

Magnuson Park

THE LAND COMES FULL CIRCLE

This walk through one of Seattle's largest parks offers a chance to see a fine example of large-scale landscape restoration.

DISTANCE

3.5 miles

START/END

E-1 parking lot in Warren G. Magnuson Park near the intersection of NE 65th Street and Lake Shore Drive NE

NOTES

Restrooms are located throughout the park. The walk traverses a couple of stretches of hard-packed dirt trail and passes by many spots where you might want to wander off and explore more.

Magnuson Park exemplifies our changing relationship with the land. First surveyed in 1855, the peninsula has been homesteaded, logged, leveled, drained, and paved. But in the past two decades the land has also been replanted, revitalized, and restored, in the process becoming one of the gems of Seattle's park system. Few other ecosystems in Seattle have experienced such change and renewal.

Known by settlers as the Sand Point peninsula, the area originally had rolling topography covered in Douglas fir (six feet in diameter), western red cedar, western hemlock, and red alder. Early federal surveyors also found



two narrow streams flowing into a shallow bay (named Pontiac by an early landowner from Pontiac, Michigan) at the north end and a swamp to the south. Within the swamp, they observed a body of water, initially unnamed but soon labeled Mud Lake.



Aerial view of naval station, May 1953

By the 1870s, homesteaders had arrived, and in 1886 Edward Lee opened the first business on the point, a boat-building company. Lee primarily provided vessels for the extensive fleet of steamboats and paddle-wheelers that ferried passengers around the lake. Three years later, the Pontiac Brick & Tile Company arrived. To move bricks, it utilized the Seattle Lake Shore and Eastern Railway (now the route of the Burke-Gilman Trail), which stopped at the town of Pontiac on Pontiac Bay. The factory soon employed enough men that the Pontiac post office opened in 1890. But brick making was not a long-term growth industry, and by 1914, the factory had shut down. At the time around 150 people lived in Pontiac and on Sand Point.

The biggest change to the landscape began in 1920 when King County acquired 220 acres of Sand Point for Seattle's first airfield. (The first successful circumnavigation of the world by air started from the airfield on April 6, 1924. Four flyers departed, and two returned on September 28.) By 1926, when it deeded 400 acres to the Navy, the county had acquired most of the rest of the peninsula. After the government decided it no longer needed the space, the city took over the land in the 1970s. It was renamed

in honor of Senator Warren G. Magnuson in 1977. The base officially closed in September 1995, with the City Council approving a master plan that included a wetland and sports fields in 2004.

Start at the parks department sign for Promontory Point, which is on a road that is separated from the west side of the E-1 parking lot by a row of trees. The lot is at the east end of NE 65th Street adjacent to the boat ramp. Signs along 65th indicate Promontory Point.

❶ Promontory Point is one of the least visited areas of Magnuson. The Navy used it as a quarry for fill material and as a firing range. (There were designated targets, but many trees suffered at the hands of shooters.) Neglected for years, the point was overrun with invasive plants, but in the late 1990s a multiyear project began the restoration of the site. Volunteers planted native species, removed invasives, and established a trail system. There is also a native plant and butterfly garden, where you might see species such as western tiger swallowtail, mourning cloak, and Lourquin's admirals.

If you wish to explore the point, here's a short tour, which has one steepish, stair-stepped hill to ascend. (If you decide not to explore the point, continue south on the road [dashed line on map] by the pavilion, and follow it as it curves around to a series of black limestone columns [number 2 on map]). Walk west through the pavilion to a narrow path, which connects to a wide gravel path. Turn right and go uphill past snowberries (which have white berries) and vine maples to a level open area (the location of the former naval quarry). The bluff to the right has been used by kingfishers for nesting; the birds excavate one- to eight-foot-long tunnels in the sandy bank. Follow the trail south. It will soon start to ascend and curve up a stepped pathway. At the top is an intersection of several trails and a good spot to see native madronas, with their characteristic smooth red bark and dark green leaves. Take the right-hand path, which extends about 125 yards to a point that offers good views of the park when no leaves are on the trees. (One longtime birder at the park calls this area "warbler alley" for the number and varieties of warblers he regularly sees here. Also look for shelf fungus, which grows on dead trees.)

Return to the intersection, and turn left and descend a relatively steep road/path along a boundary fence. At the bottom, veer left onto a paved road, then turn right and around to a series of black limestone columns.

2 Perri Lynch Howard's *Straight Shot*, built in 2007, takes advantage of and incorporates the National Geodetic Survey's Sand Point Calibration Baseline. The kilometer-long baseline was set up so that local surveyors could test their electronic equipment on a very precisely measured distance. When the parks department acquired the land, there was concern that the baseline would be eliminated, but local surveyors prevailed upon the department to protect the corridor via an art project.



Shelf fungus, Promontory Point

In her work, Howard incorporated a dozen columns, each twice the distance from the previous one, except for the final northernmost column, which had to be placed at a different distance so it would not be in the middle of a ball field. The columns run along the calibration baseline. Each column has two holes cut at different levels that let a viewer “mak[e] a targeted observation in the landscape, adopting the stance of a surveyor



Straight Shot, Perri Lynch Howard, 2007

calibrating his instruments,” wrote Howard in her concept proposal. Surveyors, police departments, and industry still regularly use the baseline to ensure the accuracy of their devices.

Return to the road that crosses *Straight Shot* (about 20 feet), turn right, and follow the pavement north along the shoreline. Don't forget to look south at the stellar views of Mount Rainier. Continue past the boat ramp, where there usually are portable toilets, to a small kiosk.

3 With its diverse habitat, many acres, and accessible shoreline, Magnuson Park is one of the city's finer birding areas. In addition, a seasonal variation in species means that you can return throughout the year and regularly encounter new birds. Along the shoreline, look for buffleheads, mergansers, greater and lesser scaup, mallards, and gadwalls. In winter, the area north around the dock at the swimming beach hosts many different gulls including California, mew, and glaucous. Bald eagles and osprey also hunt over the lake throughout the year.

Lake Washington is the state's second largest natural lake, with about 72 miles of shoreline and an average depth of 110 feet; off the Magnuson shore, the lake drops more than 185 feet. Two rivers—the Cedar and Sammamish—flow into the lake, but no river flows out. The Black River once did, but it disappeared in 1916 with the opening of the ship canal and locks, and the lake's outlet is now the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks (see Walk 9 for more details).

Similar to other lakes in the state, Lake Washington is a product of the last ice age. But its formation was a bit different than those. Nearby Green Lake is a kettle lake, formed by a chunk of ice that melted. Many mountain lakes, known as tarns, developed where glacial ice gouged out a low spot that later filled with water. In contrast, Lake Washington fills a depression excavated by water.

Continue north to the public swimming beach, where there are also public toilets.

4 The odd-looking ramp/underground structure to the west is an old magazine, or storage unit for explosives and ammunition, which was situated far from where Navy personnel lived.

To the north is *The Fin Project: From Swords into Plowshares*, an art installation by John T. Young that repurposed diving planes (horizontal

GLACIERS IN SEATTLE

From about 17,400 to 14,500 years ago during the last ice age, a 3,000-foot-thick glacier spread south out of what is now Canada to about Olympia before retreating, or melting, back north. The ice generated several notable features in the landscape. As the ice advanced, streams carried fine-grain sediment into a large lake that covered much of the modern-day Puget lowland. Up to 100 feet thick, the sediment layer is known as the Lawton Clay. It would later become central to Seattle's early brick-making industry. Next to be deposited was the Esperance Sand, a sandy, gravelly layer that can be up to 200 feet thick. And finally atop the pile is the Vashon till, consisting of a mix of sand, gravel, cobbles, and boulders. These three layers make up most of Seattle's hills.

Two other features associated with the ice age are the city's terrestrial topography and its big bodies of water. The first feature developed when the glacier moved south and acted like a giant rake scraping the landscape into the roughly parallel hills and valleys that give Seattleites their great views and challenge their driving skills. These structures primarily run north-south, or the direction traveled by the ice. Lake Washington, Lake Sammamish, and Puget Sound, in contrast, were formed by water flowing under the glacier. Known as subglacial melt, these rivers cut down into the underlying sediments and carved out deep basins, which subsequently filled with water.

fins that aid in submerging and surfacing) from decommissioned US Navy nuclear submarines. Young has said that the inspiration for the project was instantaneous. "I took one look at the fins and said there's no way we are going to cut those up. We are going to use them exactly as they are. They are magnificent forms. And that's when I saw the orca whale dorsal fin." He completed a similar project in Florida.

[Ascend the grass slope west of *The Fin Project*. At the top you will be on Kite Hill.](#)

5 Workers began to create Kite Hill in the early 1970s out of the naval station's old asphalt runways. They finished the hill in 1989 with 40,000 cubic yards of fill excavated from a garage at the Pike Place Market. Over the years, artists have used the hill as a site for guerrilla art, such as nine

life-size plywood soldiers and a nine-foot-tall steel monolith. Enjoy the splendid views from on high.

Based on the number of place names, Sand Point peninsula must have been an important location to the area's Native people. One name, *ChazáhLqoo*, means "digging in the water" and probably refers to wapato (a potato-like tuber) collected in the wetlands around the former Mud Lake. Another, *TudáxWdee*, is the Whulshootseed word for snowberry, a plant used for medicine. And perhaps most significant, *slágWlagWatS* references the inner bark of the cedar tree. Cedars here must have been special as the trees were ubiquitous throughout the region. The final name describes the point, which was called *sqWsub*, or fog.

Continue north on the hill a short way until you intercept a wide path, and turn left, or west. When you soon come to an intersection of trails, go straight to the large field, turn right, and follow the trail around the field until you reach the black column of Perri Lynch Howard's *Straight Shot*.

6 To the north is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Western Regional Center. The first building opened in 1981. Programs include the National Weather Service, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, and

NATIVE NAMES ON THE LANDSCAPE

Coll Thrush writes in *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* that the "four European compass points were not necessarily the most important directions in Puget Sound indigenous life." Instead, Native people placed more importance on features such as weather, food, travel, and local wildlife. In his book, Thrush includes four maps of Seattle, which list over 125 names and their origins. Reading them, one realizes that the original inhabitants had a much different relationship to the landscape than modern dwellers. Unfortunately, only a handful of Native place names have persisted on modern maps. Licton Springs, in north Seattle, is a corruption of *lééQtud* meaning "red paint," in reference to springs colored by rust. Another one is Shilshole, from *sHulshóól*, or "tucked away inside." All spellings of Native place names throughout the book are from the first edition of Thrush's *Native Seattle*, which contains a pronunciation guide and a history of the origin of the place names. His book uses *Whulshootseed* over the more common *Lushootseed*.

the Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, whose research focuses on helping to make more resilient coastlines.

Within the NOAA facility is an art walk consisting of five sculptures. Probably the most famous is Doug Hollis's *A Sound Garden*, which can be seen from Kite Hill. Access to the art walk is through the main gate on NE NOAA Drive off Sand Point Way. Please check the NOAA website for entry requirements. www.wrc.noaa.gov.

Continue counterclockwise around the field until you come to an intersection, turn right, and walk on a wide path, which soon runs along a turf field. Walk along the field to a gravel path on the right. Take it to the parking lot, turn right, walk to a road, and cross it at the crosswalk. Take the narrow path to the right, which soon crosses a small bridge, and continue into the Magnuson Park P-Patch.

7 Begun in 1973 as an outgrowth of a farm run by the Picardo family at 25th Avenue NE and NE 80th Street, Seattle's P-Patch program includes more than 85 community gardens. Take the time to explore these gardens, but do not pick any food.

Exit the P-Patch under a large wooden trellis. Descend the stairs to a small amphitheater (west of the garden), and follow the path around the circle to the west side. Before you is the former brig, or the Navy base's jail. Take the first left (at a piece of art titled *Geometric Garden in Red*), and walk by the children's garden to the crosswalk you recently crossed. Turn right, or west, at the road. *Watch for traffic—there is no sidewalk for the first 100 yards or so. Look for a sidewalk, and follow it west across a roadway. To the north is Building 30, formerly an aircraft hangar. Continue west, and cross 63rd Avenue NE to 62nd Avenue NE.*

8 The next half mile goes past a variety of former Navy buildings. They are part of the City of Seattle–designated Sand Point Historic District, which was approved in 2011. The district includes the very large Building 9 (barracks for enlisted men), which as of 2016 was slated for development into low-income housing, on the west side and Building 47 (recreation building, now Magnuson Community Center) on the east side. Most buildings south of the community center are owned by Solid Ground, a nonprofit working “to end poverty and undo racism and other oppressions that are root causes of poverty.” Its buildings provide transitional

and permanent housing along with case management for families and individuals. As of 2016, Solid Ground had more than 150 units within the park.

In addition, four barn owl nest boxes are located in the district. They were built because renovation forced the owls out of several older buildings. As of 2016, the boxes had been nested in regularly by the owls, key predators of the park's rodents.

Walk south on 62nd to a T-intersection at NE 65th Street, turn left, and walk about 100 feet to a dirt path that leads north into the trees. Follow the path, which will take you about 250 yards north to a paved road. Cross at the crosswalk to the Mickey Merriam Athletic Complex, turn right, or south, and follow a paved trail along the wetlands. In about 150 yards, veer left onto a gravel trail, and follow it until it intersects a paved path.

9 The wetlands you have been walking by and will continue to pass were constructed in 2008 and 2009 as part of an integrated plan to develop wetlands, athletic fields, and transition zones. In addition to providing new habitat, the restoration project helps filter and clean storm water and acts as a sponge so that rainwater slowly percolates into the wetlands.

The wetlands consist of four parts. Storm water enters through the entrance marsh system you just walked by. Beyond the ball field that you will soon pass are the marsh ponds (aka the rice paddies), shallow water areas that fill seasonally. They provide habitat for Pacific chorus frogs, migratory shorebirds, and numerous insects. The larger, permanently wet promontory ponds are up to 10 feet deep. They are a good spot to find waterfowl, amphibians, beaver, and insects such as dragonflies and damselflies (24 species as of 2015, the most at any single locality in Seattle, though the number is now decreasing because increased vegetation leads to less available water). In 2011, work began on the final section, shore ponds, which created a closer link between Lake Washington and the older wetlands.

Walk north on the paved path toward a baseball field. Just before the field, veer right on a paved path, and walk along the south side of the Frank Papasadero Field. At the end of the field, there is a gravel path. (A short detour to the left up a narrow side trail leads to the top of a low berm and good views over the wetlands complex.) Follow the gravel path to the right to a T-intersection near a bench.



Eight-spotted skimmer, *Libellula forensis*

10 The next section takes you between the final entrance marsh and the marsh ponds. Depending upon the time of year and the amount of precipitation, these shallow ponds may be dry. On your right are cattails and sedges, two plants found in wetlands. You will also pass by many red alders, which in spring often host many aphids. They, in turn, are prey for adult ladybird beetles, or ladybugs, and their alligator-shaped larvae.

Follow the trail south, or right, from the bench. Turn left when the trail forks again (the right-hand fork leads toward a parking lot), and continue until you reach a bench and a large decaying stump.

11 You have now reached the deep, permanent promontory ponds. The nest boxes across the water are for little brown and big brown bats, the park's most common bat species. Five boxes have been placed in the park. Birds to see around the ponds include yellow-rumped warbler, American

goldfinch, Virginia rail, sora, red-spotted towhee, marsh wren, red-winged blackbird, merlin, song sparrow, common yellowthroat, black phoebe, pied-billed grebe, and junco.

Also look for beaver signs, such as gnawed-off branches and trunks and drag marks across the trail where the beavers pull debris from one pond to the next. As of 2015, there were at least six beavers in the ponds. They had built a 7-foot-high lodge and an 80-foot-long dam.

In the snags, all of which were placed during the restoration process, look for the holes of flickers and furrows hewn by pileated woodpeckers.

Turn right, walk to another T-intersection, and turn left. Continue around the pond, past an intersection that leads to a road, to a junction with a trail that leads east to a grove of trees.

12 The grove consists of black cottonwoods. These trees were not planted as part of the restoration process but seeded themselves in the years since the Navy stopped using the airfield.

Turn left at the intersection. In about 50 feet is one of the best views into the largest open water in the promontory pond area, as well as a sign describing the ponds. Continue past the sign to a junction where the trail wraps around a small island (about 10 feet wide) of shrubs.

13 Note how the trail is raised slightly. This area flooded in the wet winter of 2014–15 after which the parks department decided that the trail should be higher.

Turn right and follow the trail to a road. Cross it. On your right is a stair-step sculpture, which leads to the top of a berm and great views into the wetlands. The steps line up with the naval station's 5,050-foot-long main runway (now removed).

14 Magnuson Park is an unusual park. It is one of three park spaces in Seattle—the others are Discovery and South Lake Union—previously owned by the United States military. Modern visitors benefit enormously from this early federal ownership, as it is not too hard to imagine that if the government had not acquired these properties, each would probably have

ended up in private hands and thus been inaccessible to the public. These spaces are among the curious artifacts of the military's former presence in Seattle, remnants that the city and residents are taking advantage of as they develop creative public spaces.

Follow the road south back to where you parked in lot E-1. Be careful: many cars travel this road on weekends.