

EVEN *MORE* SAN JUAN ISLANDS

by Michael Boyd

Photos by Karen Johnson



No reader of this publication needs to be told that the San Juan Islands are one of the great treasures for boaters in the Pacific Northwest. Still, if you're a cruiser who likes to go hiking, the walkable riches provided by the San Juans are a trove beyond one's wildest imagination. At the dawn of this Salish Sea summer, most boaters are at the apex of their opportunity to venture far beyond our local islands. And yet, we all have a great reason to stay "home" and enjoy yet more of the exquisite boat-accessed hikes to be found in the San Juan Islands.

We've already shared several articles with some of our favorite hikes in the San Juan Islands—pointing you toward trails on Sucia, Cypress, San Juan, Matia, Stuart, and Lopez islands—and the hits just keep on coming with the following set. Get out there, soak up the sunshine underway, and lace up your boots for some more splendid San Juan Islands strolls.



Entrance to the San Juan Island Sculpture Park on the author's first visit.



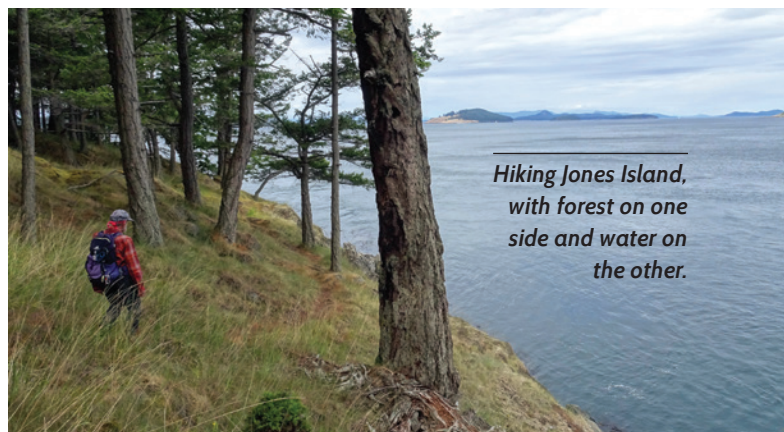
Sculpture Park herons by the lake shore.

ROCHE HARBOR

Roche Harbor is one of the places we go to treat ourselves when we are in the San Juans. It has a well protected anchorage but, with lots of boat traffic and wakes, we usually prefer to spend the night at the dock. The marina is truly "full service" and comes with a well-equipped store and a luxury hotel including amenities like a swimming pool, tennis courts, and a nice restaurant. In the high season it is always busy, so we have to plan ahead. There used to be a US Customs inspection station here, which has since been closed with the proliferation of the app-based check-in for most boats.



The Jones Island hiking trail passes many developed campsites.



Hiking Jones Island, with forest on one side and water on the other.

There are several possible hikes here, but one stands out. Up the street from the hotel and across the main road near the airfield is the San Juan Island Sculpture Park. This is a network of trails around a small lake and through grasslands, woodlands, and wetlands. It would be a fine hike if that were it, but there is much more. Everywhere you turn there are sculptures by contemporary artists, some small and intimate, hiding among the trees, others large and monumental overlooking the lake or up on a hill with a view of Westcott Bay. It's a wonderful walk with discovery at every turn, as long or short as you want to make it. And the best part is when you return a few years later, there will be new sculptures to discover; it's like a new hiking experience all over again.

JONES ISLAND

Jones Island State Park is an entire island in the western part of the San Juans. It has two small bays with possible anchorage. The south bay is open to the more frequent weather and wakes from

the many passing boats; it has little to recommend it. The north bay is smaller, has a state park dock and mooring buoys with some anchoring space, and is well protected. It is also extremely popular. Our strategy whenever we are in the neighborhood is to swing by the north bay to see if there is a buoy available or sufficient space at the dock. If there is, we stay, otherwise we go somewhere else and come back another time.

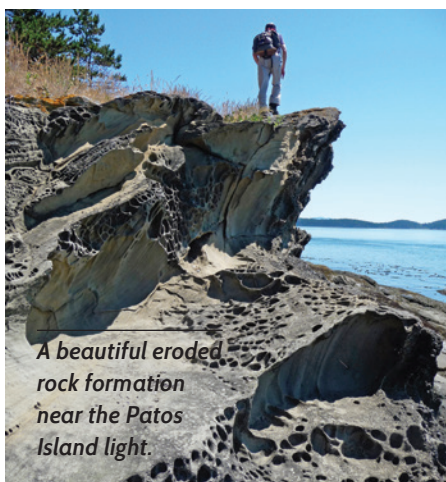
Should you be lucky enough to find yourself settling in for a stop at Jones for a day or two this summer, there is a short hike across the isthmus to the south bay. But a much nicer hike of about 3.9 miles goes around the perimeter of the island with views of the water all along the way. There are camping sites here as well, should you wish to stay on land, some of which are accessible to kayakers.

PATOS ISLAND

At the far northwest corner of the San Juan Islands, Patos Island State Park feels remote. There is only one protected anchorage, Active Cove, a narrow bay on

the south side of the island and even that is open at both ends allowing current to flow through. There are usually two State Park mooring buoys, but they at least used to be suspect. We saw a 40 foot boat tie to one then back down gently across the whole bay; clearly the connection to its anchor had broken and the ball was left floating free. [Editor's note: WA State Parks reports that Patos Island is one of the locations where mooring buoy anchors have been replaced as of early 2026.] We usually anchor, though a stern tie may be necessary because of the width of the bay and other boats—an orientation that likely puts you across whatever current may be running. There just isn't a lot of space but, if you get a settled spot, there's a high likelihood for solitude and a great sunset.

At the head of the bay is the State Park kiosk and the start of an easy trail going through the western portion of the island out to the light station. The view from the Patos Island light is truly outstanding. You can look across the Strait of Georgia to Vancouver in the distance and watch all



A beautiful eroded rock formation near the Patos Island light.



Returning to the Patos Island anchorage in Active Cove from the trail to the light.



Hiking the shoreline of Spencer Spit.



On a lovely summer day, it's hard to beat the surroundings at Spencer Spit.

the commercial traffic as it passes close by. The hike is an easy 3 miles or so; and with limited accommodations and access, you may well have it to yourself.

SPENCER SPIT

A long sand spit jutting from the eastern side of Lopez Island, Spencer Spit State Park is a popular destination for area boaters for good reasons: it's close to Anacortes, it has many mooring buoys along both its north and south sides, there's plenty of anchoring space with a good sand bottom, and it has great walks. We tend to prefer the south side since it is protected from ferry wakes and prevailing northerly winds but, other than that, there isn't much difference between them.

Natural sand beaches are rare in the Pacific Northwest, where most beaches are gravel, so we come here just to walk on the sand; out to the tip on one side and back in on the other. All that sand walking can be tedious so we usually take a break and walk up the hill through the campground and the woods that comprise the upland portion of the

park. Sometimes we even venture out of the park along the roads through the bordering rural farmland and find ourselves wishing there was a nearby coffee shop before heading back to the sand. This hike has so many variations it can be as long or short as you want.

JAMES ISLAND

James Island State Park, at the junction of Rosario Strait and Thatcher Pass, is very similar to Jones Island in shape and layout. There are two small bays, one on the east side opening onto Rosario Strait with mooring buoys and one on the west side facing Decatur Island with a small dock and possibly buoys. There is a low isthmus between them. We stayed in the east bay once, and wouldn't do so again. It was not a comfortable night. This would be a good place to moor your boat if you plan to camp on shore, and we saw several people doing just that. We've stayed at the small dock in the west bay and find it delightful, if there is room. Over the years, the mooring buoys in the bay have come and gone and the bottom appears too irregular for

secure anchoring. As with Jones Island, we usually pass by the west bay and stay only if there is room at the dock.

But once you are secure, there is a very nice hike. The short walk across the isthmus is part of a loop around the southern half of the island, a short couple of miles. The hike along the south shore, looking out into Rosario Strait, is really lovely, well worth the stop at the dock.

As we've tried to show through multiple installments of this column, almost everywhere boaters go in the San Juan Islands they can find opportunities to get off the boat, take a hike, and explore the land as well as the water. It's dream-worthy stuff, and what fine fortune that it's right here in our collective backyard for all to enjoy!

Michael and Karen have been cruising the Salish Sea and beyond for more than 20 years, hiking every chance they get. For more resources for hikers visit their web site at <https://mvmischief.com/library/>

For additional hiking information in this area Michael and Karen also recommend: Hiking the San Juan Islands by Ken Wilcox.



Scrambling off the James Island trail looking for tidepools.



James Island campers arriving.