

Whidbey Island's Special Places

And the People Who Love Them

By Dan Pedersen



What's there: Seaside village with restaurants, shops, arts, movie theatre and occasional whales. From March through early June, several gray whales often feed in the sandy shallows just in front of the town.

To get there: From the north, take Highway 525 to the traffic light at Maxwellton Road. Turn left on Maxwellton and drive 3 miles to downtown Langley. From the south, take Highway 525 from ferry landing about 3 miles to the traffic light at Langley Road. Turn right and follow Langley Road about 4 miles north to downtown Langley.

Langley and the Gray Whales

Over and under with pilot, diver and photographer, Veronica von Allwörden

Snorkeling in front of her Langley home, Veronica von Allwörden was not expecting the big gray whale that suddenly surfaced about 50 feet ahead. “And then this other one surfaced between me and the first one. It was about 25 feet off and I just turned and swam the other way. That’s too close for me. It’s like a submarine coming up next to you.”

The experience typifies the intimate nature of life in one of Puget Sound’s most picturesque seaside villages. Everything is close, including the wildlife. “I love being able to walk into town,” she says. “For me, of course, it’s also having the beach, and the eagles, birds and deer. We can walk to a restaurant or movie, and we have the marina right here where we can put in the kayaks or go diving.”

And even though von Allwörden and her husband, Eric, live in town, their home is nestled in a woodland setting near a bluff. When the wind blows, a forest dweller’s thoughts turn to what could come down. “You don’t garden when it’s windy,” she points out.

Since moving to the shore several years ago, von Allwörden has grown more attuned to the daily changes in Saratoga Passage. She is increasingly engaged in whale research, community outreach and working to improve the health of Puget Sound. She gave a talk on gray whales at Langley’s



Veronica von Allwörden



Welcome the Whales Day. “More and more I’m involved with The Orca Network, and a lot of that is with the gray whales and the situation with ghost shrimp, on which they feed.”

Von Allwörden already was used to being among fish. An avid diver, she volunteers twice a month at the Seattle Aquarium, doing research on octopi and six-gill sharks, and giving educational talks with an underwater microphone from inside a large viewing tank. But gray whales can be 50 feet long and weigh 35 tons. Swimming beside such a mammoth mammal is sobering. “It’s pretty intense,” she says.

On the day of her close encounter, von Allwörden had earlier noticed the gray whales feeding in front of her home and put on a wetsuit. “I had swum out quite a ways. The whales had gone over toward Camano Island, but then they circled back and that’s when this whale surfaced and rolled over and started to feed.”

She explained that the Marine Mammal Protection Act requires the public to keep a distance of at least 100 yards from protected species. “When I’m snorkeling and there are whales in the vicinity I’m very careful not to get too close. This just happened to be the whales’ choice to get close to me.”

Seven to 12 gray whales visit Saratoga Passage nearly every year during their spring migration to Alaska from calving grounds off the coast of Baja California. From March through early June they appear at various points along the shorelines of Whidbey and Camano islands, including the sandy shallows in front of Langley.

They come for ghost shrimp, which are plentiful in Saratoga Passage. The whales scoop up mouthfuls of the muddy bottom, leaving shallow depressions called “whale pits” in the process. They use their baleen to sift the shrimp from the substrate.

Left: Gray whales stir up the muddy bottom while scooping mouthfuls of ghost shrimp, a few miles from Langley. © 2009 Veronica von Allwörden



Painted Greenling lingers at the tire reef near Langley Marina. © 2009 Veronica von Allwörden

“Much of the ghost shrimp have been eradicated in the south sound,” von Allwörden says. In many of those areas the state leases tidelands to the shellfish industry. Ghost shrimp generate a fine silt when they feed, which tends to smother other shellfish, so the industry applies pesticides to eliminate the ghost shrimp.

She rolls her eyes. “Right. Exactly. The pesticides are pretty ironic, given that we are trying to clean up Puget Sound.”

But in Saratoga Passage and the waters near Langley, the whales find abundant shrimp to rebuild their energy reserves on the northward migration. “By the time they get here they have not eaten for four or five months. Every once in a while we have one starve to death, so you know they are just making it here. If a whale is new to the sound and goes down to the south sound, often it dies. It doesn’t make it out.”

Ghost shrimp like protected waters. “We have huge areas of ghost shrimp here, including a large area off Everett where the Snohomish River comes in.”

In the spring, von Allwörden often observes gray whales from above while carrying out aerial photography assignments for her business, Sky & Sea Photography, www.skyandseaphotography.com. The unusual niche combines two of her great passions, and, like a lot of good ideas, came about partly by chance.

She had been perfecting her above-water photography for several years when, one day, she made a discovery while diving near Langley Marina. “In the mud I saw about that much yellow,” she says, making a circle with her thumb and forefinger. “So I reached in and pulled out a dive camera. Since it had been covered with mud, it was protected from growth on the lens and didn’t have any barnacles or anything. Yeah! So I took it home, opened it up and it was still dry. I replaced all the seals, put in new batteries and loaded up the film and it worked.”

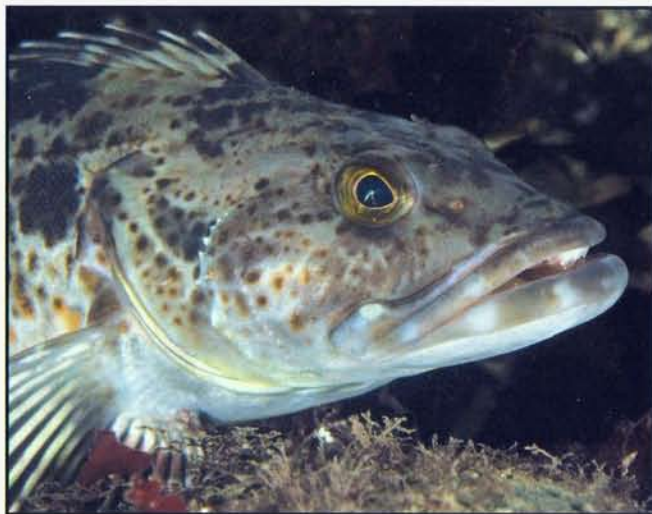


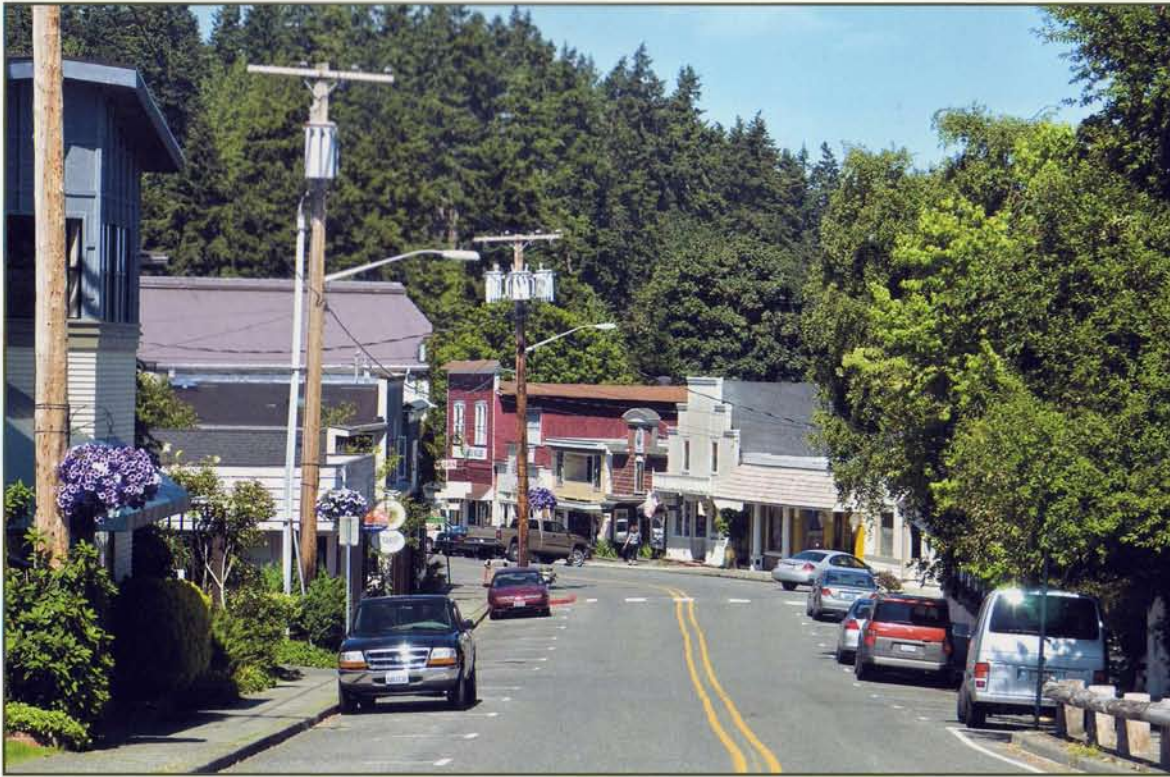
White and Orange-Tipped Nudibranch is a colorful resident of the tire reef near Langley Marina. © 2009 Veronica von Allwörden

That opened the door to a new world of underwater photography and led to better and better cameras. In the process she has built a large stock file of colorful underwater images. Many were taken at the tire reef, a structure used briefly as a breakwater near Langley Marina before it sank in a winter storm in the 1970s. “Now it’s a large reef with anemones,” von Allwörden says. “There are ling cod, perch, rockfish, octopus, and Dungeness and red rock crabs.”

The same sheltered cove, which von Allwörden describes as a “bite” out of the shoreline, is not only popular with divers but is steeped in history. Langley was a fuel stop for the wood-burning pocket steamships of the Mosquito Fleet era, from the late 1800s to early 1900s. Jacob Anthes, the town’s founder, had a thriving business selling cordwood to keep the ships’ boilers going.

Left: A curious Lingcod approaches the camera at Langley tire reef. ©2009 Veronica von Allwörden





First Street in picturesque downtown Langley. © 2009 Veronica von Allwörden

In Langley, history and nature both remain close. They are two big reasons why many people feel a special affection for Langley, a strong sense-of-place.

From the air, von Allwörden sees the whole, how things are connected. On an island there is no escaping those connections and the consequences of what people do to the earth at their feet and water that surrounds them. From the air, “You can kind of peek into other people’s worlds,” she says. “There are people who have their own dumps! There’s the house, then a little trail, and then the dump. You can see who’s neat. Who’s not. Who’s got the car collection.”

“We have a limited aquifer,” she points out, noting that most island residents draw their drinking water from wells. So it really matters what they put into the ground. “We sit in the middle of Puget Sound. When you live on an island, everything affects everything else much more obviously than it might somewhere else.”

It’s a good reminder about fragility, beauty and quality of life. Whidbey Island’s special places are special because many people care deeply, learn all they can, and live with respect for nature and the land.

Langley, like all of Whidbey Island, is a jewel in a million-dollar setting. It is surrounded by forests, blue waters, breathtaking views and snowcapped mountains. Gray whales and orcas still visit its shores. It’s why those who are blessed to live in Langley and just about anywhere else on Whidbey Island pinch themselves every day to see if they’re dreaming.

Below: Aerial view shows Cascade Avenue along the rim of the bluff, turning into First Street at top right. © 2009 Veronica von Allwörden

