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Point Blue Quarterly

Conservation science for a healthy planet.

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TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION





Ellie M. Cohen

PRESIDENT AND CEO OF POINT
BLUE CONSERVATION SCIENCE

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Left: Ellie M. Cohen. Photo by: Miki Goralsky.

SHAPING OUR FUTURE

Formative Internships

In 1975, just after my freshman year as a botany major, I was lucky to land an internship at the Baltimore City Department of Public Works with their lead forester. I helped to monitor forested watershed lands throughout the surrounding county that provided drinking water for the city.

My first week on the job, we marked trees for mechanical thinning. What a great time I had walking through the woods, seeing and hearing scores of birds while learning from my mentor. Back in the office each evening, I filled out reports and enjoyed the sense that I was contributing to habitat conservation. On the morning of my third day, I woke up with an itchy rash all over my face, neck, arms and hands. My eyes were practically swollen shut.

Unlike the interns at Point Blue's Palomarin Field Station, I did not have any formal plant and bird identification training. Nor did I have access to special products for washing poison ivy (as our interns do for poison oak)! My first couple of weeks were marked by colleagues kindly chiding me for not knowing what I was doing.

My later field-work position brought me to California, studying *Euphydryas editha*, the Edith's checkerspot butterfly. I traveled all over the state, camped out under the stars – and kept my distance from poison oak and anything like it! This was another great learning experience that opened my eyes to California's natural beauty and diversity. Decades later, my beloved Edith's checkerspot sadly became a key indicator species for climate change and habitat loss.



These two internships were foundational for me as I pursued my interests in the environment and public policy. The experiences all built on my childhood passion for nature and the interconnectedness of life. While I was never lucky enough to be an intern at the Palomarin or Farallon Island Field Station (although I still have that goal in mind!), I am proud that today our interns are at the core of Point Blue's strategic priorities. Training the next generation of climate-smart conservation science leaders – as this Quarterly highlights – will shape the rest of their lives, as well as ours. Enjoy! 🌍

Above: Edith's checkerspot butterfly.
Photo by: Bob Danley / Creative Commons.

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Releasing banded guillemots on Southeast Farallon Island, biologist Russ Bradley instructs intern Amy Blake. **Photo by:** Annie Schmidt.

◀ **Left:** Common Murres. **Point Blue photo.**

Center: Lessons in bird conservation. **Photo by** Alison Quoyeser.

Right: Mike Lynes. **Photo by** Audubon California.

Formula for a Conservationist

I consider myself lucky. From my earliest childhood experiences through graduate-level education, my career journey has been filled with all the variables for producing a conservationist.

Here's how this winning equation reads:

mentorship + connection to nature
+ experiential science learning +
passionate teachers + internships
and volunteerism = dedicated
conservationist

It's this very formula that Point Blue's education and training programs apply as we change the lives of the thousands

of young people we reach every year. Each one of these variables is key to our effectiveness in educating the next generation of conservation leaders.

My personal journey serves as an excellent case study. It began when I was young, on our family property in Healdsburg, California. A ranch of sorts, it had some animals, orchards, and plenty of wildness and wildlife. My grandmother, born on that land, taught me about the natural world – including colloquial names for just about every living thing I noticed.

We spent most days outside – for farm work and also because we loved it. I learned about mighty redwoods, flowering dogwoods, salamanders, red-headed canaries (aka Western Tanagers), wildflowers, and more. With nothing to fear, I explored forests, hilltop orchards, and the creek. Being outdoors was simply what we did on the ranch: it was where we got our food and also our inspiration.

Certainly this sort of experience it is not unique. Like most of us associated with Point Blue, you probably have a similar story of how your passion for nature originated – in a beloved landscape, and likely in the presence of a mentor.



I carried my love of nature and curiosity into elementary school. My public school in Sacramento had adopted an “open structure” philosophy, emphasizing project-based learning and parent involvement. We took many field trips and learned from all kinds of teachers, from park rangers to scientists. In third grade, I hiked the coastal scrub hillsides of Marin Headlands and dug for sand crabs at the beach. In fourth grade, I sat in a Yosemite meadow, writing, reflecting, and sketching. I stood night watch on a historic ship docked at the Hyde

Street Pier in San Francisco, listening to the sounds of San Francisco Bay.

Along the way I visited the Palomarin Field Station and watched bird banding, taught by a very young and enthusiastic biologist, Geoff Geupel (now Director of Emerging Programs and Partnerships at Point Blue).

Each of these experiences outside the classroom taught me new skills in problem solving, observation, and investigation. In high school, I had dedicated biology teachers who made science standards come to life through experimentation, independent studies, and the after-school Wilderness Club (which culminated in a hike to the top of Half Dome).

After graduating from U.C. Davis in the Wildlife and Conservation Biology Program, I became an intern for Point Blue (Point Reyes Bird Observatory). My role was to help study songbirds, working with our partners in the Central Valley at the Cosumnes River Preserve. This is one of the few remaining undammed river systems of the Sierra Nevada, with 85 acres of old-growth riparian forest.

As I learned how to live in a remote location, my Point Blue training began in

Melissa Pitkin
Director, Education and
Outreach Group

Melissa leads Point Blue's efforts to educate and connect people of all ages to science and conservation.



earnest. I was immersed in point counts, bird banding, data entry, and vegetation measures – methods for the study of birds and their habitats. Lessons from my college ornithology class (bird identification, calls and songs, natural history) were immediately put into practice, my skills greatly improved and made relevant to effective conservation science.

The Point Blue biologists who taught me were devoted and thorough, and in just four months I received field biology training no college coursework could ever match.

The sum of these experiences, and many more, led me to become Point Blue's Education and Outreach Director. With a strong team dedicated to “giving the gift forward,” I now hold a leadership role in implementing one of our new priority initiatives: training the next generation of climate-smart conservation leaders.

Education has always been fundamental to our work, which now spans almost five decades, but our new strategic plan elevates it. The reason? We aim to generate a community of conservation professionals who are equipped and motivated to help conserve our planet – especially in the face of accelerating environmental change.

Right: Project-based learning. As a fourth-grader, Melissa Pitkin (in back, wearing pink shirt) learned on many field trips, including to the Sierra Nevada. **Photo:** courtesy Bonnie Pitkin.

Below: Internships, mentors, dedicated teachers, access. STRAW interns Lizzy Eichorn (kneeling), Jennifer Benson and Lara White (standing, at left) teach participating students a restoration technique. **Point Blue photo.**



As you read the stories in the following pages, you'll see examples of how our education and training programs are bringing the Point Blue formula to as many people as possible. We work through experiential learning for students, teachers, interns, and volunteers; through birding and nature experiences that get people outdoors; and through mentoring by passionate teachers, as our scientists engage with students of all ages.

At present, there's much more to our equation: we are expanding our innovative work through the following:

1. Training the trainers: placing greater focus on school teachers and intern mentors among our own staff.

2. Updating curricula: addressing the new science standards in public schools (Common Core and the Next Generation Science Standards) and incorporating the principles and practice of climate-smart conservation science for both our school and intern training programs.

3. Linking internships across Point Blue: optimizing the exceptional opportunity we have to connect across the organization, from the skills learned at Palomarin to those used in Antarctica, and from landbird monitoring and public outreach to informatics and data analysis.

4. Accessibility: ensuring that our programs are useful to a wide range of diverse communities; reaching out to urban and rural populations with limited

exposure to science careers; and reaching across borders to keep international learning exchange a possibility.

Working with the team of scientists and educators at Point Blue to take our training programs to the next level is both exciting and fulfilling. The prospect of inviting young people from many walks of life to join me on the path I've followed is the ultimate career reward!

Continue turning the pages of this issue to meet some allies in this journey:

- Renée Cormier, former Palomarin intern and now one of Point Blue's inspiring intern trainers and mentors.
- Anna Strunkel, a recent Point Blue intern on the Farallon Islands, now continuing her career path in conservation and science illustration.
- Alison Quoyeser, a teacher in our STRAW program (Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed) and founder of an international bird education program.
- Former intern Mike Lynes, now Policy Director for Audubon California.
- And visit what's certainly our most distant study site where we involve interns: Cape Crozier, Antarctica!

If you are inspired, as I am, by what you read here, I'd love to hear from you at mpitkin@pointblue.org. We welcome your involvement and your help in strengthening Point Blue's formula for training the next generation of climate-smart conservation leaders! 🌍



MEET THE TEAM

Each Point Blue Quarterly spotlights a member of our team.

Renée Cormier – Avian Ecologist and Palomarin Field Station Intern Supervisor

How do you tell friends what your job entails?

It includes both science and education (which makes my work endlessly stimulating!). As an ecologist I oversee Point Blue's work with Northern Spotted Owls in Marin County. I also work with various aspects of the long-term data collected at the Palomarin Field Station (fondly known as Palo) – including using geo-locator technology to determine where migratory birds go.

As Intern Supervisor, I'm part of a staff team that trains our interns at Palo. Usually these are recent college graduates, and we teach them all aspects of our data collection and management – from safely handling a bird to accurately determining details of its life. The data our interns collect adds to the knowledge that Point Blue has been building for decades, documenting birds' responses to our changing environment.

What was your pathway into this role?

After I finished my undergraduate degree, having become very interested in birds and in conservation, I searched for opportunities to learn mist-netting and banding. But most openings I found required previous experience. Eventually, Point Blue offered me an internship at

Palomarin, where I was able to learn the skills of bird banding. That prepared me to work as a field biologist on Point Blue projects, mostly in the Central Valley. In 2006 I returned to Palo to begin supervising interns – to offer other young scientists the same opportunity I had experienced.

What do you find especially rewarding about your work training interns here?

Every few months, a new crew of interns arrives at Palomarin, bringing fresh enthusiasm that's contagious for all the staff who work at the field station.

Recently, I attended a major ornithological conference where nearly 1,000 researchers presented. A number of former Palo interns were in attendance, with most of them presenting their own research from masters or PhD programs! They're our future conservation science leaders.

In eight years, I now have trained more than 80 interns from 12 countries!

As Point Blue continues addressing climate change, what's new about the ways we train interns?



Above: In the Palomarin Field Station, Renée Cormier (left) shows intern Lara White some details about the plumage of a Swainson's Thrush. **Photo by:** Dan Lipp.

We're building on the traditional high standards at Point Blue for teaching field methods to interns. Each crew of Palo interns participates in scientific paper discussions to understand how their daily data collection fits into the bigger picture of conservation.

Now we're working with formal statements of what we want each intern to learn. The outcomes emphasize climate-smart conservation and other key concepts in conservation science. Every intern completes a "capstone" project: she or he works with a Point Blue staff person as mentor and completes a final project that demonstrates a synthesis of knowledge gained.

Your reflections on this program?

I find it truly encouraging to see how much our interns learn during their training at Point Blue and the Palomarin Field Station – and where they go afterwards. With this next generation of "great humans" (as Rich Stallcup always called our interns) leading the way in conservation, I believe we're in good hands. 🌍

Anna Strunkel

Recent Point Blue intern

Not only is Anna (pictured below left, holding a Cassin's Auklet) training as a conservation scientist: she is also a gifted biological illustrator and gave our Farallon biologists this Brandt's Cormorant drawing.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A POINT BLUE INTERN

Murre Morning

As an intern on Southeast Farallon Island for two months during the 2014 seabird breeding season, one of my first experiences was an unforgettable introduction to seabird life. I was living on the island for weeks at a time to hone my skills as a field biologist while working – hard! – on Point Blue's long-term monitoring and research program.

On a windy morning in mid-March, biologist Russ Bradley guided me and another intern to Shubrick Point. Above this point on the steep northern shore of the island, the Murre Blind overlooks a subcolony of about 15,000 Common Murres.

Russ led the way up the trail to the blind. In reality, this is less a trail and more a clamber up a cliff, but Russ carefully showed us the best path to follow. When we reached the top, I soon realized that the journey was very worth the climb despite my fear of heights.

We crossed the "troll bridge" (some planks of sturdy wood secured across a gap in the rocks) and squeezed into the blind. When Russ opened the front

windows, I was astounded by the scene below us. A sea of black-and-white covered the rocks, and a chorus of murre trills wafted up to our ears.

Words and images cannot do justice to the actual sight and sound of a murre colony. That was a moment when I felt totally dwarfed by, and awed by, the power of nature. It was a reminder of why I seek out experiences like this one – from a deep respect for these animals and the aspiration to learn about and help protect them.

On the island, I learned to study a variety of subjects, which encouraged me to consider how to ask different research questions. Although the internship focuses on seabirds, interns assist in studies ranging from salamander surveys to whale watches.

This is an amazing way to gain experience in new areas of conservation science. Each intern is assigned to several projects on a schedule, so I was responsible for monitoring certain colonies of murres, cormorants, and gulls. This involved re-sighting and checking each nest in the colony for eggs almost daily. We also monitored auklet nest boxes, completed predation surveys, and captured and banded several seabird species.

The research carried out on Southeast Farallon Island is essential to learn about and conserve breeding seabirds. This island has a sad history of exploitation. During the 1800s, murres were nearly wiped out from the island because of egg collectors trying to meet the demand for eggs in the bustling Bay Area. Feral cats and rabbits were introduced and ran rampant, causing seabirds to fail in their nesting attempts. People hunted seabirds and seals for their meat, and overfishing impacted the food for Farallon wildlife.

Since the Farallones were designated as a National Wildlife Refuge, in 1969, wildlife has begun to recover. The Farallon murre population has grown to about 250,000 birds, and species that once abandoned the island have returned to breed again.

Today, the threats to Farallon wildlife are different. Changes in ocean temperatures and chemistry may have drastic effects on krill, fish, and other seabird prey. It is essential to understand these effects through monitoring Farallon seabird populations. Point Blue and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have unparalleled datasets on these trends over the long term.

On my last day on the island, I climbed up to Murre Blind for a final view of the



Above: View from the murre blind during peak seabird breeding season on Southeast Farallon Island. **Photo by** Anna Strunkel.

colony. As I watched and marveled at these thousands of birds, now incubating large, beautifully patterned eggs, I felt lucky to be a part of this research. On the first day atop Shubrick Point, I had been in awe of the murres but now could feel an even greater sense of appreciation. Through studying them, I had come to understand a part of their lives.

The variety of experiences I gained at Point Blue helped me prepare for graduate research and refine my career plans. After completing a master's degree, I hope to work for a non-profit organization or for the National Park Service as a wildlife biologist and educator. 🌍

The support of Point Blue members and friends is essential for maintaining our field stations and continuing the long-term work they make possible. To learn how you can help, please contact Nancy Gamble at ngamble@pointblue.org or 707-781-2554. Thank you!

Interns conduct most of the data collection for our long-term studies on the Farallon National Wildlife. We provide extensive training and a unique opportunity for these young biologists to gain valuable skills. Their efforts – in Anna's case, tracking how seabirds survive and how successfully they reproduce – are essential to our understanding of climate-change effects on these long-lived animals. Farallon data enable us to assess the responses of top marine predators to changes in ocean circulation, which drives marine food webs. Understanding how these seabirds are affected by recent environmental conditions, in the context of their responses in decades past, helps guide management and conservation into the future. – Russ Bradley, Farallon Program Leader



Classroom Earth

When you love both children and the natural world, the motivation is strong to teach children to care for the environment. This motive can lead a San Francisco Bay Area teacher into very fertile territory, thanks to Point Blue's STRAW Project – Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed.

Twenty-seven years ago, I decided to change careers from architecture to teaching elementary school. I brought with me a lifelong passion for the natural world. For six years I taught second-graders about the Amazon rainforest.

My students performed rainforest plays and read like fiends in read-a-thons to “adopt” acres of the Amazon.

Along the way, I learned that children might gain as much or more by studying their own environment and protecting local species – even ones that were not cute and fuzzy. My niece, as a fourth-grader, had developed enormous enthusiasm for an invertebrate in a stream near her school. Her teacher, Laurette Rogers, had formed the California Freshwater Shrimp Club to give the children hands-on experience in conservation.

I wanted to do something like that!

After I began teaching fourth grade, in Marin County, California, a colleague and I met with naturalist Meryl Sundove, now one of the consulting teachers who comprise the STRAW Faculty. We decided to have our classes adopt the steelhead trout, and soon our students were raising fingerling fish from “eyed eggs.” Even-

Above: Fourth-graders in Alison Quoyeser's classroom learn to appreciate entire ecosystems.

Facing page: STRAW restoration day is the most memorable day of the year for most students.

Photos: courtesy Alison Quoyeser

POINT BLUE'S STRAW PROJECT •

TEACHING YOUNG CONSERVATIONISTS- IN-TRAINING



Alison Quoyeser
Fourth-grade teacher in Marin
County, California.

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As a long-time member of Point Blue's STRAW Program, Alison is inspired and effective as a mentor of the next generation.

tually I met Laurette Rogers, STRAW's founder and my role model for project-based learning.

Ever since 1994, just the second year of STRAW, I have been an avid participant. My fourth-graders always participate in a restoration day, one of their most memorable experiences in what I call "a watershed year."

Teachers who are active in STRAW have memorable experiences every year, too. One is Watershed Week, a mid-summer immersion program that sustains me and inspires me. Over the years I have learned about water and watersheds, soils, Native Americans' relationship with the land, climate change, effective restoration, and more.

We also learn creative ways to bring such information to life in our classrooms. To my students' delight, STRAW Faculty visit my classroom to lead lessons focused on bird identification, understanding bird adaptations for their environment, and other ornithology skills.

When Point Blue educators Melissa Pitkin and Missy Wipf first began attending Watershed Week, I became fascinated by the idea that restorations could help to bring back bird populations. I asked for their help teaching about birds and invited them to my classroom. My students and I also began participating in the Marin Audubon Society's Junior Birdwatching program, in which fourth-

graders must learn to identify and give one fact about each of 50 Marin County birds. Two years ago, 100% of my students passed the challenging test and became official Junior Birdwatchers.

Their parents marvel at these children's enthusiasm for birds and ability to point out and name the species they see. At least one of my former students now is studying to become an ornithologist. All leave fourth grade with a heightened sense of environmental stewardship.

Their stewardship now extends across political boundaries – tracing the lives of local birds that migrate. Seven years ago, when a close friend from my Spanish class moved to Mexico, the two of us decided to create a project linking classrooms in the Bay Area with ones in Jalisco, where Martina lives.

We christened our project Amigos Alados (Winged Friends) and with Point Blue's help chose 16 focal bird species that winter in Jalisco and migrate to California for the warmer months. Some are species, such as Swainson's Thrush, that Point Blue studies using new technology to document migration between Marin County and Jalisco!

Amigos Alados fosters pen-pal relationships and bird education for participating classes, hires ornithologists to teach the children in Mexico, and relies on Point Blue's STRAW Program to educate participating children here in California.

In myriad ways, including the arts, my students learn about ecology, pollution, protecting the environment, and the challenges of climate change. At the heart of what I do is my relationship to STRAW. Each morning I start class by lighting a candle and reading my fourth-graders a watershed poem, a practice I admire and have borrowed from Sandy Neuman, who is STRAW's Professional Development Manager.

I know my students are gaining a deep, personal appreciation of nature – and the motivation and ability to conserve this planet we call home. My relationship with STRAW and Point Blue staff, partners, and participating teachers assures me I am not alone. We are a community of people committed to teaching students to revere and protect the Earth. 🌍



STUDY SITES

Cape Crozier, Antarctica



Point Blue's most remote field station – 8,637 miles southwest of our Petaluma headquarters – is located at Cape Crozier, on Antarctica's Ross Sea. There, since 1996, we have examined the fine-tuned relationships between Adélie Penguins and their rapidly changing environment. We also have trained 22 interns in advanced field skills and methods for detecting climate change – at a base of operations that most people would find minimal, at best.

The United States Antarctic Program's hut at Crozier was put in its present location in 1974, after the U.S. Navy burned down the previous one. (Having lost a parked helicopter there, to damage from

a mighty gust of wind, the Navy apparently wanted to discourage further visits.) Though winds at Crozier are notorious, calm spells enable us to explore the wonders surrounding the hut: the large Adélie Penguin colony, a horizon half-filled with the blank white of the Ross Ice Shelf, and the other-worldly calls of Emperor Penguins and Weddell Seals echoing off the rocky slopes.

Many visiting scientists have reason to dislike the hut. Measuring just 16' x 8', the little shelter accommodates up to seven people, mostly for cooking and computer work. We sleep in tents nearby whenever weather conditions allow. Also, it is nearly a mile uphill from the penguins

that most of us are there to study. But, after a few days, most come to appreciate that separation from the colony, if only for the pristine condition of snow that supplies our drinking water. Also, we respect a structure that has endured 40 years of winds strong enough to embed gravel in the exterior walls.

The hut has been home to at least one new Point Blue intern each year. They receive instruction on the broad range of topics necessary to thrive in polar research – topics such as waste management, helicopter safety, and survival in extreme weather conditions.



Left: The U.S. Antarctic Program hut and “Scott tents” (note person, far right) after a summer snowstorm at Cape Crozier. **Photo by** Annie Schmidt / Point Blue

Below: The hut’s interior shelters up to seven people, especially for meals and data entry. **Photo by** Grant Ballard / Point Blue

Bottom: Fair weather does occur in the Antarctic summer, which is Point Blue’s field season for studies of Adélie Penguins in their breeding colonies. **Photo by** Megan Elrod / Point Blue



Interns also learn how to collect, manage, and analyze all the data that we gather about Adélie Penguins and their ecosystem. They gain first-hand experience with some of the Earth’s major climate-science yardsticks – sea ice, glacial ice, and polar winds.

In the past, we could see the Ross Ice Shelf from the hut’s window, but now it has retreated behind a hill. Unlike the shelf (which covers land), sea ice in the region is rapidly growing. This is likely due in part to the sea surface water freshening from the glacial melt. Windy days are increasingly common at Cape Crozier, due in part to warmer air temperatures.

While our interns do not witness such changes in a single field season at Crozier, they do become thoroughly familiar with the methods we employ to chart and interpret the phenomena. The invaluable skills they gain are helping prepare a new generation of scientists to tackle the challenges of climate change. 🌍



Grant Ballard, PhD
Chief Science Officer

Now in his 17th Antarctic field season, Grant is Point Blue’s Science Director and leads our Climate Change and Quantitative Ecology Group.



PARTNERSHIP

Audubon California – Mike Lynes



From our shared roots in the study and protection of birds, to our focus on using science to address today's conservation challenges, Point Blue and Audubon California have long been natural allies.

One invaluable link in this alliance comes in the person of Mike Lynes, now a leader at Audubon California. He recently assumed the post of statewide Director of Public Policy. Formerly he was Conservation Director, and then Executive Director, at Golden Gate Audubon Society.

Like many effective conservationists today, Mike was once a Point Blue intern, an experience that helped shape his career. Today Mike is charged with bringing the best available information to bear on California's most important conservation issues.

In his words: "At Audubon California, we're rethinking how we tackle bird conservation problems. Using new models, we aim to protect birds now and also ensure that places will exist where populations can be viable in 50 or 100 years."

In the Migratory Bird Conservation Partnership, Point Blue now partners with

both Audubon California and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to ensure that birds, farmers, and cities all have the resources they need to survive and thrive. This joint effort brings together the talents of all three organizations.

One of those talents is Mike's knowledge of the best pathways for influencing public policy to protect birds and the environment. His expertise stems from an academic background in both biology (undergraduate studies at U.C. Davis) and environmental law (degree from U.C. Hastings Law School). For five years he was an attorney representing environmental nonprofit organizations.

While his career is impressive and important, I believe that a key to Mike's strengths derives from his tenure at Point Blue. From 1995 through 2000 he was an intern and then a field biologist. He counted, banded, and located the nests of birds throughout the Central Valley, with special emphasis on the Cosumnes River Preserve. He played a lead role in writing the California Partners in Flight Oak Woodland Bird Conservation Plan

– a conservation guide that is influential to this day. At Point Blue, Mike became a conservation scientist.

"I was lucky enough to be at the Palomar Field Station when the landbird program was expanding, and I had the opportunity to stay on, acquire skills, and really build partnerships – including with other organizations such as TNC and Audubon. That collaborative work led me to see that conservation science and policy should be bridged. Today, I'm applying the scientific approach that I learned at Point Blue, along with skills in law and policy, to address conservation problems – including climate change."

We at Point Blue are looking forward to many more years of productive collaboration with Mike Lynes. 🌍



Tom Gardali

Director, Pacific Coast and Central Valley Group

Tom uses natural history, ecology, long-term studies, and diverse collaborations and partnerships to provide the scientific intelligence needed for effective conservation action.



news bites

SCIENCE PRESENTATIONS

Among the major conferences where Point Blue scientists, restorationists, and educators presented our results:

First California Adaptation Forum – Sacramento, August 2014. Ten Point Blue staff attended, leading forums focused on coasts, working lands, and catalyzing climate-smart conservation.

Ecological Society of America – Sacramento, August 2014. Our talks included: long-term, large-scale bird response to river restoration; modeling novel bird habitat relative to climate change; impacts on Farallon Ashy Storm-petrels; and rangeland benefits of prescribed grazing.

Joint meeting of ornithological associations,¹ Estes Park, Colorado, September 2014. Point Blue presentations included: quantifying ecosystem changes to guide riparian conservation; birds' long-term responses to river restoration in California's Central Valley; and designing restoration for riparian birds.

¹ American Ornithologists Union, Cooper Ornithological Society, and Society of Canadian Ornithologists.

NEW PHD LEADERSHIP

Two of our former interns / graduate students have returned to Point Blue as PhD biologists, to head important new conservation science projects.

Kristy Dybala is spearheading an update to the Central Valley Joint Venture (CVJV) Implementation Plan. For 25 years this broad public-private coalition has worked to provide for the habitat needs of migrating and resident birds. Riparian landbirds and wintering shorebirds are Kristy's focus. Using data collected by Point Blue and partners, and satellite images of the Central Valley, she will assess the birds' populations, how much habitat they have (including on flooded agricultural lands), and how much more they will need in order to survive into the future.

BIRD-A-THON

The 2014 Rich Stallcup Bird-A-Thon is on pace to exceed last year's total – in support of Point Blue's essential work. A record 45 counter teams took to the field this year, 20 teams on foot or by bicycle! Be part of the fun: visit pointblue.org.birdathon-support.



Above: On the ground as the lead biologist in of our Rangeland Monitoring Network, Libby Porzig gathers soil samples. **Photo by** Tom Gardali / Point Blue

Elizabeth (Libby) Porzig coordinates the Rangeland Monitoring Network, aimed at expanding knowledge of California rangelands and ranching practices. She is helping ranchers, researchers, and conservation partners gather data on birds, wildlife, and soil characteristics. The information gained can support conservation and enhancement of rangelands' ecological health for people and wildlife. This winter, Libby and partners are sampling soils from the coast to the Sierra Nevada.

NEW CFO!

We are thrilled to welcome Padmini Srinivasan as Point Blue's new Chief Financial Officer. With over 30 years of high-level financial management experience in both the non-profit and for-profit worlds, she also brings a passion for conservation. Welcome, Padmini!



focus

Merlins and Other Falcons

Suddenly the mudflat explodes, and shorebirds rocket into flight going every which way. Huge flocks of sandpipers are wheeling and winding, flashing white then dark. Willets, godwits, and curlews are screaming. Terns lose their graceful composure. Herons and egrets cock an eye to the sky, close their necks, and freeze. A scrub-jay in the border thicket goes still as stone.

An attack is in the works, and the target is known only to Merlin.

From somewhere, a 150-mile-per-hour bullet with claws is on the way, focused on a single soul amongst the chaos. Often the victim will be a sandpiper. Merlin easily catches the flock and cuts a wake through it, emerging, this time,

with a meal. The crease in the flocks rounds out.

A couple of feathers drift and rock slowly back to earth, and before they land Merlin is feasting two miles away, perched with its kill on an open Douglas-fir branch. Waders settle back to nervous feeding and quiet roost. Merlin will be back on the next low tide.

Merlins don't hover. There isn't time. Unlike kestrels, it isn't part of their style. The world of Merlin is quick and intense. In flight, kestrels often hover and flow around like overgrown swallows, but Merlins beat at the air like they are always late and trying to catch up.

Below: Merlin. Photo by: ©John Heidicker / VIREO.

Below left: Flocking Dunlin. Photo by: Jim Culp / Creative Commons.

Facing page: Marbled Godwit. Photo by: Tom Grey / tgreybirds.com.



"Series '74" Harley Davidson motorcycles had an option called the suicide clutch that did not engage gradually. You were either at idle, or ripping along: nothing in between. That, too, is the way of the Merlin... they do not engage gradually. In the Scilly Isles, where hundreds of British birders go in October to look for rarities, this standard dialogue has evolved. If the question is "Was that a Merlin?" then the answer is "Yes – because if it were a kestrel, it would still be here."

Timing: Merlin is a scarce bird throughout its Holarctic range. Isn't this a surprise for what might be the world's most efficient winged predator?

Here in California, Merlin is a winter bird (though a pair or two may nest in Siskiyou or Modoc counties), but it will be a good day if you see even one. On the winter range Merlin needs a lot of space, and other species of raptors, especially other Merlins, are physically excluded.

Habitat: Merlins aren't much for following rules or staying within the cage of definition. From mid-September through mid-April, one of them might be found anywhere, in any habitat. Although some individuals maintain distinct foraging



Point Reyes Bird Observatory Fund

To honor our history and sustain our commitment to bird conservation, we established the **Point Reyes Bird Observatory Fund**.

Donations to the Fund support our long-term bird ecology studies at our Palomarin Field Station (in Point Reyes National Seashore) and the Farallon Islands (at the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge).


To learn more, please visit pointblue.org/prbofund.

territories at coastal, valley, or Great Basin localities, others are nomads and follow food sources –



crossbills moving with the cone-nut crop, thrushes at berry outbreaks, or waxwings and solitaires ranging through juniper forests. Merlins have been seen chasing Red Phalaropes ten miles offshore, warblers at Furnace Creek in Death Valley, and Rosy Finches at 12,000 feet along the Sierran crest. Merlins are small-bird-harvesters and may occur wherever there are any ripe to pick.



Merlins are special. Their scarcity, unpredictability, and mystique make them one of the most striking players in the wilderness of wonder. Be like the sand-piper and, while in the winter field, watch constantly for the imminent, flashing presence of this feathered prince. 

Rich Stallcup (1944–2012) was a PRBO co-founder and our naturalist extraordinaire. His knowledge continues to deepen our appreciation of all things wild. Read this complete essay and the entire Focus archive online at pointblue.org/focus.

POINT BLUE CALENDAR

SCIENCE EVENTS

BAY DELTA SCIENCE CONFERENCE
OCT 28–30
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Sam Veloz, PhD presents "Using scenarios to support climate-smart adaptation for the South Bay Salt Ponds Restoration Project."

WATERBIRD SOCIETY
NOV 5–8
LA PAZ, MEXICO

Point Blue scientists present on migratory shorebird conservation, waterbirds and agriculture, and more.

CALIFORNIA RCD CONFERENCE
NOV 12–15
VENTURA, CA

Biologists in our Rangeland Watershed Initiative join a partnership panel, as Associated Resource Conservation Districts "rethink water."

WILDLIFE SOCIETY WESTERN SECTION
JAN 26–30
SANTA ROSA, CA

CEO Ellie Cohen is the keynote; we offer a special session on our collaborative conservation approaches; and we present on climate-smart restoration.

PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP
FEB 18–20
SAN JOSE, CA

Our marine researchers present new findings from Point Blue studies on seabirds, marine mammals, and the ocean food web.

MEMBER EVENTS

Point Blue offers visits to our field sites where members can learn about our cutting-edge studies. For details visit pointblue.org ("Get Involved") or contact Lishka Arata at 707-781-2555 x 354 or larata@pointblue.org.

WINTER WATERBIRDS
SUNDAY
DEC 7
LOCATION
TO BE ANNOUNCED

Cranes, waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors: birds will surround our discussion (at Staten Island and Cosumnes River) of Point Blue's work to help guide habitat management.

Note: Bird and Conservation Walks will resume in February 2015 (see below, and watch for the newest schedule online).

BIRD-A-THON CELEBRATION
SATURDAY
EVENING
JANUARY 24
POINT BLUE HQ, PETALUMA

Awards, refreshments, and a program to celebrate the success of our 2014 Rich Stallcup Bird-A-Thon! Contact Alison Romano at aromano@pointblue.org or 707-781-2555 ext 320.

CITIZEN SCIENCE WALK
SATURDAY
FEB 7
POINT BLUE HQ, PETALUMA

Bird the wetlands at Shollenberger Park and Ellis Creek ponds; learn how to turn your bird lists into valuable information for conservation.

Thank You For Your Support

Point Blue is deeply grateful to Point Reyes National Seashore, the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge, and Cordell Bank and Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuaries for providing facilities and field stations where we work.

Your gifts make it possible for Point Blue Conservation Science to reduce the negative impacts of changes in land use, climate, and the ocean on birds and ecosystems.

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FARALLON PATROL Our Farallon Islands Program relies upon the skills and generosity of volunteer skippers in the Farallon Patrol. They provide essential transportation year-round between the mainland and our research station on the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge. We acknowledge all Patrol skippers in our Annual Report, and we thank those who made runs during each calendar year in the winter issue of the Point Blue Quarterly.

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Right: During this year's Rich Stallcup Bird-A-Thon, the "Boardline Birders" identified a team record of 96 species. Standing, left to right: Geoff Geupel, Ryan DiGaudio, Andy Rumer. Seated: Ivan Samuels, Rona Weintraub, Alison Romano, Ed Sarti, Jack Ladd.
Photo by: Elliott Wright (also a team member).





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A gift to Point Blue in your will or trust helps equip future scientists and educators with the tools they need to study, protect, and enhance our natural world. Not only is your bequest to Point Blue an investment in the next generation of conservation leaders: it is an investment in the future health of our planet!

Have you already included Point Blue, PRBO, or Point Reyes Bird Observatory in your will? Please let us know! We'd love to thank you and invite you to join us for exclusive Tern Society events and activities.

Please contact Stacey Atchley
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Photo by: Annie Schmidt / Point Blue

