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters Unit Boat Launch	Headquarters Unit, Island Unit, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit, Milltown Island Unit, Big Ditch Access Area
Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters Unit Car-Top Boat Launch	Headquarters Unit, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit
Skagit Wildlife Area Big Ditch Access Car-Top Boat Launch	Big Ditch Access Area, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit
Skagit Wildlife Area Leque Unit Davis Slough Car-Top Boat Launch	Leque Island Unit, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit
Skagit County Conway Boat Launch	Headquarters Unit, Island Unit, Milltown Island Unit, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit, North Fork Access Area
Skagit County La Connor Boat Launch	North Fork Access Area, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit
Local Private Boat Launches	

Milltown Boat Launch (public access to private launch)	Milltown Island Unit, Island Unit, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit, Headquarters Unit, Leque Island Unit
Blake’s Resort Boat Launch	North Fork Access Area, Skagit Bay Estuary Unit

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 access to the South Fork Skagit River area and the central portions of the Skagit Bay Estuary Unit. Another possible Wildlife Area launch site is the Big Ditch Access south of Conway and west of the Pioneer Highway. Big Ditch does not have a developed launch ramp and is only usable for car-top boats or light trailered boats, and can be very difficult to launch or retrieve all manner of vessels at lower tides. This is also a popular site for launching canoes or other types of paddling boats. The other Wildlife Area launch site is at the Davis Slough parking lot (west side) of the Leque Island Unit. This launch is only usable for cartop boats (such as canoes and aqua pods) or light trailered boats and can also be challenging at low tide.

There are three other launch sites adjacent to Skagit Bay. One is the “pay to launch” site at Blake’s Resort near the end of Rawlins Road on Fir Island. This site provides direct access to the Skagit River North Fork area. The second is the Skagit County Parks boat launch in Conway. It is located on the northeast side of the Conway/South Fork Bridge and provides access to the Island, Milltown Island, and Skagit Bay Estuary Units. The third boat launch is on Milltown Road just west of Pioneer Highway. This site is privately owned, is surfaced with crushed rock, and is open for public use. This site provides access to the Skagit River South Fork area and the Skagit Bay Estuary Unit. Excellent hunting can be accessed from these launch sites.

HUNTING SAFETY

Hunting Skagit Bay is not a “spur of the moment” hunt. Preparation and good equipment are necessary for hunter safety and a successful hunt. Suggested equipment and hunting gear include:

1. A well camouflaged boat, at least 14 feet in length, and equipped with at least a 20-horsepower motor. Alternately, kayaks and marsh boats can work well, but hunters should be experienced, carry safety equipment, and be aware of their limited range and the likelihood of tides impacting paddling routes.
2. When hunting the bay, more decoys are typically better as birds tend to congregate here in large groups. Most hunters recommend using at least three dozen duck decoys, and often enhance their “spread” with six to 12 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. On calm, windless days, hand-powered jerk cords or spinner decoys can be helpful for attracting waterfowl attention (note that battery-powered motorized decoys are not legal for waterfowl hunting in Washington state).
3. Life jackets for all passengers are mandatory, as well as all Coast Guard-required safety equipment for the size of boat that you are using. Life jackets should always be worn. 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 can work well for hunting use, but should be checked regularly for proper operation and cannister expiration.
4. Having a GPS, cell phones, tide books (**KNOW YOUR TIDES!**), extra headlamps or flashlights, and survival gear within a waterproof dry bag or dry box are also recommended, as the Skagit Bay Estuary can be a very dangerous boating environment. A hand-held marine radio is another useful piece of safety equipment for this style of waterfowl hunting.
5. Aerial photos or mapping apps are the best type of “map” for use in the estuary. It is quite easy to get lost in the marsh, and if you add weather such as fog it can be a game changer, so be careful to pay attention to the routes that you are taking on your hunt. Satellite images or mapping apps can also be useful for staying within deeper sloughs and channels while boating.

WDFW and local search and rescue teams conduct several rescues across this area 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 to plan. No corrections need to be calculated into the height or time of the printed Seattle tides, though no tide forecast is exact. There can be numerous variables other than tides that can affect water levels, including river conditions, barometric pressure, and wind. Be sure and check the local NOAA marine weather forecast. If winds are predicted to be over 15-20 knots, be extremely cautious if you are planning a hunting trip to the Skagit Bay area. 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 Unit and other open water areas. 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 throughout the year, acquire the equipment that is legally required, and reap the rewards of hunting the Skagit Bay area.

Use this as a very “basic” guide. Successful waterfowl hunting in any major waterway or open water area requires a lot of research 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 and Be Safe!

Skagit Wildlife Area Staff

Contact (360) 445-4441



*Ducks and snow geese in flight as the sun sets over the Skagit Wildlife Area and Skagit Bay.
Photo by Chase Gunnell, WDFW Puget Sound Region communications manager.*