Fall 2026

Point Blue Connector

Conservation science for a healthy planet.



THE GLOBAL HORIZON:

Connecting Science, People, and Wildlife Across Borders in an Unprecedented Era

A NOTE FROM THE CEO

Globally Connected Conservation Science Rooted in Local Knowledge

This summer I visited three long-term Point Blue programs whose achievements are transforming conservation in California while producing learnings that apply across the globe. In the Sierra, I learned the critical role meadows play in sequestering carbon, keeping California's water clean, and providing habitat for common and endangered species. The team is working to restore 30,000 acres of meadow by 2030, contributing to California's ambitious conservation strategy. Farther south, I visited sand dune restoration efforts and saw the steps taken to protect the endangered California Least Tern and Western Snowy Plover at Vandenberg Space Force Base. For the second year, plovers have exceeded the species recovery target for California, totaling 3,018 breeding adults. On a trip to the Farallones, the cacophony of seabirds spoke to the recovery of this once nearly decimated colony, where today half a million birds breed safely due to human stewardship and study. In each example, our successes can be applied globally, which you'll read more about in this issue.

I am truly lucky to have visited the dedicated, passionate staff who spend their days, early mornings, and sometimes nights working to understand, protect, and steward California's incredible wildlife populations and unique habitats. The staff I encountered embody everything Point Blue stands for—advancing our mission, making the world a better place, and bringing together people from agencies, local communities, schools, tribes, farms, and fisheries. After reading these stories, I hope you'll come away with a better understanding of how we're using Point Blue's success to support conservation efforts globally. Looking ahead, we are leaning into Connected Conservation—building partnerships with a wider variety of people interested in protecting humanity and nature from the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and social injustice.

In sincere gratitude,

Melissa Pitkin
Chief Executive Officer



Stepping Into the Matrix—Connected Conservation in a Changing Climate

In Point Blue's 60 years, one of the greatest challenges we've ever faced is how to advance our conservation work in the face of a changing climate. One bold vision came from the international community calling for us to imagine a world where half of the earth's surface is protected and managed for biodiversity, which would create resilience in the face of the rapid change our ecosystems are facing.

In many ways, this vision is audacious. Yet more and more evidence indicates that it is not only achievable, but vital in the efforts to protect our air, water, food supply, climate, wildlife, and ecosystems. Intact natural areas such as forests and wetlands support wildlife diversity while serving as carbon sequestration hotspots and buffering the impacts of climate change. They also provide ecosystem services like clean water and flood protection while healthy oceans sustain fisheries that feed millions of people.

A stepping stone along the way to protecting half of our planet is called 30x30, a global target to conserve 30% of the planet's land and coastal waters by 2030. A key component of this target is ensuring the long-term health and vibrance of land-based ecosystems and coastal waters through active management.

At Point Blue, we've cut our teeth guiding the designation of protected areas with several significant projects. We developed models (see Models article, page 6) that helped us envision how sea level rise would impact tidal marsh habitat and bird communities in the San Francisco Bay. This effort established the urgency of the matter, helping unlock millions in funding for science-based restoration efforts across the Bay. We developed bird community models that have been used to guide the expansion of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument. And our collaborative work with international partners in Antarctica helped lead to the establishment of the world's largest high seas marine protected area in the Ross Sea.

Acknowledgement for this issue

The Point Blue Connector is a Collaborative Effort. This issue's team was:
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While identifying and prioritizing where protections matter the most is an important tool, we've long recognized that conservation needs to go beyond just protected areas. Effective conservation needs to include projects like our Partner Biologist Program, which works with local communities to enhance conservation practices on agricultural lands, and BirdReturns, which works with landowners to create flooded habitat for shorebirds. These have shown that spaces outside of protected areas can be just as important for biodiversity. Collaborative conservation connecting people, land, and communities across large scales is a critical component in our toolbox and overall strategy. The 30x30 framework is now giving these ideas a global stage.

"30x30 is exciting because it is an umbrella under which we are really starting to see momentum in public policy towards something Point Blue has long cared deeply about—conserving biodiversity," says Dr. Liz Chamberlin, our Director of Innovation.

"This is an opportunity for us to contribute to the conversation for how this is achieved at national and international scales."

Point Blue sits on the steering committee of the California Global Biodiversity Alliance, a coalition engaging directly with the global biodiversity policy discussions. Within California we are focused on turning that global vision into local action. We advocated for going beyond acres conserved to include restoration and stewardship, which enhance the conservation value of protected, natural, and working lands and support cultural resources. These actions also improve outdoor access, strengthen communities, connect habitats, and broaden participation in conservation, making them vital to California's strategy. This is truly connected conservation.

"Connecting people and nature is important," says Dr. Sam Veloz, our Director of Ecoinformatics and Climate Solutions, who sits on the California Biodiversity Network steering committee. "A lot of people care deeply about biodiversity, and they can do things on their land that contribute to conservation efforts such as improving soil conditions and reconnecting our fragmented landscapes."

With support from California's 30x30 general funds, our Roots program has undertaken this process in earnest, enabling over one hundred habitat restoration projects outside the boundaries of protected areas and within farms, vineyards, ranches, community gardens, and schools across 38 different counties. Most of these projects are supporting historically underserved land managers and half are supporting managers who have never received state or federal conservation funding before.

As we look ahead, the exciting new partnerships being formed through the Roots and other programs are the kinds of collaborative conservation efforts that contribute to our key goals, and the kind 30x30 will need to tackle one of the greatest challenges we've ever faced.





Left: 30x30 Ambassador Group Training in March 2026 in Sacramento, which Point Blue participated in. Photo Courtesy of CNRA (California Natural Resources Agency). Right: Sheep tag wool being used as mulch around a newly planted Bolander's phacelia in a pollinator hedgerow at a Roots project site in Humboldt County, California. Photo by Alissa Fogg.

Global Lessons From Local Birds

Birds taught us the importance of connection. Deep in West Marin, at the southernmost end of the Point Reyes National Seashore, lies the Palomarin Field Station. Over the last several decades, young Point Blue biologists have spent part of their year carefully searching through poison oak thickets to study the ecology of the Wrentit, a small scruffy brown songbird



Wrentit at Sobrante Ridge Regional Preserve, Richmond, California. Photo by Becky Matsubara.

living throughout coastal California. With their petite wings and seeming aversion to flight, Wrentits have one of the shortest dispersal distances in the avian world, moving an average of less than 400 meters from where they are born to where they establish their own nest. Even with such a limited home range, Wrentits showed us that the intactness of the landscapes surrounding them is just as important—if the regional coastal scrub becomes fragmented, their numbers decline.

Just over the hill from Palomarin sits the Bolinas Lagoon, a ~1200 acre, wildly scenic estuary nestled along a rift formed by the San Andreas Fault. In the early 1970s, Point Blue biologists pioneered long-term comprehensive surveys of the shorebirds moving into and out of the lagoon. One of these shorebirds, the Dunlin, is characterized by a long silky black bill and feathers touched with rich delicate hues of gray and brown. Unlike the Wrentit, Dunlin follow shifting tides and the ebb and flow of water across vast landscapes. Dunlin showed us that birds can even respond to habitat hundreds of miles away—if the availability of flooded rice fields in the Central Valley increased, their presence along the coast decreased.

Surprisingly, these two species, so different ecologically speaking, have taught Point Blue scientists the same lesson—that making connections at regional, county, state, and even global scales is necessary to have meaningful conservation impacts. This lesson continues to resonate today and is more urgent than ever. We've taken it to heart and it has guided our growth and journey as an organization for the last 60 years.

For Point Blue, this journey started in the field with diligent observations and thoughtful questions. If the data showed us that nearby factors like the amount of mudflat or local rainfall did not explain changing bird numbers, our eyes began to look further for answers. "While we began at the Bolinas Lagoon learning about the shorebirds there, we soon realized we also needed to know what was happening in the San Francisco Bay, then in California's Central Valley, then along the West Coast, then the entire Pacific Flyway," reflects Catherine Hickey, Director of our Pacific Coast and Central Valley Group.



Dunlin at Mclaughlin Eastshore State Park, Emeryville, Alameda County, California. Photo by Becky Matsubara.

The lesson of connection grew and we began to understand that to more clearly see changes across these larger extents, the data had to be easily comparable. So we refined how we recorded our observations and began to set repeatable protocols for how this should be done. We developed



Point Blue Staff and Partners from FUNDAECO at COP16. Left to right Marco Vinicio Cerezo Blandón, Diana Eusse, Ingrid Arias, Dr. Matt Reiter. Point Blue photo.

survey methods and published monitoring plans that became the standard for other organizations across the United States. And we hosted workshops to teach these methods and techniques.

While we knew the value of the data being collected, we also began to see that, by sharing it, its value and our conservation insights would rapidly increase. So in the early 2000s, we helped launch the Avian Knowledge Network (AKN) with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, making bird-monitoring data available online to anyone with an internet connection.

At the time, this was a revolution in ecology, expanding our ability to understand and address what was driving the health of our ecosystems. Our California node, the California Avian Data Center, was among the first nodes of the AKN, and it demonstrated how partners across other states and into Mexico and Canada could join the same network. Today, the Avian Knowledge Network has grown into a massive collection of millions of bird observations contributed by partners across the Western Hemisphere.

"The development of the Avian Knowledge Network was a key stepping stone to providing a biodiversity data infrastructure

that could be used to connect conservation efforts from a diversity of agencies and institutions at local to global scales," says Dr. Sam Veloz, Director of EcoInformatics and Climate Solutions.

This expansion point in our journey instilled in us the idea that working in collaboration with others was an essential aspect of our conservation work. It clarified that partnerships are what allow the tools in our conservation toolbox to work more effectively.



A staff member from Prescott College's Kino Bay Center shares a new bird community interpretive sign which was funded by MSP+. Photo by Ulises Rancaño.

"In nature, diversity leads to resilience. This is the same for the human network we've built," says Dr. Matt Reiter, Research Director in our Pacific Coast and Central Valley Group. "Having diverse perspectives leads to better and more lasting solutions."

That human network has grown over time and it's gone well beyond data. For shorebirds, we connected with the Central Valley Joint Venture, an alliance that focused on waterfowl conservation, and led efforts to also have them prioritize shorebirds and use scientifically informed conservation targets to guide their objectives. This led to thinking at the national scale and we were one of the original signatories of Partners in Flight, a network of over a hundred organizations working towards bird and habitat conservation in the Americas. Today, this is culminating in the Migratory Shorebird Project and associated MSP+ Science to Action grants program led by Catherine, Matt, and Colombia-based Diana Eusse. These efforts have brought people together from Alaska to Chile working to improve local conservation actions that contribute to and are informed by global scale datasets and mutual values.

"There's this passion for ensuring that we're really pushing this information for conservation, but what gets me really excited is this human community that has been developed," continues Matt. "Seeing that community grow, and seeing the next generation coming in to share local perspectives and helping find common solutions is powerful."

The Migratory Shorebird Project serves as an example for how Point Blue and our current strategic direction has evolved to address the urgent conservation and human issues today. This approach has expanded across all areas of our work, from oceans to meadows to working landscapes, and more recently to the world stage.

Dr. Liz Chamberlin, Point Blue's Director of Innovation, sits on the steering committee of the California Global Biodiversity Alliance (CalGBA), a coalition of state, tribal, academic, and community organizations. Through active participation in the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, CalGBA is allowing us to connect with legislators and delegates from other countries who are driving global policies that will protect biodiversity and human communities from the impacts of climate change. "We have power to help drive the conversation," says Liz. "Point Blue is a bridge builder and networker—we do hyper local work but also work at state, federal, and global levels. Because of our unique positioning, we can bridge gaps in understanding and connect decision makers with conservation efforts happening on the ground."



A community member explains the grassroots environmental actions she's helping to lead at Laguna La Cruz, Sonora, Mexico, part of the network of on the ground actions happening throughout the MSP network. Photo by Ulises Rancaño.

Today, as we look back at our history, we can clearly see how the scale of our impact has grown as we connected across multiple spheres. This is what the birds, from the reclusive Wrentit to the nomadic Dunlin, have taught us so well. And we can't help but be optimistic about what we can continue to learn and do together in the future.





Above: **Partners within MSP+ Science to Action from Mexico, the Comcaac Nation, and Colombia gathered at Prescott College's Kino Bay Center in Sonora, Mexico. Photo by Ulises Rancaño.** ***Right:*** **Point Blue Director of Innovation, Dr. Liz Chamberlin, and former Point Blue Conservation Policy Intern, Kaden Nguyen, at COP16 in Cali, Colombia. Point Blue photo.**

Meadow Dreams—How Models Help Make Sense of the World



Dr. Cody Reed examines a Sierra meadow soil core sample. Photo by Lishka Arata.

Dr. Cody Reed thinks a lot about meadows. And when we say that we don't mean conjuring images of lush vivid green fields full of bountiful wildflowers as birds sing amongst the shadowy edges. When we say she thinks about meadows, we mean she's thinking about how different plants are using water and sunlight to create organic matter and store carbon. She thinks about how microbial communities are decomposing plant matter and releasing carbon into the atmosphere. She thinks about how climate affects these processes. And she dreams of being able to quantify all of these components over time for every meadow across the entire Sierra Nevada mountain range. To this, some might say she's imagining an impossible task. However, Cody, Point Blue's Senior Meadow Ecologist, has a powerful tool that can help her dreams become reality—models.

But before we dive into what a model is, let's take a step back to understand why meadows are so important. Through our 30 years studying birds and forest management in the Sierra, we came to appreciate how vibrant and full of life meadows can be. Our monitoring revealed the rich diversity of wildlife and vegetation they held and how birds rely on them to refuel and fatten up before their long migration. Meadows can also store tremendous amounts of carbon, keeping it out of the atmosphere. This carbon stored in the soil allows meadows to soak up water like a sponge, releasing it slowly over time as the summer progresses, buffering the effects of drought and keeping streams flowing. These amazing aspects of meadows make them very attractive places for heavy human use, and over time, 50-70% of them have unfortunately become degraded or have been lost.

As we continue the hard work of restoring and protecting these places, this is where models come back into the picture. At their core, models are about using data to understand ecological processes and relationships. Built on equations or correlations that describe how components (oxygen, carbon, microbes, water, etc.) interact, models help us develop, explore, and validate ideas about how ecological systems function. The results can then be tested and applied to other meadows. Because carbon sequestration is tied to ecosystem function in meadows, these predictions help us understand the condition of individual meadows to identify which ones need the most help or which ones have the greatest conservation value. As different restoration techniques are applied, this model will let us track their success over time and guide how future restoration is done. And as the climate changes, models can help us predict and prepare for how meadows might respond across the landscape.

Because models need data, partnerships are a crucial part of building them. Our connections with universities, restoration practitioners, government agencies, and local organizations allow us to collaborate and gather that data. We in turn share the model results with other researchers and land managers, who can use them to improve conservation outcomes in meadows both within and far beyond the Sierra Nevada.

Just as Cody thinks a lot about meadows and carbon, we have other modelers who think a lot about forest fires, sea level rise and tidal marsh, sandy beaches and plovers, sea ice and penguins, riparian waterways, and sea-surface temperature and seabirds, to name a few. Like Cody, each of them dreams of scaling their models across entire regions and spanning borders, working with partners to understand and protect species and habitats at a landscape level. Models help us make sense of the world and turn that understanding into action.



Dr. Cody Reed surveying a Sierra meadow. Photo by Lishka Arata.

The Heartbeat of Ocean Conservation



Weddell seal in Antarctica. Photo by Dennis Jongsomjit.

The ocean is a living, breathing reminder that all things on the planet are connected. Ocean currents move massive amounts of water around the continents, bringing along nutrients while transferring heat. These forces shape and sustain food webs, drive weather patterns, and regulate Earth's climate.

At the heart of global ocean circulation lies Antarctica and the Circumpolar Current surrounding it. It is the only current that wraps around the earth uninterrupted and touches all the major ocean basins. This connectivity is emblematic of what it takes to study and protect the open ocean, requiring cooperation across a system that has no borders.

Nearly 20 years ago, Point Blue learned that principle when discussions started to make global headlines about creating the world's largest international marine protected area (MPA) in the Ross Sea of Antarctica. The idea of creating this MPA got everyone's attention since ocean protections at that scale had not been previously attempted. "We all had to put together not only the scientific justification for what to protect, but also a compelling vision for why it mattered. What would this place look like in 50 or 100 years if we got the protections right, and what would we lose if we did nothing?" states Dr. Grant Ballard, our Chief Science Officer, who's been making trips to Antarctica since 1996.



Dennis Jongsomjit holding an abandoned Emperor Penguin egg. Photo by Annie Schmidt.

Eventually, that vision, along with decades of work by numerous partners across the world, led to the establishment of the Ross Sea Region Marine Protected Area in 2017. The MPA helps preserve one of the most pristine and productive oceans on the planet—an ocean that is directly linked to physical processes that help drive global ocean circulation. The seasonal freezing and melting of waters along Antarctica's coast can be thought of as the heartbeat of this system, pushing vast amounts of cold salty water deep to the ocean bottom while warmer water moves in to replace it. The Ross Sea is a significant contributor to this life-sustaining pump.



Where the ocean meets the land at Cape Crozier, Antarctica. Photo by Dennis Jongsomjit.

Now, as we approach the 10-year anniversary of the MPA, it is set to undergo a formal review to evaluate its effectiveness. Taking the three decades of experience we've built working in Antarctica, Point Blue is now helping to lead a charge for the Ross Sea MPA to be a model for how international science, data, and policy can help protect our shared oceans.



Adélie Penguin colony at Cape Royds, Antarctica.Photo by Dennis Jongsomjit.

Through a formally established Research Coordination Network, which Point Blue helps lead, dozens of scientific efforts underway to study and monitor the Ross Sea are being brought together and leveraged to engage partners and ultimately inform policies that will protect the region.

In 1959, the Antarctic Treaty established the entire continent as a place for "peaceful purposes only," promoting scientific investigation and cooperation. Today, 58 countries are signatories to that treaty. As an inspiration that can extend to our interconnected oceans, "The Antarctic Treaty is one of the most durable examples of international scientific cooperation, and it shows the role that science can play in bringing nations together even when they are at odds elsewhere," continues Grant. "We now get to help shape how that work unfolds over the coming decades."



Antarctic biologists recording data in the field. (L to R: Megan Elrod, Suzanne Winquist, Dr. Annie Schmidt) Photo by Dr. Annie Schmidt.

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Lessons from COP17: From Global Decisions to California Action

Join us on December 3, 2026, 12-1pm Pacific, for a lunchtime webinar covering what happened at the UN Biodiversity Convention in Yerevan, Armenia, the outcomes that matter for implementation, and the insights brought home to inform Point Blue's work.

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"I am impressed by the relationships Point Blue has forged with the communities where it operates, building on our common interest in the welfare of the wildlife, habitat, and nature that we all appreciate and love. The Point Blue community is far-reaching!"

- Bruce De Benedictis, Generational Donor and Tern Society Member.



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Cover photo: MSP+ Science to Action partners from Mexico, the Comcaac Nation, and Colombia gathered in Kino Bay, Sonora, Mexico in 2026, hosted by Prescott College's Kino Bay Center. Photo by Andres Galindo.
Above: Bruce De Benedictis at Point Blue's 60th Anniversary Celebration. Photo by Kaare Iverson, kaareiverson.com.