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Seen
In

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VANCOUVER ISLAND DIVING

Vancouver Island Diving
– Comox/Courtenay/
Union Bay Area

■ Story by Barb Roy



After making a recent trip to Comox Valley, I can assure divers that the Union Bay area's **Wolf Eel Alley** is as amazing as **Flora Inlet's** sixgill sharks. On a single dive, I saw more than 10 big wolf eels. In addition to the wolf eels, I discovered another of Vancouver Island's east side's treasures—tiger rockfish. These usually shy big orange fish with horizontal black bars are a favorite among underwater photographers. They are hard to photograph because they vanish when divers appear. Tiger rockfish that inhabit Wolf Eel Alley live up to their aggressive terrestrial namesake—they do not hide.

Seeing wolf eels here is a sure thing. In fact, Sean Smyrichinsky, owner and operator of Union Bay Dive & Kayak, has counted up to 32 wolf eels here. He counted 17 the day before he escorted me on my first dive at Wolf Eel Alley.

During my recent dive trip with him, Sean introduced me to Wolf Eel Alley and told me all about other great diving opportunities visiting divers can explore. We departed Fanny Bay onboard Sean's 33-foot aluminum boat, *Skydiver*, and headed across Baynes Sound toward Denman Island. The boat was roomy, capable of handling up to 12 divers, with an 11-foot beam, open back deck and a large cabin, which I'm sure will be warm during cold months.

Sean explained a bit about his business as we headed for the site, "We opened during



the summer of 1999 as a charter operation, then began offering classes and opened the dive store in the summer of 2000. In 2002 we added kayak rentals. Currently I will take divers out year round, traveling to over a dozen good, close sites. With a group, I can travel north to the *Capilano* or south to Flora Islet, for the sharks."

The area we tied up to was part of an oyster farm. Throughout the year Sean does underwater work for local oyster farms. As we prepared our scuba gear, Sean told me of how farming ties in with this unique site of resident wolf eels.

"Oyster farming is quite popular in the area, as is farming mussels and clams. The trays they use are about two feet square and around three inches tall. The trays are stacked 10 high and placed in 15 feet of water in rafts of a dozen or so. The seedlings grow very fast. Beneath them, red rock crabs are attracted to the droppings and juveniles that fall during storms. When oysters are not allowed to become dry due to low tides, their shells stay soft and are therefore vulnerable to the rock crabs if they get out. This abundance of red rock crabs attract wolf eels."

I am sure this is what also attracts the tiger rockfish, who like to hang around their dens for tasty crab leftovers. We entered the emerald-colored water and descended through a layer of summer-time aquatic fog,

which cleared at about 50 feet. The water was cool and refreshing. I followed Sean and another diver down the wall to around 65 feet before they leveled off and swam parallel to the rocky structure. Visibility had cleared to 40 feet or more, a welcome bonus. I positioned my two strobes and adjusted my 50mm lens for easy critter focus.

Within minutes we came upon a wolf eel hidden in a tight den. It peered up at us with big, round, dark eyes. Passing over more rocky terrain, Sean pointed out another, then another. Huge white plumose anemones decorated the area with a dinner-plate sized painted anemones adding a touch of color. After a few more wolf eels of varying sizes, I lost count.

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Tiger rockfish were as plentiful as the wolf eels. Bright orange bodies with black stripes simply stood out like beacons for my camera. No additional light was needed for my digital camera to focus although I needed additional light to focus on wolf eels. One of the tigers even had a crab leg sticking out of its mouth like a crab-leg toothpick.

During the rare occasions when I could tear myself away from the tigers and wolf eels, we also found giant swimming nudibranchs, red rock crabs, sunflower stars, leather stars, copper rockfish, female yellow kelp greenlings and sea cucumbers. The site was very interesting with plenty of hiding places and different structures to explore. During our ascent, we came across several stacks of oyster trays which Sean would later recover for the marine farmers. Atop these stacks seemed to be the ideal location for finding decorator crabs, sea stars and the occasional nudibranchs.

I was pleased with the dive and am looking forward to exploring more sites this fall when visibility is better and off-season travel rates apply. Sean also told me of several other sites he travels, some of which I have also explored.

“We have a shipwreck in **Union Bay** and one in **Deep Bay**, two helicopters near **Comox** covered with life and a new wreck just off **Chrome Island**. I am currently cleaning off the fishing nets and doing some salvage work for the owners. It is a 70-foot Packard sitting upright in about 150 feet of water. I think the tech divers will really like it. The mast is at about 100 feet.”

Sean continued telling about the area as we headed back to the dock. “For a full day-trip we will head north up to the wreck of the *Capilano* and **Mitlenatch Island**, south to Hornby Island for the six gills in July, August and September, and during the winter months there is a place where we visit and swim with sea lions. **Lasqueti Island** is another place we are looking at to add, for our full-day excursions.”

Aside from Sean offering some excellent colorful dive sites to visit, Union Bay Dive

& Kayak also teaches classes, rents gear (drysuits, cameras and kayaks), fills tanks with air or Nitrox from an oil-less compressor and has retail sales. Sean has been diving in coldwater since 1991 and I found him to be very knowledgeable of the area.

During my stay in Union Bay I was the first guest to stay at the new Two Eagles Lodge, just down the road from the dive operation. My hosts were Steve and Carolyn Touhey, Americans who fell in love with British Columbia and decided to return with their daughter and horses to open a fine B&B/vacation rental establishment. As divers themselves, Steve and Carolyn plan to also accommodate visiting divers, offering a place to wash dive gear, a drying room and a large suite for small groups or families. Union Bay is just two miles north of the Denman Island Ferry Terminal and 12 miles south of Courtenay.

When not diving or for accompanying family members, there are plenty of things to do in the Comox Valley area. I enjoyed hiking up to the site of an old ski resort on Forbidden Ridge where I found an awesome view. Nymph Falls has great hiking trails along the river and Cumberland, in the foothills of the Beaufort Range, is full of hiking and biking trails, mining history and leads to Comox Lake.

One thing I did do while in this quaint little area on Vancouver Island was visit the ghost ships of **Royston**. This collection of rusted hulls, broken apart over more than 50 years, is quite the attraction. Royston is southeast of Courtenay on the old highway. The wrecks are visible from the beach but inaccessible from there. The friendly folks at Comox Valley Kayaks were happy to include me in a tour they offer to the Royston wrecks so I could photograph the aging relics.

According to the book “The Ghost Ships of Royston,” written by Rick James for the Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia and published in 2004, many of these hulks had quite a colorful history. There were warships, steam tugs

and Cape Horn Windjammers.

It didn't take long to paddle from downtown Courtenay to the wrecks. We approached from the protected side of a sandy breakwater with easy access. You can walk on the small island, but I would advise not to do this. If you do walk on the island, be extremely cautious because the eroding shoreline reveals ship pieces and hulls. I remained in my boat and paddled around to the other side. Visibility was surprisingly good, allowing us to see where the rest of the hull continued down underwater. I felt a bit sad seeing these once mighty giants, reduced to jagged pieces of steel and massive hull sections. But as James wrote in his book:

“With their varied histories reaching back into the nineteenth century, they have not only provided over fifty years of service as a hulk breakwater but constitute an important maritime heritage site.”

On the way back from our paddling adventure, we were fortunate to see several bald eagles, white swans resting on a beach and countless other shorebirds along the way. Comox Valley Kayaks also provides guided full day tours, whale watching trips, kayak sales and paddling lessons.

I was very pleased with my Comox Valley experience, combined with the selection of awesome seafood restaurants, and more than 40 different parks and beaches to check out. My grandchildren especially enjoyed digging for fossils through a program at the Courtenay Museum. I look forward to my return visit for more diving and a chance to play a round of golf or find a relaxing stream for a bit of fly fishing.

Comox Valley is on Vancouver Island, 66 miles (107 km) north of Nanaimo. Union Bay can be found just south of Comox/Courtenay. To avoid long ferry waits during busy long weekends, reservations are highly recommended with BC Ferries. From the mainland, ferry service to Nanaimo from Tsawwassen and Horseshoe Bay is available. 

