

# CORMORANT ISLAND

Cormorant Island, or Y<sub>al</sub>is as it was originally known, was once populated by a nation of people who called themselves the Kwakwaka'wakw. The Island was traditionally used as a burial island as well as a summer residence by the 'Namgis people for generations. In 1792, Captain George Vancouver anchored his ship, the HMS Discovery, at Xwalkw which is found at the mouth of the 'Namgis River, now mapped as the Nimpkish. The First Nation's Chief at that time, Cheslakee, was the first point of contact with Captain George Vancouver and later it was said that they developed a friendly relationship.

Cormorant Island is 10 hectares in size (4.9 km long and 0.8 km wide). It is an island in the Queen Charlotte Strait and is located off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. Alert Bay, a fishing port and commercial center for nearby logging communities is located on the south shore of Cormorant Island. Alert Bay proudly celebrates its First Nations and Pioneer heritage. The Island boasts some of the finest Totem Poles on the BC Coast. Cormorant Island was named after a British warship called the HMS Cormorant which was stationed in the area from 1846-48.



Alert Bay, the destination point of Cormorant Island, is North Vancouver Island's oldest municipality. It was incorporated as a village in 1946. It has a diverse population of approximately 1300 citizens. The 'Namgis people are residents of Cormorant Island in the village of Alert Bay and have traditional claims on much of the surrounding area including most of the Nimpkish River Valley. The Alert Bay Accord was created in 1999 and was the first of its kind between a Municipality and a First Nations Band. The Accord describes common goals of promoting a high standard of cultural, economic and environmental quality of life for the benefit of all residents of Cormorant Island. The Accord was originally signed in 1999 and signed again in 2012 to reinstate the agreement. Today, Alert Bay is well-known for the powerful resurgence of Native culture and hosts some of the region's finest historical and cultural artifacts, First Nations paintings and totem poles.

## HISTORY

For thousands of years, Cormorant Island was populated by a great nation of seagoing people who called themselves the Kwakwaka'wakw (pronounced: KWOK-wok-ya-wokw). Kwakwaka'wakw literally translates as "those who speak Kwak'wala". The former name "Kwakiutl" is actually the name of one specific Kwak'wala speaking tribe, the name of which was used as a generalization to describe the cultural group as a whole. The Kwakwaka'wakw live along the outer coast from Smith Sound to Cape Cook, on the shores of Queen Charlotte Strait and the inlets leading into that strait. By the mid-1800s, the group lived as far south as the northern end of Georgia Strait and consisted roughly of 30 tribes. Each of these groups had its own territory, winter village and several other sites that were occupied seasonally. The Kwakwaka'wakw believe that animals, rivers, and trees are powerful beings that long ago existed in both the human and spirit world. One of their most influential sub-groups lived along the rich valley of what now maps as the Nimpkish River on Vancouver Island – they called themselves the 'Namgis.

The 'Namgis people originally lived at the mouth of the Namgis River on Vancouver Island. They lived on the abundance of salmon, herring and cod that the region provided while using the western red cedar for housing materials, canoes, clothing and blankets.

The principal village was built on terraces on the west side of the river mouth. It was here that a famous chief, Cheslakee, confronted and then befriended Captain George Vancouver in 1792. Captain Vancouver was anchored in a sheltered cove on a nearby island. He became one of the first Europeans to encounter the 'Namgis when he anchored near the mouth of Gwa'ni River at the village of Xwalkw.



*The scene was recorded by expedition artist J. Sykes, Titled "Cheslakee's Village" after the 'Namgis chief. The engraving shows houses made of cedar planks and painted geometric designs. ([https://www.sfu.ca/brc/virtual\\_village/Kwakwaka\\_wakw/yalis--alert-bay-.html](https://www.sfu.ca/brc/virtual_village/Kwakwaka_wakw/yalis--alert-bay-.html))*

Around 1860, the island and its new European settlement would be named after the Navy ships HMS Alert and HMS Cormorant. This area of the coast was a profitable hunting ground for traders and exploiters. Many hunted otter for its pelts but other resources were rich here as well: coal, gold, timber, whales and fish – specifically salmon.

In 1870, two entrepreneurs: S.A Spencer and Wesley Huson leased Cormorant Island from the government and established a small saltery that salted and mildcured local salmon before sending it to Victoria. When they turned the saltery into a cannery, the two entrepreneurs followed streams uphill to a boggy tract on the crown of the island. They dammed up the flow, by felling huge trees across the rivulets. The damning allowed them to pipe the water downhill to their packing house.

The high water levels caused by the dam, drowned many trees, leaving a forest of dead standing wood. Wildfires raged through, leaving only the skeletons of the biggest trees. The roots of the charred spruce, hemlock and fir soon rotted out. The red cedars survived and their bleached trunks still stand 150 years later, creating an eerie scene that became known as “Gator Gardens”. The saltery operated until 1941 and was taken down in 2003. The damn can still be seen today and remains partway up the hill. The water continues to bubble up from the ground faster than it runs down the hill feeding the marsh and providing a safe haven for many species of birding wildlife. The area was renamed in 1998 as the Alert Bay Ecological Park. There are a series of trails that take you around the forested area. An elevated boardwalk has been put in to protect the marsh and allows visitors a close-up of the swamp’s sensitive eco-system.

When the saltery was created, the ‘Namgis moved their village to the island and established a permanent village at Yalis. The translation of the name Yalis in Kwakwaka’wakw means, “sitting on the beach with legs spread apart” in reference to the way the shoreline at the village is shaped.



In 1860, the English name, Alert Bay, was given after the British Naval Ship: the HMS Alert, which had surveyed the coast in the mid-1800s.

Alert Bay was developed into the largest commercial fishing town on the central coastline. Soon other fish processors joined Spencer and Huson. The harbour was crowded with gillnetters, long-liners and

trollers. There were canneries in the Bay as well as within a days sailing of Alert Bay. First Nations families moved in, women worked in the canneries while their husbands and sons fished. The “Namgis First Nation also had their own Harbour. Alert Bay became a dominant trading and service centre for many North Vancouver Island regions and First Nations communities.

To secure a permanent workforce on the Island, Spencer and Huson persuaded Reverend James Hall to move his Anglican mission from Fort Rupert to Alert Bay in 1877. In 1878, a mission house was built to school the First Nations boys and girls. In 1894, St Michael’s Residential School was built and operated from 1894 to 1974. At first there were two wooden buildings, one for girls and one for boys. In 1929, they were replaced by a large, three-storey brick building located next to the U’Mista Cultural Centre.

In 1929, St Michael’s residential school was built. It was constructed to serve the aboriginal communities of Campbell River to Prince Rupert and was closed in 1975. It was run by the Anglican Church and was the largest operated school at the time with space for 200 live-in students. Children were forcibly torn from their families and placed into a foreign environment where they were not allowed to speak their language or practice their traditional pastimes. Visits with their families were rare and the rare occurrences were fleeting. Numerous reports of abuse both physical and sexual were reported as well as gross negligence and treachery such as sticking needles in tongues of the students who were caught speaking their native language as well as isolation and even death. In 1947, two-dozen children ran away from the school. The subsequent investigation into the conditions of the school led to the resignation of both the principal and vice-principal. By 1969, when the federal government assumed administration of the school, all residents were attending local schools. The residence closed in 1974. In February 2015, St Michael’s Indian Residential School was torn down in a massive survivor ceremony hosted by the ‘Namgis First Nations. It is estimated that 160,000 aboriginal children attended the school.



## 'Namgis Culture and History

*Each group of people on earth has its own story of how it came to be. As Bill Reid says in his prologue to Indian Art of the Northwest Coast.*

*"In the world today, there is a commonly held belief that, thousands of years ago, as the world counts time, Mongolian nomads crossed a land bridge to enter the western hemisphere, and became the people known as the American Indians.*

*There is, it can be said, some scanty evidence to support the myth of the land bridge. But there is enormous wealth of proof to confirm that the other truths are all valid."*

### The Story of 'Namgis the name:

The name 'Namgis comes from a story about 'Namxxyalegiyu (the Halibut-Like Sea Monster). Before the great flood, a 'Namgis man was warned in his dreams to be prepared for the flooding. He knew he must wait by the ocean for a huge sea monster, 'Namxxyalegiyu whose name meant "something terrible". Once the rain began, it never stopped. The huge sea monster arose from the depths. It was so huge that the tides dropped around the world. The man climbed onto the sea monster but 'Namxxyalegiyu was so big that the man seemed to be a tiny speck on the sea monster's back. The Creator gave this man the supernatural power of being able to breathe underwater. 'Namxxyalegiyu protected the man whenever he remained under the ocean.

When the waters went down 'Namxxyalegiyu returned the man to his homeland. The man looked around and saw that he was all alone so he took the name Namukustolis (Only One in the World). He came to the beach near the mouth of the 'Namgis River. Namukustolis was very lonely, so after a time he caught some birds and transformed them into people. This is how he started the 'Namgis tribe. He kept the great sea monster as his tribe's crest because it was his protector and he saved him during the great flood.



## The Story of Gwa'ni River

Early 'Namgis history tells of a man named Gwa'nalis who the Creator (also known as the Transformer) turned into a river, the Gwa'ni River. This River is now called the Nimpkish River. The story is told that many years ago, when the world was still young, a man named Gwa'nalis and his family settled at a place called Xw<sub>w</sub>lkw. After some time had passed, a supernatural being named Kaniki'lakw who had earlier beaten Gwa'nalis but was now ready to return. The Creator came to Gwa'nalis and asked him, if he wanted to become a mountain. Gwa'nalis said he didn't because mountains slide and crumble until the world will end. He was then asked if he wanted to be a cedar tree and Gwa'nalis said he did not because when cedar trees were struck by lightning they would split and fall and then rot until the world would end. Gwa'nalis was then asked if he wanted to be a large boulder. Again he answered no, because boulders crack in half and then crumble until the world is no more. Finally, Gwa'nalis was asked if he wanted to become a river? After much thought, he answered yes "because rivers flow for as long as the days shall dawn in the world". So the supernatural being Kaniki'lakw, put his hand on Gwa'nalis's forehead and pushed him down saying, "There you will be a river for as long as the days dawn in the world, and you will be full of salmon so that your descendants may never starve." The river is still known as Gwa'ni. It is the river of the 'Namgis. (<https://umistapotlatch.ca/enseignants-education/> and Pal'nakwalagalis Wa'kas 1930)).



The river was the heart of the 'Namgis people. At one time there were as many as 9,000 people living in the area, with people of the 'Namgis living all along the Nimpkish River Valley as well as on islands off the coast near the river-mouth, including Cormorant Island.

*\*\*please note these are one of the variations of these stories that has been passed down over the years\*\**

## Potlatches

The English translation of “Potlatch” means “to give”. Many people believe that people who have a lot are considered to be rich and powerful. The Kwakwaka’wakw people, believe that a rich and powerful person is someone who gives away a lot. Potlatches have been hosted for more years than can be remembered. Historically they were used to redistribute wealth through gift giving. In addition to its economic redistribution, potlatch maintained community solidarity and hierarchical relations within and between bands and nations. The Kwakwaka’wakw continue to host potlatches and they continue to play a central as well as unifying role in the community life today.

As mentioned, the word “potlatch” means “to give” and comes from a trade jargon, Chinook, formerly used along the Pacific coast of Canada. Guests attending a potlatch are given gifts. The more gifts given, the higher the status achieved by the potlatch host. The potlatch ceremony marks important occasions in the lives of the Kwakwaka’wakw: the naming of children, marriage, transferring rights and privileges and mourning the dead.

Potlatches are a time for pride and joy. It is the time that the Chief or host of the potlatch can show case their masks and dances. The purposes of potlatches varied. A few uses were to publicly recognize class structure and status. A family’s right and privileges or inheritance would be passed on in potlatches; including land rights, fishing hole rights, specific songs and dances or the right to wear or use ceremonial objects and objects that indicate leadership. Potlatches were also used to celebrate marriages, naming of babies, honor important people who had passed on, comfort those who had lost a loved one as well as restore one’s reputation in the community after a humiliation.

Long ago potlatches would span the winter months and last for weeks. They were held in a ceremonial Bighouse. The size of the house indicated the status of the host in the village. Chiefs with the largest bighouses would invite hundreds of guest from many First Nations. Guests would travel to a potlatch by canoe and when arrived would shout out to the host that they have arrived. Giant welcome figures, carved out of cedar, often stood at the water’s edge as hosts sang welcome songs. Sometimes there were so many guests that there was no room left on the beach because of all the canoes. An interesting note was that two of the greatest gifts received at a potlatch was copper or a song. Copper is a material item considered very valuable in Kwakwaka’wakw culture. Copper was perhaps the greatest symbol of wealth and power. Every copper has its own name, history and value. Songs, however, are considered the most treasured

gift. To receive a song is to receive great cultural wealth and gives a person high status in the community.

## U'mista Cultural Centre

The Kwakwaka'wakw were resettled and schooled by government in Alert Bay. An anti-potlatch proclamation was issued in 1883; it became law on January 1, 1885. Failure to comply with the ban meant imprisonment. First Nations language, art and culture were driven underground. For more than 60 years the ceremony was outlawed but they still continued – in secret. In 1904, it was believed that there were less than 200 Kwakwaka'wakw, now known as the 'Namgis First Nation. The Centre was built as a ground-breaking project to house potlatch artifacts. These artifacts were once seized by Canadian authorities in 1922, during a period of cultural repression. The cultural practice of potlatch was banned in the late 1800s by the federal government. The ban is said to have been fueled by misinformation. During the ban many important regalia and ceremonial items were taken away to museums and private collectors around the world. Members who participated in these so-called illicit potlatch activities were arrested. During the ban, one of the largest potlatches ever recorded was held in December 1921 on Village Island. There were said to have been 45 people arrested and 22 went to jail. Eventually in 1951, the potlatch ban was overturned. But it wasn't until the 1970s that potlatches started to become a normal part of First Nations lives again.

In 1980, the world renowned U'mista Cultural Centre was founded. The centre was part of the potlatch revival. It houses many of the repatriated ceremonial items and masks that were taken away during the potlatch ban. It is Canada's longest-running First Nations museum and cultural education facility.

The Potlatch Collection tells an epic story of resistance and resilience. The name U'mista means “the return of something important”. U'Mista is actively protecting the language, songs and



traditions in its big house ceremonies and archives. It is the U'Mista's mandate to repatriate the many ceremonial artifacts that were taken by museums and private collectors around the world when they believed the Kwakwaka'wakw were, or soon would be extinct. Much of the repatriated

collection is now on display at the Centre. Along with the Potlatch Collection, there are many other fascinating exhibits as well as an extensive art gallery and gift shop.

## Totem Poles

The original houses at Yalis had frames of stout posts clad in hand split planks up to 5 feet wide. In 1872, Alert Bay saw the arrival of the sawmill. Sawn lumber was used on false house fronts that was added to the old house structures. In the latter half of the 1800's, there were a dozen large communal houses. All were replaced with new structures and many added one or more totem poles to the front of the house. Many of these totem poles were large figures including eagles, thunderbirds, Huxwhukw (hok hok) birds and ravens, along with human welcome figures to signal ceremonies being held inside. The trend to elaborate the houses of chiefs with paintings and carved elements culminated in the house of Chief Wakas, whose house represented a raven whose beak opened and closed as guests arrived for a potlatch.

The totem was carved by Yukwayu for Chief Wakas in 1899. This was the first large totem pole at Alert Bay.

Totem poles were carved for a variety of needs, but their primary purpose was to commemorate people or special events. The first totem poles were carved as part of an elaborate Potlatch ceremony and was deep with meaning. Every totem pole tells a story.

Traditional totem poles were the traditional way of telling the story of an individual clan and to communicate legends, history and culture. Each image carved into a totem pole represents a story and recorded history. Creatures of the natural and supernatural world are present on the poles. The family crest often appears at the top of the totem pole. Totem poles are a complete family history, created to last eternity.



Alert Bay boasts the **World's Tallest Totem Pole** standing at 173 feet (52 meters) tall. This Totem



Pole is culturally different. Most Totem Poles are specific to a particular family, this one represents a few of the tribes of the Kwakwaka'wakw. The pole was carved in two sections by six Kwakwaka'wakw artists. The figures include the Sun Man, a whale, an old man, a wolf, the Thunderbird and its cousin, the Kulusl which is a two-headed serpent, a bear holding a salmon and a raven holding copper. It was originally 173 feet, but during a storm in 2007, the top 10 feet of the pole fell to the ground. The top ten feet was reattached and the pole still stands at 173 feet tall today! You will find this Totem Pole located next to the 'Namgis Traditional Big House.

Alert Bay Big House was built in 1963. It was modeled on the traditional residences of the Kwakwaka'wakw. The building is primarily used for potlatches and traditional dance performances

from Alert Bay's local 'Namgis community which can be seen in the summer months. The original Big House was lost to a fire in August 1997 before being rebuilt and opened again in May 1999.

Totem Poles originating in Alert Bay are perhaps some of the most familiar. There are several found in Stanley Park in Vancouver, while others are featured in various museums across North America and throughout the world.

Cormorant Island has 24 Totem Poles, including the world's tallest totem pole. The majority of them are in the original 'Namgis Burial Grounds, where they represent the memory of those who have passed away. It is forbidden to enter the burial ground but the totems are easily viewed from the roadside. This cemetery is unique because it is one of the last places on the BC Coast where the totem poles can be viewed in their original site. The Alert Bay Visitor Centre, located after exiting from the ferry, has a brochure that provides information on where the Totem Poles are as well as what they represent.

## Home of the Killer Whale

Alert Bay is “Home of the Killer Whale”. Orca are abundant along British Columbia’s coastline. They travel as far north as Alaska. However, the pristine waterways that surround Cormorant Island are some of the best places to find resident Orcas. Close to Alert Bay, in the Johnstone Strait, is the largest concentration of Killer Whales in the world at Robson Bight Ecological Reserve. Up to 200 Orcas arrive in Robson Bight each summer to rub their undersides on gravel beaches at the mouth of the Tsitika River. To the northeast of Cormorant Island is the Broughton Archipelago Marine Provincial Park which is a wilderness area consisting of a maze of several small islands and numerous inlets that is primarily recreational day-use only. The Broughton Archipelago has unique and unlimited fishing, swimming and kayaking opportunities. Recently, humpback, Minke and Grey whales have returned to the area. The Humpback adults can grow 40-50 feet long and their tails can be up to 20 feet wide. The humpbacks are the most active of the big whales. You can often see them rolling and smacking the water with their 16-foot long flippers. Now and then a big male will jump their 40 tonne body out of the water and come



crashing down on their backs. They are quite spectacular and always put on a good show for any on-lookers near by.

## Present Day Alert Bay

Although small, Cormorant Island is rich in history. With two museums, one can discover memorabilia, rich First Nations history and a few stories from loggers, fishermen, merchants and doctors who all played a role in the evolution of Alert Bay.

Alert Bay is well-known for its powerful resurgence of Native culture and hosts some of the region’s finest historical and cultural artifacts as well as First Nations paintings and totem poles. In addition to the rich cultural heritage of the island, there are many other activities available to visitors on the island including whale watching, eco-tours, fishing, scuba diving, kayaking, hiking and biking.

Alert Bay offers all visitors an Island experience that is unique in both cultural heritage as well as outdoor adventure and opportunities.

## THINGS TO DO IN ALERT BAY

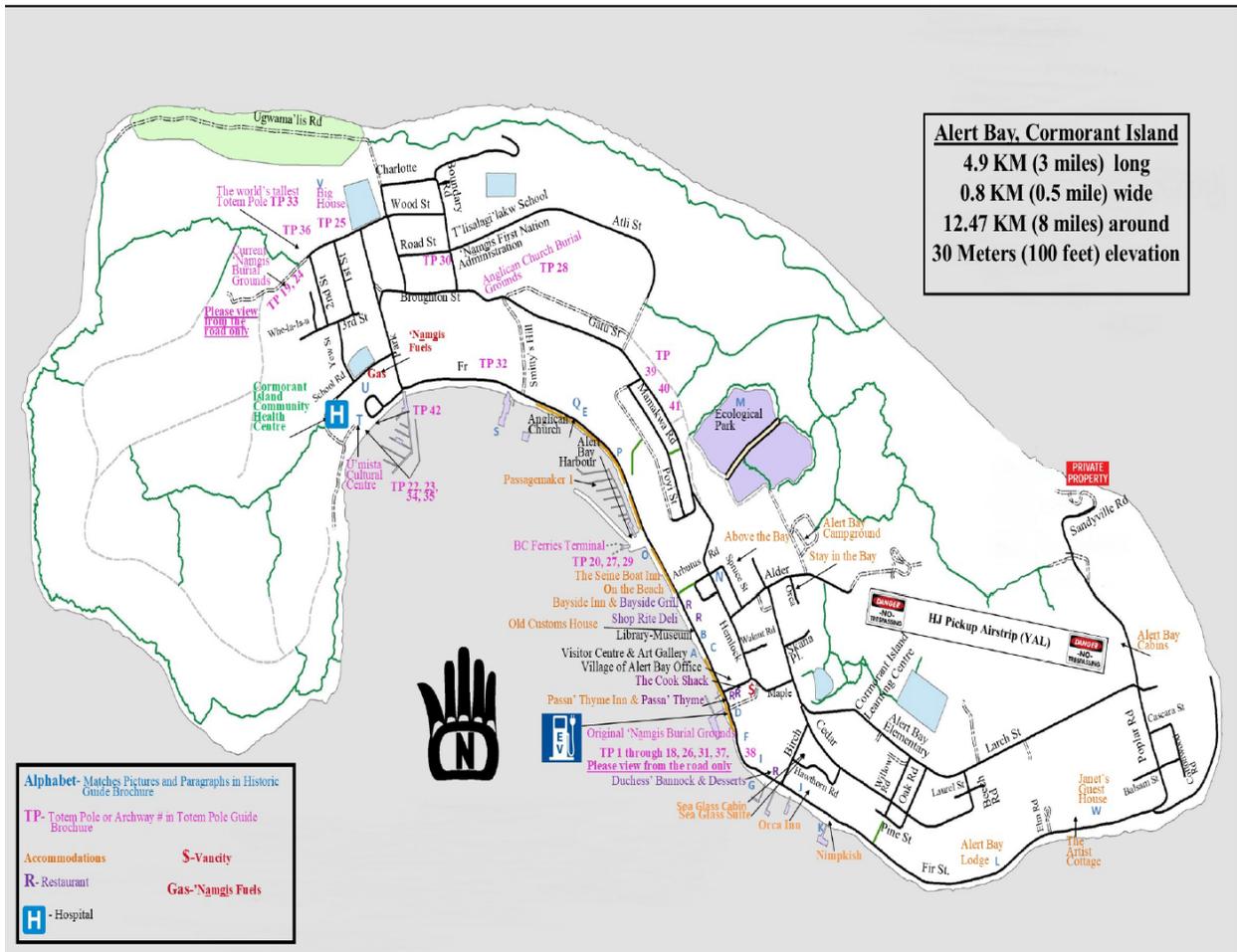
Cormorant Island is only 10 ha in size and can easily be walked or biked. The island is quite hilly so bringing a vehicle would make the island more accessible. The ferry ride from Port McNeill is only 40 minutes in duration. There are six sailings a day and they run every 2.5 hours. There is so much to see and do on this island gem. Find what interests you and go with what moves you.

### Some ideas and must do's:

- **Alert Bay's Visitor Centre**, 118 Fir Street, is located a few hundred meters to the right when you disembark the ferry. There you will find the most recent tourism information and brochures. The Alert Bay Library is located adjacent to the Visitor Centre.
- **TIDES:** Cormorant Island is surrounded by water. **Check out the tides** to know when to explore the beaches at low tide: <https://www.waterlevels.gc.ca/eng/station?sid=8280>
- Visit the **U'Mista Cultural Centre** and immerse yourself in the rich cultural heritage of the Kwakwaka'wakw past, present and future.
- **The Alert Bay Big House** during the summer season the T'saasala Cultural Group perform dances regularly. All of the dances and songs have Elder approval and have remained unchanged throughout the generations.
- **World's Tallest Totem pole and the 'Namgis Burial Ground.** The Burial Ground can only be seen from the road but the 23 totem poles found there can be easily viewed. Here, is the old native cemetery Ground is an old native cemetery where totems remain undisturbed on their original site. The cemetery is one of the few remaining locations on the BC Coast. The World's Tallest Totem Pole is found next to the Alert Bay Big House.
- **Alert Bay Ecological Reserve:** A paradise for bird-watchers and botanists. The reserve is a series of trails that take you through the forest as well as an elevated boardwalk that protects the sensitive eco-system that it winds you through. The old cedar snags provide an eerie charm and beauty that is both mystical and peaceful to be surrounded by.
- **Robson Bight Ecological Reserve:** a must see for all nature lovers and whale watchers. Take a whale watching charter and spend the day looking for whales, seal lions, porpoises and dolphins as well as receiving a tour of the island and surrounding area from the water.

A great way to tour Robson Bight is via kayak and there are numerous kayak companies that offer unique packages to suit everyone's various different needs.

- **Fishing:** take a charter and spend a few hours or an entire day fishing Blackfish Sound for salmon or bottom fish. Salmon fishing is best late May through August and Halibut fishing commences April to June and continues through the summer to September.
- **Kayaking:** *Cormorant Channel Marine Provincial Park* and the *Broughton Archipelago Marine Provincial Park:* both full of wildlife, numerous inlets and several small islands. The area is mainly underdeveloped and largely undiscovered. Facilities are limited to day-use recreation only. Here you will find unlimited and unique fishing and swimming opportunities that are fabulous to explore with a kayak.
- Explore the town of Alert Bay itself and it's little restaurants, cafés and quaint waterfront. Pick up a souvenir of beautiful First Nations jewellery or First Nations art at one of the gift shops in the Bay or from U'Mista Cultural Centre.



BC Ferries Schedule: <https://www.bcferrries.com/routes-fares/schedules/daily/MCN-ALR>

### **Port McNeill to Cormorant Island (Alert Bay)**

*\*\*Check ferry schedule before planning trip as it changes regularly\*\**

<b>DEPART</b>	<b>ARRIVE</b>	<b>DURATION</b>
8:40 am	9:25 am	0h 45m – nonstop
11:35 am	12:15 pm	0h 40m – nonstop
2:20 pm	3:05 pm	0h 45 m – nonstop
5:10 pm	5:45 pm	0h 35 m – nonstop
7:40 pm	8:20 pm	0h 40m – nonstop
9:30 pm	10:35 pm	1h 5m – stop at Malcolm Island (Sointula)

### **Cormorant Island to Port McNeill**

*\*\*Check ferry schedule before planning trip as it changes regularly\*\**

<b>DEPART</b>	<b>ARRIVE</b>	<b>DURATION</b>
6:40 am	7:20 am	0h 40m – nonstop
9:35 am	10:20 am	0h 45m – nonstop
12:20 pm	1:05 pm	0h 45m – nonstop
3:15 pm	4:00 pm	0h 45m – nonstop
5:55 pm	6:35 pm	0h 40m – nonstop
8:25 pm	9:25 pm	1h 0m – stop at Malcolm Island (Sointula)