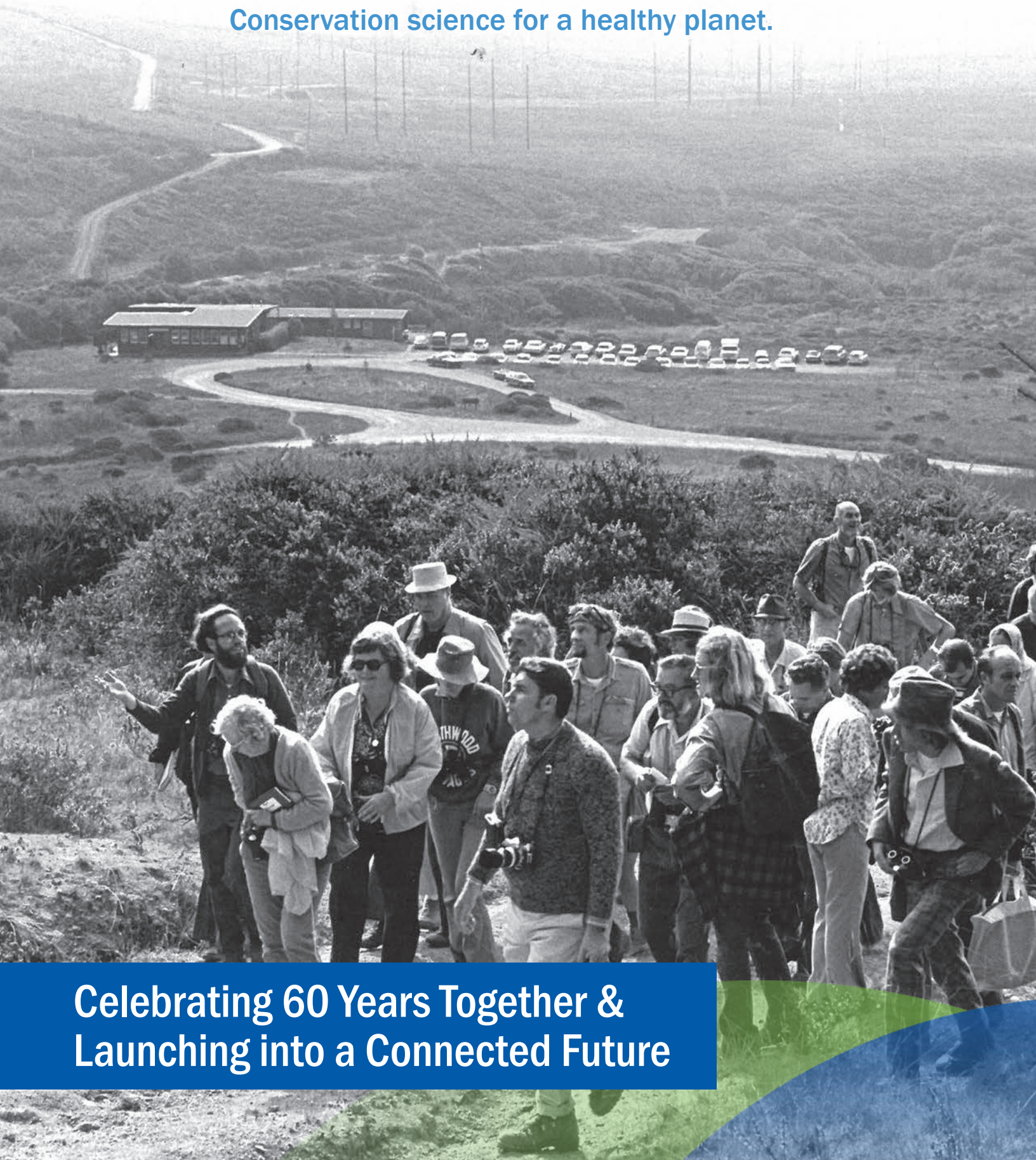
Spring 2025

Point Blue Connector

Conservation science for a healthy planet.



Celebrating 60 Years Together & Launching into a Connected Future

FROM THE CEO

Building a Connected Future with a Solid Foundation

I have had the great fortune of being with Point Blue for almost 30 years. That's about half of our entire history and more than half of my lifetime! I've seen our evolution through the eyes of a field biologist in my early days standing in the rain on the Farallon Islands as I struggled to read the digits on muddy, numbered tags on elephant seal flippers. Then, as an educator leading our Education & Outreach group, I experienced the joy of welcoming the STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring A Watershed) Program to join Point Blue. More recently, as Chief of Staff, I was able to work with my smart and passionate colleagues to support them to do their best work.

I know through experience that this organization is built on the solid foundation of authentic care for the planet's people and wildlife, rigorous scientific skills, and seasoned experience building connections. Working with Ellie Cohen, our CEO from 2000 to 2019, to implement climate-smart conservation was exciting, challenging, and effective. Working with Mani Oliva, our recent CEO of five years, to grow our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity efforts and emphasize communities was transformative, informative, and motivating. Now, as I stand in the shoes of Acting CEO, I'm proud to represent and lead this unique and impactful organization forward. I'm concerned yet confident about the challenges we must continue to overcome, and I'm beyond thrilled to be launching a new strategy with my team: Connected Conservation.

What does Connected Conservation mean to us? It means actively building and deepening relationships with our community, at every level, so we can connect ecological needs and human needs to co-create long-lasting solutions to the biodiversity and climate crises. I am excited for this new direction because when we work in community with others, we can do great things.

True to the theme, this has been by far the most collaboratively developed plan to date, and because of that, I feel it will be hugely successful. You will hear more from each of our Group Directors about how our new strategy will propel our work forward. In each of the stories, you will see a through line from our founding roots to our vision of a healthy, connected future for wildlife and people. I hope these stories inspire you to stay connected and maybe even deepen some of your ties to this restorative conservation work. We could not do it without you. Cheers to all of us for 60 years of improving the health of the planet and the lives of people and wildlife!

In sincere gratitude,

Melissa Pitkin
Acting CEO

Migration: From Landbirds to Shorebirds

For over 60 years, birds have been at the heart of Point Blue's mission. The organization was founded to study bird migration along the Pacific Flyway, and we now have the longest running population study of landbirds in North America west of the Mississippi River and the largest coordinated research network of shorebirds in the Pacific Americas Flyway.

Our avian research began by banding birds to identify individuals near our Palomarin Field Station and tracking them within our study area to better understand the hidden aspects of their lives. But birds don't stay in one place. They fly over huge swaths of landscapes—from Northern Alaska to South America and beyond. As our organization grew, we realized that to truly understand bird migration patterns, we needed to follow them beyond California's borders. In 2010, a solution arose when geolocator tags became small enough that we could attach them to the birds' lower backs to track their larger movements. This major technological breakthrough allowed us to complete geolocator studies and unlocked our knowledge of where birds were going when they left California.

"We always say that birds know no borders," said **Renée Cormier, Senior Avian Ecologist**. "If a population of migratory birds is declining, it could be due to factors on their summer or winter grounds and/or at important migratory stopover sites. If we don't know where a bird is flying to, then it's much more difficult to know what threats they are facing. Embracing new technology like geolocators has helped us be on the cutting edge of avian ecology and we now have a fuller picture of the annual cycle for many more species, which can help with their conservation."

This new technology has been particularly impactful for understanding Swainson's Thrushes. After placing geolocator tags on thrushes nesting along the Northern California Coast and in the Sierra Nevada and southern Cascade mountain ranges, we discovered that the birds from different breeding sites were going to different places. Coastal birds were migrating to western Mexico, birds nesting near Lassen National Forest were migrating to Central America, and birds in the Tahoe area were flying all the way down to South America. Longer migration routes and more recent forest loss on both the wintering and breeding grounds

for the Cascade-Sierra birds compared to the coastal birds indicated that those birds may be more vulnerable than the coastal group.

Meanwhile, our search for knowledge about shorebirds, which are famous for their long migration routes, was expanding beyond the Bay Area. As we got a better sense of where the birds went during the long winter months, we knew we needed to deepen our conservation efforts in California and beyond. From salt flats to mangroves to fish nurseries, the places that support flourishing human communities also support shorebirds. That's why the team launched MSP+ Science to Action, a program that builds on the last 13 years of the Migratory Shorebird Project (MSP) and its international network and data. Through MSP+, Point Blue provides grants to MSP partner organizations across Mexico, Central America, and South America to grow local capacity for shorebird and multiple-benefit coastal conservation and to implement science-informed conservation actions in cooperation with their local governments and communities.

"We recognized as an organization that yes, you can study birds here in California and do everything you can to support them, but if you don't piece together that broader picture of what birds face in the places they migrate to, all of it could be for naught," said **Matt Reiter, Research Director in the Pacific Coast and Central Valley Group**. "To do conservation in the most impactful way, you need to bring in the folks in the communities where these birds go. We've made an effort to make sure we aren't parachuting in and saying 'we need to do this.' We want to make sure we're uniting people to find a common vision that benefits everyone—not just the birds." So far, the program has been incredibly successful, leading to new connections and projects across the Flyway.

Earlier this year, our partners at Panama Audubon hosted a workshop bringing together women from Central America who are either already engaged in bird conservation or who want to get more involved. Guests participated in an extensive three-day training where they learned how to use certain tools to study shorebirds. The training concluded with participants sharing draft proposals for how they will contribute to studying shorebirds in Central America and a meeting with the Environmental Ministry of Panama to discuss these important efforts. This type of collaboration facilitates lasting relationships that we hope will empower the local communities to protect shorebirds and their habitats over the long-term.

In Guatemala, initiative partners have collaborated with local salt producers to help them implement a modified water management system. With Point Blue's support, small family businesses in Sipacate now have more sophisticated water control structures that have improved their salt production while supporting local shorebird populations.

Ensuring that all of these projects run smoothly requires dedicated partnerships. "Understanding migratory birds is a massively collaborative effort," said **Blake Barbaree, Senior Ecologist**. "Our success truly hinges on the work of all our amazing partners. Point Blue continues to be a trusted nexus for the conservation community because we've brought people together and connected state agencies, volunteers, and smaller conservation organizations. We have such a strong reputation because we've spent decades delivering unique and important research on scales that matter. My predecessors laid this foundation and I'm lucky I've gotten to build on it."

Left: Participants of a workshop in Panama aimed at training Central American women to use technological tools for the study of shorebirds, supported by MSP+. Photo by Rosabel Miro, Sociedad Audubon de Panama. Right: Swainson's Thrush with a GPS geolocator tag, held safely in the "bander's grip" by a Point Blue staff member in the Sierra Nevada. Photo by Point Blue.

How do you see the theme and framework of Connected Conservation improving and growing the impact of the work you're leading?

Dr. Jaime Jahncke
Director, California Current Group

Connected Conservation strengthens our ability to protect ocean ecosystems by bridging applied science, community engagement, and policy. The ocean is inherently connected—across habitats, species, and human communities. Our approach to conservation must reflect that. Through this new framework, Point Blue is advancing collaborative, science-driven solutions that enhance ocean resilience, support sustainable fisheries, and protect vital marine wildlife from climate-driven threats.

By leveraging the Farallon Islands' decades-long time series and the Applied California Current Ecosystem Studies (ACCESS) data, we are uncovering critical trends in ocean productivity, climate variability, and ecosystem health. These datasets provide an unparalleled foundation for understanding how marine wildlife—from seabirds and whales to forage fish—respond to environmental change. By integrating these long-term insights with new technologies and conservation strategies, we can inform policies that promote a healthy, thriving ocean.

John Parodi
Director, Education and Outreach/STRAW Group

I'm thrilled that Connected Conservation is the new strategic direction for the organization as it highlights what we have known since STRAW's inception: people and the environment are not separate. Individuals and human communities cannot operate outside of, or in isolation from, our natural world if we want to create the thriving communities and landscapes we're all working so hard to achieve. The more folks we authentically bring into the work, the greater ripple effects we will have, both socially and ecologically. Some we can anticipate, but some wonderful ones we cannot! This theme challenges and encourages us to push the boundaries of inclusive conservation even further, doing everything we can at Point Blue to remove barriers to access conservation so all individuals and communities can contribute to the planet's health. I am so honored to work alongside so many creative, effective, and dedicated individuals to deepen the impact of our work in this way!

Dr. Liz Chamberlin
Director, Innovation Group

Connected Conservation is core to the work of Point Blue's Innovation Group. We serve as bridge builders across the organization, helping connect our science to the relevant agency, partner, and policy pathways of conservation action. Over the past few years, our team has supported visioning for greater

state-level engagement in California, which is critically important at this point in time to continue momentum on conservation issues important to Point Blue. Within our Innovation Group, we are thinking outside of the box about how we can connect our work to conservation impact—especially through the human dimensions of conservation, including policy, social science, and community science. We are just starting to scratch the surface of the impact we can have through these novel approaches.

Ryan Burnett
Director, Sierra Nevada Group

Connection is central to the conservation movement. Mending severed processes like restoring natural ecological functions, or ensuring species can access all the resources they need to thrive, is all about connection. Also, in many ways the lost connection between people and ecosystems has created the current conservation crisis we face. In the Sierra Nevada we are focused on restoring meadows that have had their ecological processes severed, reconnecting streams to their floodplains. We are working with Indigenous peoples who stewarded these lands for millennia but were intentionally severed from them, believing that bringing their wisdom and care back to these lands will increase the impact and durability of our shared conservation work. This new strategic direction inspires me to take a more inclusive approach to our work in the Sierra Nevada, seeing the problem through a more holistic lens and engaging more deeply with existing and new partners.

Dr. Sam Veloz
Director, Ecoinformatics and Climate Solutions Group

The Ecoinformatics Group is focused on using data to advance conservation and science and to demonstrate how the actions of conservation managers, communities, and decision makers impact ecosystems, species, and natural processes. Through this new strategic direction, our team is scaling up our approach to make data and information more available and accessible. We will continue to work with state, local, and national partners to use this information to collaboratively connect conservation actions at scale.

Catherine Hickey
Director, Pacific Coast and Central Valley Group

Connection is the very essence of enduring conservation solutions. There is no bypassing the need for it; there is no fast-tracking it. There is a deep reward in committing to Connected Conservation. It is where joy and hope for the future resonate. It is where we find what matters—from local to global communities. It is how we listen to and learn from each other, how we share knowledge, and how we envision and build a sustainable future together. Literally every day, it is revealed as the heart of our work. The center of my work is migratory species, and species that do not exist without connection—connection of sites and ecosystems, connection of resources, and ultimately connection of communities. So, I'm all in. Point Blue's embracing of this theme is a dream and I hope you're all in too.

Bonnie Eyestone
Director, Working Lands Group

Connected Conservation has been at the heart of the partner biologist programs since its founding in 2011. This new framework for the organization is already strengthening collaboration and tapping into all of the unique strengths of Point Blue's incredible staff. Externally, Connected Conservation is doubling down on the human element of our work, emphasizing that authentic engagement with all kinds of communities will lead to greater and more lasting impact for wildlife and ecosystem resilience.

The Blue in Point Blue

The ocean produces roughly half of the Earth's oxygen and plays a vital role in maintaining the livable world we all enjoy. But it is an incredibly dynamic system, changing quickly from year to year, often serving as the canary in the coal mine for climate change and shifts in our global systems. Seabirds and marine life—from the Pacific Basin all the way to Antarctica—are on the frontlines of these rapid changes, flashing early warning signs about our planet's health.

Since 1968, Point Blue staff have been out in the field collecting marine data to grasp these changes. Over the last six decades, scientists from the organization have studied breeding and survival success of marine birds, mammals, and sharks off California, and studied penguin colonies in Antarctica. Having access to these long-term studies with uniform data has allowed our team's scientists to detect shifts early on and shape ocean conservation policy.

"All our planetary life support systems are tied to the ocean," said **Dr. Annie Schmidt, Antarctica Program Director**. "The reality is we can't have a liveable planet without a healthy ocean."

For nearly 30 years, Point Blue's scientists have conducted demographic studies of Adélie Penguins in Antarctica to understand their breeding and foraging patterns and the environmental conditions that impact population growth. The team then uses these findings to evaluate what's happening in the marine environment in the region.

"Field work and long-term monitoring are so crucial for us to understand multi-decade changes," added **Schmidt**. "Adélie penguins live up to 20 years, so we need to be on the ground throughout their entire lifespan. These rich places provide us with an incredible opportunity to collect unique datasets and knowledge about marine ecosystems."

Community science partnerships have also been essential for fieldwork to yield marine conservation wins. Since 2011, the Coastal Marine team has partnered with the Morro Coast Audubon Society to monitor seabird populations along the central California Coast and document human-caused disturbances in the area. The team then uses that data to conduct targeted outreach.

"We're entering our 15th year of collecting data on seabirds on the Central Coast and our partnerships with community members have been invaluable," said **Dan Robinette, Coastal Marine Program Leader**. "For example, community members saw that kayakers were disturbing a seabird population so we worked to engage the kayak community. Conservation efforts are often not successful without the right community buy-in and education."

Point Blue's fieldwork on the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge has also been instrumental for marine conservation. For 57 years, Point Blue staff have maintained a presence on the Islands, collecting data to understand one of the most biodiverse marine systems in the world. Since the program began, over 1,000 people from 47 different countries have spent time living on this rugged land. The work has evolved over the years to address new environmental challenges, and these efforts have paid off: species that were once nearly extinct are now thriving.

"I've had the privilege of witnessing firsthand that if you protect a place, wildlife has a chance to recover," said **Pete Warzybok, Principal Scientist and Farallon Program Leader**. "Before I started working on the Farallones, fur seals were almost entirely hunted out. Then in 1996, we saw the first seal pup born. Last year, that number exploded to 2,000 pups. Simply preserving the land as a safe refuge and providing stewardship has led to the flourishing of fur seals, and it has been remarkable to witness."

Now, with long-standing US Fish and Wildlife Service budget challenges having come to a head, Point Blue faces a devastating choice of having to leave the island for the fall and winter for the first time in almost six decades—potentially losing valuable data and opportunities for budding scientists to kick off their careers. With no scientists present during the upcoming fall bird migration, there is a greater risk that people may illegally come too close to the island and disturb the wildlife.

"Working on the Farallones is a life-altering experience," **Warzybok** concluded. "Many people who are now leaders at Point Blue or who are running their own labs at universities began their careers as volunteers or interns on the Islands. These types of field experiences train the scientists of the future, and losing that opportunity would have devastating impacts for science."

Despite these potential setbacks, Point Blue remains committed to shaping the next generation of ocean conservation, ensuring science, partnerships, and innovation drive the protection of these cherished places.

"Our oceans team has widened our focus dramatically since the program began," **said Dr. Jaime Jahncke, Director of the California Current Group**. "Our work was originally limited to seabird ecology. We then realized we needed to have a better understanding of the environmental effects on marine life. And after the 2005 heatwave tragically killed many bird chicks, we saw we needed to address how our warming world is impacting different species. This work is more important than ever and we will continue to evolve to meet these new challenges."

Two coastal and marine ecologists, Meredith Elliott and Julie Howar aboard an ACCESS ocean research vessel. Photo by Julie Howar.

Facilitating the Human–Nature Connection

Those who had the good fortune of working alongside Rich Stallcup, a founding member of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, our organization's original name, describe his preternatural connection to birds and nature. Many who knew Rich—who was given the nickname "Mr. Magic" because of his knack for finding rare birds—speak about his brilliant scientific mind, his spiritual reverence for birds, his deep connection to nature, and his ability to share all of that with others.

Over the last six decades, Point Blue has built on Rich's prolific work and legacy, aiming to facilitate deepened ties to nature for people of all ages because we've learned over the years that to have lasting conservation impact, we need to create and maintain community and center the connection between nature, people, and wildlife.

Successful conservation efforts inherently rely on human relationships and people's desire to engage in the work. This is especially true in the organization's Working Lands program where Point Blue's Partner Biologists work alongside private landowners to ensure California's agricultural lands provide as much benefit as possible to the communities and wildlife that depend on them. Backed by partnership with state and federal agencies that fund conservation actions on private lands, the team works with landowners to improve stream flows for fish, manage livestock grazing to protect creekside habitat, create conservation plans to keep habitats healthy, and much more.

"We wouldn't be able to do this work without taking the time to walk the land with and listen and respond to ranchers and farmers," said **Alicia Herrera, Working Lands Programs Coordinator and Senior Partner Biologist**. "Over the years, people have told me so many incredible stories about how our projects benefit their land and their quality of life. One rancher said to me, 'As a kid there used to be so many fish, but then they disappeared. Since we completed the fish passage project, the fish are back.' It's those stories that inspire me."

Deepening relationships to nature by restoring it in community is a central component of Point Blue's Students and Teachers Restoring A Watershed (STRAW) program, a collaborative network of students, teachers, private landowners like ranchers, and other partners.

The work is instrumental in shaping the scientists of the future by breaking down the walls of the classroom and enlivening education for students across California. "Through STRAW, students get career education, and on-the-job training. This is a program that is fundamentally respectful to children and their autonomy," said **Laurette Rogers, STRAW Founder and Ambassador**. "STRAW has shown that children are leaders; they can do professional restoration work and lead in their communities. Students can work well in teams, as they are inspired by their own competence and power. Children deserve more of those types of opportunities."

In recent years, the program has expanded to the Sierra, and Point Blue is now working with new landowners in Grass Valley and Mariposa thanks to our new Roots Program, formed as a result of a large grant from the California Wildlife Conservation Board. "The time to do this work is now," concluded **Rogers**. "It makes a difference in so many ways. It doesn't just heal the environment, it heals communities, as this work is never just about one person. To me, STRAW has been an ongoing miracle for over three decades. It is incredible to see how powerful it is for people to realize they're doing something tangible and giving back."

The Partner Biologist, Roots, and STRAW programs are just a few examples of the many ways that Point Blue helps facilitate people's connection to nature. Point Blue hosts apprenticeships at the Palomarin Field Station, training programs along the coast, and volunteer and research assistantships in our marine lab, to name a handful more.

Point Blue also recently hired a conservation social scientist to investigate the social context underpinning participation in these various programs. We created this position to explain the "why" behind our ecological research and to analyze the social relationships that are not always measurable through numbers.

"People and the natural world are inherently interconnected," said **Liat Wilde, Conservation Social Scientist**. "I am hoping that in this role, I am able to paint a broader picture that explores the feelings, emotions, and experiences of people who are sometimes missing from the environmental decision-making table. Scholarly investigation of the intersections of people and the environment is a relatively nascent field and I am looking forward to helping Point Blue be a leader in this work."

Students restore habitat at Shollenberger Marsh near Point Blue headquarters. Photo by Lishka Arata.

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Save the Dates!

Mark your calendars for our 47th annual Rich Stallcup Bird-A-Thon. Come together as a nature-loving community and count birds for conservation.

SEPTEMBER 15 – OCTOBER 15, 2025

More details to come at www.pointblue.org/birdathon.

Make Conservation Your Legacy

Become a Tern Society member today!

"I think conservation begins at home. If everyone takes special care in their own backyard, we are all better off. I suppose we all respond to inspiring headlines of "breakthroughs" but it's the daily work that matters most."

–Mike Mecham,Tern Society Member, retired aviation writer, volunteer, and Point Blue supporter for over 28 years

By making a planned gift, you leave a powerful legacy that harnesses the power of science to maximize nature's benefits for wildlife and people. To learn more visit pointblue.plannedgiving.org or call (707) 781-2554.

Above: Chestnut-backed Chickadee. Photo by Christina Burnham. Below: Volunteers Steve Virshup, Becky Dahlstrom, Mike Mecham, Gary Jones, and Save the Bay staff Jill Albertson, at the Novato Baylands. Photo by Alycia Matz. Cover: Bob Stewart, one of our first avian ecologists, shows a group around a bird study area above our Palomarin Field Station in 1972. Photo by Nick Story.

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