



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 murre, 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 designated whale watching weeks in December and March. Visit whalespoken.org for information. 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.



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Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
www.oregonstateparks.org
800-551-6949

Friends of Cape Meares Lighthouse & Wildlife Refuge
www.capemeareslighthouse.org

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Cape Meares State Scenic Viewpoint



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 built the tower using bricks made on site and then covered the exterior with iron plates.



A Powerful Lens

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 traveled by ship around Cape Horn, then north along the Pacific Coast to Cape Meares. Builders used a hand-operated crane made from local spruce trees to lift the components—weighing one ton—up and over the cliff to the tower.

The lamp was first lit on or about Jan. 1, 1890. Its innovative bull's eye lens generated 18,000 candlepower of white light and 160,000 candlepower of red light. Mariners could spot the powerful beams from more than 21 miles away, and the distinctive red-white pattern allowed them to plot their location.

The Keeper's Tasks

The lighthouse keeper kept busy preparing the light for its nightly duty. The first light was powered by a heavy bronze, five-wick kerosene lantern, which was replaced later by an incandescent oil-vapor lamp. The keeper had to trim the lantern's large wick, filter the kerosene and clean the lens daily. 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.

Storms battered and wore down the lighthouse and buildings, and the keeper's duties included constant cleaning, painting and polishing, as well as replacing storm-broken windows.

Life at the Lighthouse

The keeper and his assistant lived with their families in two nearby houses, which were located by the current parking lot. They grew much of their own food and traveled by horse and buggy at high tide to Tillamook every few weeks for staples. They were careful 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 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 Coast Guard decommissioned the stubby, steadfast lighthouse.



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."

