

# Sea Kayaking on the Petersburg Ranger District



## **Routes Included in Handout**

**Petersburg to Kake via north shore of Kupreanof Island**

**Petersburg to Kake via south shore of Kupreanof Island**

**LeConte Bay Loop**

**Thomas Bay Loop**

**Northwest Kuiu Island Loop**

**Duncan Canal Loop**

**Leave No Trace (LNT) information**

**Tongass National Forest  
Petersburg Ranger District  
P.O. Box 1328 Petersburg AK. 99833**

## **Sea Kayaking in the Petersburg Area**

The Petersburg area offers outstanding paddling opportunities. From an iceberg filled fjord in LeConte Bay to the Keku Islands this remote area has hundreds of miles of shoreline to explore. But Alaska is not a forgiving place, being remote, having cold water, large tides and rugged terrain means help is not just around the corner. One needs to be experienced in both paddling and wilderness camping. There are not established campsites and we are trying to keep them from forming. To help ensure these wild areas retain their naturalness it's best to camp on the durable surfaces of the beach and not damage the fragile uplands vegetation.

This booklet will begin to help you plan an enjoyable and safe paddling tour. The first part contains information on what paddlers should expect in this area and some safety guidelines. The second part will help in planning a tour. The principles of Leave No Trace Camping are presented. These are suggestions on how a person can enjoy an area without damaging it and leave it pristine for years to come. Listed are over 30 Leave No Trace campsites and several possible paddling routes in this area. Each campsite is detailed and includes a map.

### **Petersburg Harbor Caution**

Petersburg has an excellent harbor that is very protected from the wind. But because of its location at the northern end of the Wrangell Narrows the tidal currents can be very strong. Combine a strong current with fixed docks and a very active commercial fishing fleet, and it requires paddlers to take extra caution. If possible, plan your harbor paddling at either the low or high slack tide when the current will be the least. On large tide changes the current can be 5 knots or more.

## **Launch sites and temporary kayak storage in Petersburg**

All of the Petersburg harbors are managed by the Harbor Master. The office is located at the entrance of the North Harbor and can be reached by VHF radio on #16 or 772-4688. There is a boat ramp located in the north harbor that is an excellent launch/landing site and all services are within walking distance. Temporary kayak storage is planned for the harbor so for the latest information contact the harbor master.

Sandy Beach Park located on Frederick Sound has a large tide flat and is located 2 miles from town which makes it inconvenient without a vehicle. There is no camping or storage in the park.

### **Possible routes for paddlers**

Petersburg to Kake via the north shore of Kupreanof Island: One way 65 miles

Petersburg to Kake via the south shore of Kupreanof Island: One way 95 miles

LeConte Bay Loop: Route is 75 miles

Thomas Bay Loop: Route is 60 miles

Northwest Kuiu Island Loop: Route is 85 miles

Duncan Canal Loop: Route is 62 miles

Note mileage(statute) given is an estimate

### **Please give us feedback**

This information is an evolving project. The data was collected over many years and it is important that this information be updated as sites change and new sites are found. So if you have any comments please send them to:

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## **Paddling in LeConte Bay**

Icebergs add a whole new dimension to paddling. They are incredible to paddle among but they need to be treated with respect. One thing to remember is that we see only about 15% of an iceberg. So if you see an iceberg the size of a car there is a two car garage under it. As the icebergs melt their center of gravity moves making them roll over a lot! There is no way to know when this is going to happen so it's best to assume it will happen. A good rule is to stay at least two boat lengths away. If the iceberg is taller than your kayak is long, double that distance.

The number of icebergs in the bay changes dramatically day to day as does their location and density. The current and wind can jam icebergs together making passage impossible. If possible, plan your paddling trip with the tides. Start up the bay with a rising tide and paddle out with a falling tide. The icebergs can lower the air and water temperature by more than 10 degrees so always carry extra clothes.

A surge wave or swell is produced when the glacier calves or drops ice into the water. LeConte is active, so this happens all the time. The bigger the piece of ice that breaks off, the bigger the swell will be. The swell can be 6 inches to 10 feet high and causes icebergs to rock back and forth, sometimes making them break up and roll over. This can be dangerous if you are surrounded by large icebergs. Another hazard occurs when the swell meets the shoreline. The water line will rise then fall several feet very quickly. So when you hear the thunder of the glacier calving get away from the shore and try to be in open water.

Paddlers should keep at least ½ mile from the face of LeConte. Large chunks of ice can break off underwater and surface several hundred feet away. These icebergs are called shooters for good reason.

Extra caution should be taken in May and June when the Harbor seals are giving birth on the icebergs. The young can be easily scared and separated from their mothers.

The beauty of LeConte is unmatched and with caution, can be safely enjoyed in a sea kayak.

## **Remote Location**

One of the wonderful things about paddling this area is that in a ½ hour of paddling you will be in the wilds of Southeast Alaska. This also means that help is not necessarily just around the corner. A paddler needs to be prepared with the skills and supplies to handle emergencies by themselves and for extended periods of time. Extra clothes, extra food, repair kits, signaling devices and first aid kits are a must.

## **Weather**

It's best to plan for rain on your visit to SE Alaska. Petersburg is located in the middle of the largest temperate rainforests in the world. On the average Petersburg gets 110 inches of rain with the most coming in the fall and the least in late spring and summer. With proper planning rain will not slow down your adventures. A good rule is 25% of the time you'll see the sun, 25% it's full on raining, and 50% of the times it's showers and overcast skies. The fun part is this can all happen in one afternoon.

Air temperatures in the summer range between the 40s and the 70s.

In the canyon-like inlets the mountainous topography makes wind forecasting especially difficult. Storms bringing wind and rain, usually blow in from a southerly direction. With a northern wind we usually have clear weather. Remember that a wind opposing the tidal current will pick up the seas very quickly.

With a VHF radio you'll be able to pick up the National Weather Services continuous broadcasts in most areas. There are three channels in this area WX-2(from Wrangell), WX-4(from Cape Fanshaw) and WX-5(from Zarembo Island). Forecasting is not an exact science, but the broadcasts will give you current trends in weather and wind.

## **Tides**

The tides here are subject to very large fluctuations, ranging from -4 to +21 feet in a six hour period. At low tides large mud flats can be exposed blocking routes and making access to shore impossible. The tides also create fast moving current in and out of bays and passages. For example at the mouth of Wrangell Narrows the current can move above 5 knots. Understanding the tides and the use of a tide book are essential in planning your paddle.

## **Water Temperature**

The water temperature average is 47 degrees. What 47 degrees really means is if you end up in the water you'll have a few minutes or less to get back into your kayak when you are not wearing a wet suit/dry suit. The best recommendation is not to push situations. If the sea conditions are above your comfort level take a break and enjoy the beach. Also, know and practices rescues, stay together so help is available nearby, or dress for the water temperature, which means a wet suit/dry suit.

# Leave No Trace

LNT is a non-profit organization set up in the early 1990's to help people enjoy an area without damaging it. They offer skill and ethics booklets for many different areas and selected activities. The following 7 principles are from their Sea Kayaking pamphlet. These are very condensed here so please consult the pamphlet for more detailed information. You can get the pamphlet at the Forest Service Office or at [www.LNT.org](http://www.LNT.org)

**1. Plan Ahead and Prepare:** To have a safe and enjoyable paddling trip you must spend time planning your trip. Having the right maps and tide tables, proper gear, appropriate paddling skills and the right amount of food are all very important. The same is true in protecting the places you will visit. Research hazards and possible campsites along your route.

**2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces:** Durable surfaces are those minimally affected by human use. Examples are rock outcrops, sand, gravel, boardwalks, and roads. Southeast Alaska is a harsh environment for plants, and the growing season is very short. You'll find thick layers of moss that may look like a wonderful bed but in fact it's decades old and struggling. By concentrating use on durable surfaces we can enjoy an area and leave it as we found it. In Southeast Alaska the beach is the perfect durable surface. This booklet lists campsites on the beach along with the maximum tide that allows use. Because our tides are so big the only time you may feel a little cramped is right at high water. Another benefit of camping on the beach is it's the first place to dry out after a rain shower. I'm sure you have been under a tree in a rain storm, the trees do a wonderful job slowing down the moisture but have you noticed that it's the last place to dry out?

**3. Dispose of Waste Properly:** It's easy these days to pack out any trash that you may have. The zip lock bags that stored your food easily turn into trash bags that can be brought back to town. Fish viscera should be scattered below the high tide well away from any campsite. Any dish water (use mild soap) is best disposed at low tide. What to do with the other trash we humans create is a little harder. Since urine is typically not a major health concern the best place for it is the beach. There are several ways to handle feces. One is to use a portable toilet system that is currently available, and bring everything back to town. A second is to dig catholes. A cathole is a shallow hole (6-8" deep) dug at least 200 feet from any fresh water source. A small trowel is very handy for digging catholes. Toilet paper, if you need it, is best completely burned or packed out.

**4. Leave what you find:** Leave things as you find them so the next person can make the same discovery you made, and remember that it's unlawful to remove artifacts from our National Forests.

**5. Minimize Campfire Impacts:** These days modern cook stoves make simple work out of heating up a meal. They are easy, fast, and reliable. Dry firewood around here is not easy to find. Remember this is a rainforest. If you must build a fire, put it below the high tide and keep it small. A good rule is to use only driftwood or down and dead wood no larger than your wrist. Spend the time to burn everything up and mix the cooled ash into the beach gravel. See the Leave No Trace pamphlet for several fire building tips and techniques that will minimize impacts.

**6. Respect Wildlife:** Marine mammals are one of the wonderful attractions here. Frederick Sound is a great place to see Humpback whales and LeConte Bay is home to hundreds of harbor seals. When I'm out paddling I think of myself as a visitor to the local wildlife's home. A couple of simple rules will protect them and you. Remain at least 100 yards from marine mammals, don't get between the mother and young, and limit close viewing to half an hour. When paddling in areas with lots of whale activity it's best to travel as a close group rather than all spread out.

Bears are a fact of life here, so keeping a clean camp will protect you and help keep the wild animals wild. Food should be stored 100 yards from your tent and never in the kayaks. Bears don't like to be startled so make some noise when you land at a beach or walk into the woods. When salmon are in the streams the dinner table is set for the bears so extra caution is needed. Always ask at the local Forest Service or Fish and Game office if there are problem bears in the area you are traveling. A good pair of binoculars will allow you to have incredible encounters without impacting the wildlife.

**7. Be Considerate of other Visitors:** Our interaction should reflect the knowledge that we can and do enjoy wild lands differently. Although our motivations and sense of adventure vary, there's always room on the water for people with open minds.

# Explanation of Campsites pages

## *Page one*

**Campsite name and #:** The name of the campsite and it's number . The campsite numbers are shown on the region map to help locate the site.

**Route:** Listed are 6 possible paddling routes. These are NW Kuiu Island, Kupreanof Island North, Kupreanof Island South, LeConte Glacier Bay, Duncan Canal and Thomas Bay. All mileage is given as statute not nautical.

**Map:** This shows the USGS map for the site. All are 1:63,360 scale maps and are listed by a name, then letter and number. (example Petersburg D-3)

**Latitude and Longitude:** These are listed using WGS84/NAD83 datum and are in degree-minutes.minutes format (D.M.M) The given Lat/Long are not perfect and should be used along with the description information and a map to locate the campsite.

**General Description:** Gives name of body of water, nearest major landmark , and direction the site faces.

**Campsite type:** The two types are “beach” and “existing woodland”. Beach means the site is located right on the beach and tents should be located on the gravel or sand. Some work may be required to level out the sand and rock to make tent pads. The Existing Woodland campsite is an established/impacted site in the trees.

**Number of Tents:** This a based on 2-3 person tents.

**Tide Level:** Lists the highest level the tide can be to safely accommodate the given number of tents. This is only a guideline! Tides are listed in one of three tide table districts (Juneau, Ketchikan or Sitka). This level is without specific location tidal corrections.

# Explanation of campsites pages

## *Page two*

**Landform behind campsite:** Given to help you locate the site as: flat, gradual slope and steep slope.

### **Beach Characteristics:**

**Beach Slope:** Describes the slope of the beach as gentle, medium, steep or mud/tidal flats

**Beach Material:** Tells you what the beach is made up of. Four types are: sand/gravel, small and medium rocks, large rocks and mud.

**Landing obstacles:** Lists any problem that one could encounter landing at site. Examples would be heavy wind or swell from a certain direction.

**Distance to campsite at low water:** Gives the distance in feet from the high tide mark to the average low tide level. At times with extra large tidal changes (minus low tides) this distance could increase.

**Water Source:** Lists any water source near by. With prolonged dry weather (one week or more) many smaller water flows may dry up. It is recommended that all water be treated or boiled for safety.

## **Communication**

### **VHF radios, cell and satellite phones**

It is recommended that some type of communication device and flares be carried in case of emergencies.

**VHF Marine Radio:** This is a small radio that will allow two way contact with nearby motorboats and provide access to weather forecasts. This is a common and well established system. VHF radios are standard equipment on all commercial vessels and most recreational boats. The US Coast Guard has almost complete VHF coverage in Southeast AK. and monitors channel 16 day and night. Waterproof units ranging from \$100-\$300 are available. These radios are highly recommended.

**Cell Phones:** The age of cell phones has made it to Southeast but the coverage has not. These phones only work very close to Petersburg and Kake. The mountainous terrain often blocks the signal.

**Satellite Phones:** Work fine here with a clear view of the southern sky. They will not work in tree cover.

#### **Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons, EPIRBs:**

These are small radios that send out emergency signals and will start a full search and rescue mission. EPIRBs are limited to only outgoing signals and are to be activated only in life threatening situations.

## **Additional Information**

Tongass National Forest, Petersburg Ranger District  
P.O. Box 1328 Petersburg AK 99833  
(907) 772-3871

Petersburg Visitor Information Center  
P.O. Box 649 Petersburg AK 99833  
(907) 772-4636

Alaska Department of Fish and Game  
P.O. Box 667 Petersburg AK 99833  
(907) 772-3801

Leave No Trace , Inc  
P.O. Box 997 Boulder CO 80306  
1-800-332-4100 [www.LNT.org](http://www.LNT.org)

Forest Service Cabin Rental Information  
[www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov)

U.S. Geological Survey Maps  
[www.usgs.gov](http://www.usgs.gov)

## **Publications**

Alaska's Southeast, Touring the Inside Passage  
By Sarah Eppenback, 1991 Globe Pequot Press

Guide to Sea Kayaking in Southeast Alaska  
By Jim Howard, 1999 Globe Pequot Press

Sea Kayaker's Pocket Guide  
By Shelley Johnson, 2002 Ragged Mtn. Press

# KAYAK CAMPSITE MAP

**Legend**

- Campsites
- Cabins
- Shelter
- Trails
- Lakes

