

WEEKLY

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Patos Island

THE LIGHTHOUSE ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, May 4, 2011



I've seen my fair share of lighthouses, but none stirs my soul like the one on Patos Island.

Part of the lure is its location on the far shore of the northernmost of the San Juan Islands. It's a small, tree-covered island with rocky shores and twisted madrones reaching for the Salish Sea. A lonely outpost swept by capricious winds, it feels like the edge of the world.

Unlike most of the San Juans, which have been logged over, the forests of Patos are largely intact. Except for the few primitive campsites, two mooring buoys and the lighthouse itself, it is blessedly undeveloped.

The lighthouse, like most these days, is unmanned. Its light has been automated since 1974, offering its beacon into the night without the benefit of human intervention. But it was not always so.

The Patos Island lighthouse was constructed in 1893 to help Alaska-bound steamships navigate through Boundary Pass, the expanse of water that separates the San Juan archipelago from Canada's Gulf Islands.

The most famous of the lighthouse keepers was Edward Durgan, who reluctantly moved onto the island in 1905 with his wife and 13 children. Supplies were procured via a 25-mile trip to Bellingham by rowboat.

They would live there for eight years and grow to love their isolated home. Legend has it that Theodore Roosevelt visited them on the island and sang "Remember the Maine" on the beach (apparently Teddy couldn't carry a tune in a bucket).

One of Durgan's children, Helene Glidden, would write a book in 1951 based on her experiences growing up on Patos entitled *The Light on the Island*. Long out of print, the book is currently available in a 50th anniversary edition.

After a stint as a U.S. Coast Guard facility, the island came under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management in 2005, and the dilapidated coast guard quarters, built in 1958 on the bluff at Alden Point, were torn down and removed, leaving the lighthouse itself the only remaining structure on the island.

A half-century after reading *The Light on the Island* as a girl, Midwesterner Linda Hudson moved to Lopez Island and visited Patos for the first time, curious to see the setting of the beloved story. She was captivated by the place, but saddened by the condition of the lighthouse, which had fallen into disrepair after years of facing the raw elements of the northern San Juans. She founded the Keepers of the Patos Light, a nonprofit group dedicated to the preservation of the lighthouse. The roof was replaced, structural repairs were made and the lighthouse freshly painted.

Today the lighthouse once again gleams in the sun, standing sentinel at the head of Active Cove, its light flashing every six seconds. At dusk, the bluff is alive with sounds: the lapping of waves, the wind in the trees, the croaking of ravens. If you hear something that sounds like an off-key rendition of "Remember the Maine," don't worry, it's only your imagination.