

Wonderful Whatcom

Exceptional recreation
in northwest Washington

By Meri-Jo Borzilleri

ROWING AT TROLLING SPEED on Silver Lake, my husband, Ron, and I keep our eyes on the tip of his fishing rod as it bends slightly with each oar stroke. Soon we hear a splash nearby. Then another, and another.

The fish are skittering, jumping, *leaping* 3 feet or more above the water, all within view—and sometimes within casting distance—of our rented rowboat. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife stocks the 180-acre lake with rainbow and cutthroat trout, and although the fish aren't going after our bait, they're certainly putting on a show.

The scenery is also part of the show at 412-acre Silver Lake Park, a Whatcom County recreation site nestled in a valley about 30 miles east of Bellingham, in the foothills of the Cascade Range. Maples, cottonwoods and alders throng the lakeshore, and firs dress ridges so steep and high that a shawl of snow is still visible.

The park's grassy lawns attract picnicking families, and we see several children wading out from the beach. Other visitors take advantage of the fact that paddleboats, canoes and rowboats can be rented from the end of April through October. Silver Lake also has campsites, cabins and even a separate horse camp with stables—all open year-round.

The park is just one of the wonderful recreation opportunities in Whatcom County, which borders Canada and occupies the northwesternmost corner of Washington state and of the contiguous United States. (While the state's Clallam County extends farther west, Whatcom County is farther north.) The county offers spectacular wilderness areas and outdoor playgrounds for hiking, skiing, cycling and golfing, and it's also culturally rich. More than a dozen museums showcase history ranging from radios to railways.

Numerous art galleries and performing-arts productions attract appreciative residents and visitors, and Western Washington University boasts an Outdoor Sculpture Collection, scattered throughout campus, of 29 contemporary sculptures by internationally acclaimed artists.

Visitors also enjoy farmers markets; scenic day cruises to whale-watch or to visit the San Juan Islands; gaming and live entertainment at casinos such as Silver Reef, whose complex includes a hotel, restaurants, indoor pool and spa; and a new wine trail featuring artisan wines and beers. Accommodations such as the Hotel Bellwether and The Chrysalis Inn & Spa in Bellingham, and the Semiahmoo Resort in Blaine, just 25 minutes north, are great bases from which to explore the region. All of the properties feature sweeping water views, spa services, fine dining and luxury rooms.

The jewel of Whatcom County is 10,781-foot Mount Baker, which is reached via the Mount Baker Highway, a state-designated Scenic Byway that is also known as State Route 542. The 58-mile-long route winds past towering evergreens, and alongside the rushing Nooksack River, on its way from Bellingham to the Mount Baker Ski Area. It ends about three miles beyond the ski area at Artist Point, where you can take in a panoramic view of Mount Baker, along with 9,131-foot Mount Shuksan and other peaks. Black bears are sometimes spotted along the road to the point, and Mount Baker has the largest population of mountain goats in the state, with the animals often seen just below the viewpoint. Artist Point typically opens sometime in July and stays open through September, weather permitting. Depending on the season, you might need chains at higher elevations.

When I drive the Mount Baker Highway, I enjoy stopping at Maple Falls and Glacier to sample handmade fare in locally owned restaurants and taverns. Then, about seven miles after I enter the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, I watch for the turnoff to beautiful Nooksack Falls, an 88-foot cascade. The Nooksack parking lot is less than a mile off the highway, and it's just a short hike, on a less-than-one-mile-loop trail, to the viewing area to see the frothy falls plunging over mossy cliffs.

The ultimate view, however, is at Artist Point. As Washington State Tourism notes, even the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow would pale in comparison to the reward of reaching Artist Point. Here you can walk trails edged with wildflowers, and take in a backdrop of lakes, meadows and mountains. As I admire Mount Baker, I'm reminded that it's a glacier-covered volcano that stays white all year. Part of the North Cascades Range, it's the second-most-active volcano in the Cascades after Mount St. Helens, although it last erupted back in the mid-1800s.

The Mount Baker Ski Area is known for having a long ski season and one of the deepest snow packs in the country. Runs are usually open from late November to the end of April. Annual average snowfall

at the ski area is 647 inches, and during 1998-99, the area set a world record for single-season snowfall, with 1,140 inches. Mount Baker is also one of the best ski values in the nation. An adult full-day lift ticket topped out at just \$46.54 last season, making it a bargain to ski the 38-trail mountain, whose terrain ranges from beginner slopes to intermediate groomed runs, to expert trails that challenge with steep slopes and trees. Lessons and rentals are available.

The area's snowboarding appeal is underscored each February when the Legendary Banked Slalom race takes place on a natural halfpipe. The 2010 race will be February 5-7.

On a fall or spring day, you can snowboard Mount Baker in the morning and bike in the lowlands in the afternoon. And even when the lifts aren't operating, people sled, snowshoe and hike on snow well into the summer. Information on trail conditions and State Route 542 conditions is available at fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/.

Bicyclists also love Whatcom County, which has numerous routes to choose from. For a fun mountain-bike trip that appeals to people of many different ages, park at Boulevard Park south of downtown Bellingham and pedal the gravel, two-mile South Bay Trail along scenic Bellingham Bay. Then connect with the seven-mile Interurban Trail and ride along the Chuckanut Ridge Trail to Larrabee State Park, with postcard-worthy overlooks of the bay. Total ride, one way, if you decide to pedal the entire route:

nine miles. Mountain bikers also enjoy rides around Lake Padden (2.6 miles) or on the Railroad Trail (3.5 miles) or the Cornwall Park Trail (1.5 miles).

For intermediate and expert mountain-bike riding, Galbraith Mountain is a peak experience. Located southeast of downtown Bellingham, it's the main reason *Mountain Bike Magazine* named Bellingham one of the 10 best mountain-biking towns in the nation in 2001. Galbraith's Forest Service and logging roads connect more than 30 single-track trails with names such as Whoopsie Woodle, Purple Heart, Chutes and Ladders, and 911.

For road biking, some of Whatcom County's best rides are on rural roads around Bellingham that frequently provide views of Mount Baker and the waterfront. I like the Bellingham-Ferndale Loop (18 miles), the Lake Samish ride (16 miles), the Aldrich Road ride (20 miles) and a ride that starts in downtown Bellingham and goes to Gooseberry Point's scenic beach (30 miles).

Bike-route information and maps are available from Bellingham Whatcom County Tourism, and bicycle rentals are available at companies such as Jack's Bicycle Center and Fairhaven Bike & Ski.

Fairhaven Bike & Ski is in the charming red-brick community of Fairhaven, which was founded in the late 1800s and is just

3 miles from downtown Bellingham. Shops such as Village Books, the Wild Blueberries toy store, the Two Turtle Doves luxury-bedding store and the Three French Hens "boutique for chicks" delight visitors, and the Fairhaven Outdoor Cinema takes place on the Village Green each summer, with movies such as *Twilight* and *Marley & Me* being shown this month.

The Bellingham Farmers Market comes to the Fairhaven Village Green on Wednesdays, June through September, as well as taking place on Saturdays at Depot Market Square in downtown Bellingham, April through Christmas. Whatcom County is the nation's leading county in raspberry production: It provides more than 65 percent of U.S. frozen raspberries, with 48 million pounds harvested in 2008. The county is also known for its blueberries, strawberries and dairy industry.

While the Village Green appeals to visitors who relish fresh produce, another kind of green attracts golfers, who can choose from 15 Whatcom County courses, including Semiahmoo's award-winning, par-72, 7,137-yard Loomis Trail Golf Club. In addition, the North Bellingham Public Golf Course is a Scottish-links-style course, while the Homestead Farms Golf Resort touts the Pacific Northwest's only par 5 to an island green in a pond, and the densely treed Lake Padden course is recognized as one of the Pacific Northwest's finest municipal courses. Many greens fees in Whatcom County are less than \$70.

Whatcom County is also the starting point for several boating day trips. You can take a scenic cruise in the waters around the San Juan Islands or go on an orca-watching adventure, leaving from the Bellingham Cruise Terminal or Squalicum Harbor. For instance, from mid-May to early September, the foot-passenger San Juan Island Commuter can transport you to Friday Harbor or Orcas Island, or take you on a whale-watching tour. And Victoria-San Juan Cruises can take you to Victoria, the picturesque, English-style capital of British Columbia, through September 27 this year, with dinner served on the return trip.

A new attraction that's growing in popularity is the Whatcom Wine Trail (www.whatcomwinetrail.com) comprising wine-tasting at nine artisan wineries, such as Chuckanut Ridge Wine Company, whose 2003 Crawford Vineyards Merlot was a silver-medal winner at the 2005 Northwest Wine Summit.

The wine trail's Dakota Creek Winery specializes in producing limited quantities of premium wines from handpicked

Eastern Washington grapes, while Mount Baker Vineyards & Winery begins its wine-making process with "the best fruit from carefully maintained vineyards on our own estate or in the Yakima Valley."

At HoneyMoon Mead-Wine-Cider, you can taste meads made with locally produced raspberries and fireweed honey, along with handcrafted wines from Yakima Valley grapes, and ciders blended from Whatcom County apples and berries. Several local breweries—including the award-winning Boundary Bay, known for its house brews and cask ales—and a cheese shop round out the Whatcom Wine Trail.

Whatcom County is also a prized visitor destination because of its proximity to Canada: Bellingham is just 60 miles south of Vancouver, B.C. (making Bellingham a sought-after place to stay during the 2010 Olympics), and just 90 miles north of Seattle. However, there's so much to see and do right in Whatcom County itself, that many visitors plan an entire vacation around exploring this notable northwestern corner of the United States. n

Writer Meri-Jo Borzilleri lives in Bellingham.

Horizon Air (800-547-9308, www.horizonair.com) flies daily to Bellingham, Seattle and Vancouver, B.C., gateways to Whatcom County activities and attractions. For more information, contact Bellingham Whatcom County Tourism, 360-671-3990 or 800-487-2032; www.bellingham.org.

Doing Business in Whatcom County

Many Whatcom County business owners came to play and then moved here to live, attracted by excellent quality of life—clean water, clear air, moderate temperatures, stunning scenery, relatively little traffic—and by proximity to Seattle and to Vancouver, B.C.

"A lot of people with master's degrees live here," says Taimi Gorman, a marketing consultant who teaches business and marketing seminars for Whatcom Community College. "People who move here have often worked somewhere else successfully and are willing to remake themselves, or they want to move here and will do anything just to live here."

Modern technology and excellent air access from Bellingham to cities across the globe via airlines such as Horizon Air and Alaska Airlines (which recently added several nonstops from Bellingham to Las Vegas) allow companies to operate successfully from the area's midsize and rural communities, says Nancy Jordan, executive director of the Northwest Economic Council—Whatcom County.

Businesses benefit significantly from infrastructure operated by the Port of Bellingham, she says. "A lot of the companies are national or international in their scope. They may be based here, but their work is global."

For example, Superfeet, the premium-insoles company, bases its 50-person headquarters in Ferndale but has offices across the country and distributors worldwide. Whatcom County is also home to British Petroleum's 800-employee Cherry Point Refinery in Blaine and to the Alcoa Intalco Works Smelter, a 515-employee aluminum smelter in Ferndale.

The county's biggest employer is PeaceHealth in Bellingham, with more than 2,600 employees. PeaceHealth's St. Joseph Hospital in Bellingham is a 253-bed, two-campus medical center and Level III trauma center, with a world-class cardiovascular center.

The hospital's new off-campus wound-healing center, which opened in July, uses advanced technology such as a hyperbaric oxygen chamber to treat wounds that are difficult to heal.

From PeaceHealth to Superfeet, companies large and small are flourishing in the county. Below are just some of the ways businesses can benefit from being in Whatcom County:

- The Northwest Economic Council administers a revolving-loan program that can fund up to \$75,000 of a qualifying project such as acquisition of equipment, land or a building, or expansion of an existing facility.
- Economic Development Investment loans—from a Whatcom County fund generated by local rural sales taxes and available through the Northwest Economic Council—can finance public projects such as water and sewer lines, and electricity and transportation infrastructure.
- Qualifying Whatcom County businesses can take advantage of state incentives such as a high-technology business-and-occupation tax credit, a new-jobs business-and-occupation tax credit, and sales-and-use-tax exemptions for companies in industries such as manufacturing, nonmanufacturing aerospace, and biotech/medical-device manufacturing. There are also tax incentives related to areas such as warehouse construction or expansion, computer software, biofuels, food processing, solar energy, and timber and wood products. Guaranteed loans for private-business projects, as well as tax-exempt financing, are also available to qualifying companies.
- The Northwest Economic Council partners with the local Procurement Technical Assistance Center to help companies with paperwork related to bidding on federal and local government projects.
- The Northwest Economic Council provides extensive information and resources for Canadian companies interested in establishing a presence in the county, and the Whatcom Opportunities Regional Center assists qualified foreign investors interested in investing in senior-living

projects in Whatcom County.

- Western Washington University, Bellingham Technical College, Northwest Indian College and Whatcom Community College train a skilled workforce, and the Northwest Workforce Council and WorkSource Northwest provide job training and assistance. In addition, Washington state's Job Skills Program pays up to one-half of the total cost of training related to certain hiring, retention and upgrade needs, and the state's Customized Training Program loans upfront costs of customized employee training.

For more information, visit www.nwecon.org and www.portofbellinham.com. -M.B.