

Clinton Beach Marine Life

Plankton – Base of the Marine Food Chain

The rich waters of Port Gardner Bay and Puget Sound are a mixing bowl for phytoplankton – single-celled plants that are the most common vegetation in the sea. Fresh water from the nearby Snohomish River and other streams meets saltwater in Puget Sound, the second largest estuary in the United States after Chesapeake Bay. Plankton converts sunlight to proteins and carbohydrates, feeding everything that grows here – from microscopic shrimp to the gray whales that eat them.



Zooplankton

Phytoplankton

Gray Whales and Ghost Shrimp

Gray whales visit our shoreline nearly every spring, from March through early June, and are sighted from shore and from the Clinton-Mukilteo ferry. They feed on ghost shrimp in the sandy shallows of Saratoga Passage from Langley and Camano Head north to Penn Cove. The whales scoop up bathtub-size mouthfuls of the muddy bottom and use their tongue and baleen to sift out the four-inch-long shrimp.

Ghost Shrimp

Gray Whale

Salmon, Forage Fish and Birds

Juvenile salmon from the Snohomish and other rivers prowl our shoreline, finding refuge and food in the nearshore eelgrass beds visible at lower tides from the pier. Look down from the pier and you may glimpse darting schools of forage fish – surf smelt, sand lance or Pacific herring. They are a staple for salmon and other food fish, and for many birds such as loons, grebes, cormorants, terns, kingfishers and great blue herons.

Eelgrass

Cormorant

Harbor Seal

Orcas

Pods of orcas visit Saratoga Passage from time to time, usually from late fall through midwinter. They typically travel in groups of several individuals led by the elder female. The resident orcas of Puget Sound eat predominantly Chinook salmon and shrimp.

Orcas

River Otters and Harbor Seals

Keep an eye out for river otters, harbor seals and their pups. Harbor seals often sneak a curious look at you from a distance and then sink below the surface.



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