A distinctive lighthouse. Exceptional wildlife viewing. A truly unique tree. All make this park an uncommon day-use destination.

WATCHING WILDLIFE

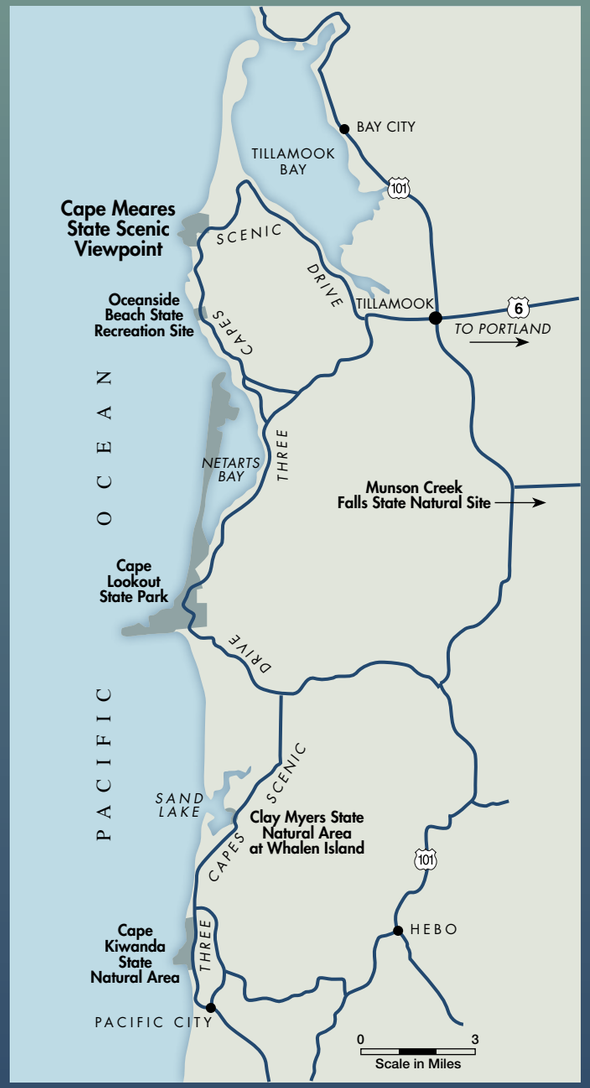
Cape Meares is home to a variety of wildlife. Elk, bear, deer and many species of birds are found in this unique coastal setting. Parts of Cape Meares and nearby Three Arch Rocks are National Wildlife Refuges. From April through July, the steep cliffs and offshore rocks are nesting sites for thousands of seabirds, including common murres, pelagic and Brandt's cormorants and pigeon guillemots. Peregrine falcons occasionally nest on the cliffs in the spring.

Cape Meares State Scenic Viewpoint is a prime location for whale watching. Migrating whales may be seen from December to January as they head south to calving grounds in Mexico and again March to April as they head north to Alaska. Volunteers help visitors spot whales during a designated watch week each migration. A population of about 200–400 whales feeds along the Oregon coast throughout the summer. Other marine mammals such as sea lions, dolphins and porpoise may be seen from Cape Meares' excellent viewpoints.

RUMORS OF A "WRONG" CAPE

Was the lighthouse mistakenly built on the wrong cape? For years, persistent rumors suggested that Cape Lookout, 10 miles to the south, was the cape of choice. However, 1886 reports comparing both capes show that Cape Meares was indeed the selected site.

In his report to the 13th Lighthouse District, J.S. Polhemus said, "Cape Meares affords nearly as good a site [as Cape Lookout] as far as the view from the sea is concerned, and being lower gives a better situation of light with reference to fog …" The report noted that accessibility from Tillamook Bay would make construction easier and a "flowing spring" atop Cape Meares would furnish water for construction purposes.



More information?

Call the Oregon State Parks Information Center:
1-800-551-6949

or visit the Oregon State Parks website:
www.oregonstateparks.org

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Cape Meares
State Scenic Viewpoint

CAPE MEARES
STATE SCENIC VIEWPOINT

THE "OCTOPUS TREE"

This popular attraction is an unusually large Sitka spruce aptly named for its unique shape. More than 10 feet at its base, it has no central trunk, uncommon for a spruce. Instead, limbs 3–5 feet thick branch out close to the ground. Several other large Sitka spruce trees are visible from the trails, but none is as unusual as the "Octopus Tree."

THE LIGHTHOUSE

Oregon's shortest lighthouse stands 38 feet atop Cape Meares and 217 feet above the ocean. In January 1886, the U.S. Congress approved $60,000 for construction of the lighthouse, which later took one year to build. Craftsmen using bricks made on site built the tower and then covered the exterior with iron plates.

The tower light is a first order, eight-sided Fresnel lens, hand ground in 1887 by Henry LePaute in Paris. A first order lens is the largest and most powerful of the six Fresnel types. The lens was carefully loaded on to a ship that sailed around Cape Horn, then north along the Pacific Coast to Cape Meares. Workers using a hand-operated crane made from local spruce trees lifted the one-ton lens parts up and over the cliff to the tower.

Lighting the Lamp

The lamp was first lit on or about Jan. 1, 1890. The beam was visible to ship decks 15 feet above the sea and more than 21 miles away. The beam alternated between white and red from sunset to sunrise. The lens generated 18,000 candlepower of white light and 160,000 candlepower of red light owing to the magnification powers of its bull's-eye lenses.

THE KEEPER'S TASKS

The lighthouse keeper was kept busy preparing the light for its nightly duty. The first light came from a heavy bronze, five-wick kerosene lantern, which was replaced later by an incandescent oil-vapor lamp. The keeper had to trim the large wick, filter the kerosene and clean the lens. The kerosene, after many passes through other material, received a final filtering through silk. A clockworks (a system of gears and weights much like a grandfather clock) kept the lens turning throughout the night. When the clockworks malfunctioned, the keeper turned the lens by hand until dawn when repairs could be made.

Lighthouse duties included replacing storm-broken windows, and maintenance, cleaning, painting and polishing were constant.

Life at the Lighthouse

The keeper and his assistant lived with their families in two nearby houses. Most of their food came from their own garden, supplemented by staples bought during high tide trips to Tillamook every few weeks. The trick was to return on the next high tide, because the alternative was a long pull home over the low tide mud of Tillamook Bay. One caretaker family wrote of a harrowing, all night horse and buggy trip to reach a doctor in Tillamook. Today it's a 15-minute drive.

In 1934, electricity came to the lighthouse, ending much of this monotonous toil. The U.S. Coast Guard installed an economical, automated beacon on a blockhouse a few feet away. In 1963 the stubby, stalwart lighthouse was decommissioned.

TRAIL MAP

Lighthouse
Restrooms
Information
Heritage Tree
Viewpoint
Trailhead
Picnic Area
Parking Area
Trails
Paved Trails
Roads & Parking
0 0.1 0.2
Miles