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Conservation science for a healthy planet.

Point Blue on the Farallones: Celebrating 50 Years of Stewardship and Conservation



Point Blue is celebrating 50 years of stewardship and conservation of the Farallon Islands in partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Our biologists have maintained a continuous presence on the islands—24 hours a day, 365 days a year—studying and protecting “California’s Gallapagos” since 1968.



The “Old Man” and the Island

by Pete Warzybok, Senior Marine Ecologist

I am known as “Old Man Farallon.” It is a title I have earned through the accumulation of more than 2,200 nights spent living and working at Point Blue’s field station on the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge. When I first landed on Southeast Farallon Island (the largest island in the Refuge) as a wide-eyed and slightly seasick intern in the spring of 2000, I knew very little about the Farallones. In fact, I had not even heard of them until a few months earlier. But I had some experience with seabirds from a job in Alaska the previous summer and was game for an adventure. I could never have imagined that I would end up spending the next 18 years contributing to what was already one of the longest running ecological monitoring programs in the country.

Seemingly barren and forbidding when viewed through the Bay Area fog, the Farallon Islands host a vibrant community of wildlife. Thirteen species of seabirds,

numbering almost a half-million individuals, nest on virtually every available spot of land—above and below ground. Seals and sea lions haul out by the thousands to rest and give birth to their pups. More than 200 species of migratory birds use the islands annually, with scores of other species visiting less regularly to rest and refuel during migration. The waters surrounding the islands support numerous species of whales, dolphins, and fish (including white sharks). Butterflies, bats, crickets, and other insects each find their niche here. We even have our own distinct subspecies of arboreal (tree-dwelling) salamander, despite the fact that we only have three trees.

For more than 50 years, Point Blue has worked closely with our partners at the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge. This special collaboration enables Point Blue to maintain a research station here, monitoring the

wildlife populations, learning about the inner workings of the Farallon ecosystem, and discovering the interconnectedness of marine life, from plankton and fish to seabirds and whales. We have also observed how easily this delicate balance can be disrupted.

Marine systems are inherently variable. El Niños, storms, seasonal fluctuations in wind intensity, and changes in ocean circulation patterns are just some of the naturally occurring events that affect top predators such as seabirds and pinnipeds. Point Blue’s studies help to detect these events and determine the short- and long-term impacts they may have. The key is being able to put these anomalies into context of the normal functioning of the ecosystem. This is where our long-term perspective becomes especially valuable. With more than 50 years of continuous Point Blue data to reference, we have the power

to differentiate between a single event, potentially important trends, and long-term threats like climate change.

Point Blue also uses science to determine the likely cause (or causes) of change and help managers make informed decisions that improve the health and well-being of marine wildlife, now and into the future. Some examples of the conservation impacts made possible by our long-term Farallon data include: the 1987 ban on gillnet fishing in the Gulf of the Farallones and in northern Monterey Bay, which reduced seabird bycatch and allowed Common Murre populations to recover and grow over the last two decades; the 1993 state law banning the hunting of white sharks in California; the establishment of a Marine Protected Area around the Farallones in 2010 to protect important forage species such as rockfish; and current actions by NOAA and the US Coast Guard to reduce ship strikes on whales.

As a hub for Point Blue's Training the Next Generation initiative, the impact of our Farallon program extends well beyond the islands themselves. The incredible hands-on training that our interns receive empowers the next generation of science leaders with skills and knowledge to make a positive impact throughout the world. Of the almost 1,000 interns to have completed the program since 1968 (including me!), many hundreds have gone on to have impactful careers in conservation science, ranging from resource management to academia, advocacy, citizen science, and education.

Our science has supported major conservation achievements, but many threats still remain. Globally, seabirds are one of the most imperiled groups of birds. The combined impacts of rapid climate change, overfishing, invasive species, and ocean pollution are major threats to seabirds and other marine life. However, we remain optimistic that with rigorous science and management, the Farallones will be able to endure and adapt to these challenges. And with ongoing dedication—and with the generous support of our supporters—Point Blue will continue our science and stewardship of the island for another 50 years.

Farallones Journals

Since our Farallones research officially began on April 3, 1968, Point Blue biologists have recorded wildlife monitoring activities, unusual occurrences, and strange dreams in daily journal entries—by hand. The following are select highlights from years past.

12 October, 1975

Second recorded sighting of a Red-footed Booby in the western continental US

I was nearly at East Landing when a commotion of gulls caught my eye. Six Western Gulls were harassing another bird. At first I was looking for a Great Blue Heron or a Great Egret, which the gulls also harass. But then as the hapless bird banked, I immediately recognized it as a booby...I ran to join the others and [watched] it fly SE and disappear from the island and the unkindly gulls. From first sighting 'til it was beyond reasonable visibility, probably less than five minutes had elapsed.

4 November, 1985

White shark attack

Zodiak lunched by great white shark while moored at North Landing. Two bites on the stern portion of the starboard pontoon, which caused the boat to deflate and engine go under water. The zodiac is a total loss...engine in questionable condition.

28 August, 1996

First northern fur seal breeding on Farallones in nearly 200 years

Five animals in Mirounga Valley included an adult male, adult female, pup, and two 2-3 year olds. This is the first documented breeding here since ~1812-1817!

27 July, 2008

Invasion dreams

Annie¹ dreamed that the summer crew was returning to the island while being chased by pirates...[while] a top-secret aerospace project to blast the island's mouse population into outer space was being conducted.

12 August, 2017

A Farallones milestone

Pete² surpassed the record for total number of days spent on the island!! 2188 days! Quite the accomplishment! Congratulations, Pete!



1. Annie Schmidt, PhD, Antarctica Program Leader
2. Pete Warzybok, Senior Marine Ecologist



It's a Seabird's World

by Katie Douglas, Point Blue Intern

The smell of regurgitated fish lingers on feathers and our fingers. Long necks covered with soft black down snake their way out between our legs and under our arms. The ground we walk is slick with guano and fog, necessitating careful steps over rocks made out with the red glow of headlamps. I know this moment is one of my happiest spent as a Point Blue intern on Southeast Farallon Island.

It is the middle of the night on the north side of the island. For the past five hours our seabird crew has been moving around the sloping rock faces that house the island's Brandt's Cormorant colonies. We have monitored the adults since March, and now, at the end of July, it is time to band the grown chicks. Brandt's Cormorants are one of the 13 species of seabird we follow on Southeast Farallon Island and one of the last to fledge each year. Our banding of

them marks the end of a long island field season, for the birds and researchers alike.

The island's landscape has dramatically transformed since I arrived last spring. First dominated by native Farallon weeds and lazing elephant seals, the calm was broken with the appearance of 220,000 Common Murres. Alongside the Murres, which blanketed much of the landscape with their turquoise eggs and warbling cries, arrived the raucous Western Gulls, distinguished Rhinoceros Auklets, and multiple other seabird species ready to begin the breeding season. The influx of each species initiated a new routine of a variety of studies, including mapping nesting grounds, tracing individual productivity, and diet sampling.

My internship on the Farallones has given me an incredible opportunity to be part of Point Blue's rich history on this island,

which is reflected in 50 years of continuous data collection. This remarkable work and the dedicated team of Point Blue scientists, fellow interns, and partners have taught me so much and inspired me to continue researching seabirds and working on the conservation efforts that protect them.

It's 3:00 AM and I sit gently holding the last chick to be banded tonight. Its soft coos and closed eyes make me reflect on the broader context of what we are doing here. Seabirds are a vital component of a larger global ecosystem and are sentinel indicators of change—natural and human induced—in marine environments. Furthering our knowledge of seabirds by studying and monitoring them will only further our understanding of this changing planet. I'm definitely sleep deprived, but in this moment I can't imagine closing my eyes to this most beautiful scene of a seabird world.



Far left: Pete Warzybok, Senior Marine Ecologist. Photo: Maps for Good. **Above, left:** Common Murre colony viewed at night. Photo: Thomas Peshak/National Geographic. **Above, right:** Point Blue intern Katie Douglas monitoring a Western Gull chick. Photo: Point Blue.

Next page, top: A Zodiac meets Farallon Patrol skipper John Wade as he delivers scientists and supplies to the island. A crane waits to lift the raft out of the water. Photo: Point Blue. **Next page, bottom:** Gerry McChesney, Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge manager, and Anne Morkill, San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex manager. Photo: USFWS.

The Power of Partnership

Point Blue is honored to conduct research and stewardship operations on the Farallon Islands through a unique and successful partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

"Most people don't realize it," says Refuge manager Gerry McChesney, "but when USFWS took over management of the South Farallon Islands and entered into our cooperative agreement with Point Blue, many of the island's seabird and marine mammal populations were devastated from more than a century of human exploitation and disturbance." But the partnership, and strong protection, helped reverse that trend. "Rhinoceros Auklets, northern elephant seals, and northern fur seals have all returned after a century or more of absence," he says.

Species recovery is among the many ways this special collaboration has enhanced conservation efforts on the Refuge. "Point Blue's scientific studies on a large suite of Farallon species have allowed us to take a more ecosystem-level approach to conservation," adds Anne Morkill, manager of the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "Conservation actions can be targeted where they're needed, such as by controlling or eradicating invasive species, developing climate-smart nesting habitats, and working with other agencies to protect the Refuge's marine birds and mammals from off-refuge human impacts such as fisheries."

Looking ahead, the partnership will continue to be essential to protect this special place. As Gerry says, "We're able to do far more together than either organization could do alone."



The Farallon Patrol: Science Meets Adventure

Twenty-eight miles from San Francisco, the Farallon Islands rise dramatically from the Pacific in craggy peaks. Subject to dense fog, whipped by turbulent winds, and prone to large swells, the islands lie in what can be one of the most unforgiving stretches of ocean along the coast.

When Point Blue scientists began research and stewardship of Southeast Farallon Island, they needed a reliable and safe way to transport scientists and supplies. A group of visionary mariners answered the call for support, and the Farallon Patrol was born. Ever since, intrepid volunteer skippers have conducted hundreds of "Patrol runs," donating their boats, fuel, time, and energy to ferry Point Blue staff, interns, and supplies about once every two weeks. They've carried tons of cargo and covered thousands of miles, sometimes in harrowing conditions.

"Pete says I've done 78 runs since '95," says Patrol skipper John Wade, "and I believe I did about 10-20 as crew before that." Some of those trips have been more memorable than others.

One that stands out began on a damp December day about 17 years ago. "We headed out with a mild rain front expected," explains John. "But the wind shifted, and rain began in earnest about 5 miles from the island," he recalls. Once there, John

and the Point Blue team off-loaded very quickly. With returning biologists aboard, he started back for the mainland just as night fell. That's when things started to get exciting. "Suddenly a large blinding spotlight points right at us through the mist," says John. "We sheared off to the north, passing a large pilot boat by about 100 yards. Close enough." Fighting on through mist and rain, John searched for the ship channel buoys but couldn't find them. "Then, one of the sharp-eyed biologists spots them, right on target," he remembers. As they finally neared Point Bonita, "Bang! The wind drops, the rain stops, and the gray clouds open up into big white puffy heaps wreathed with glowing white edges from the rising full moon," John recounts. "Heaven!"

Like all past and current Farallon Patrol skippers, John plays a unique role in advancing Point Blue's science. "It is an honor, a challenge, work, and a lot of fun to be able to support the programs and meet the very hard working researchers," he says. "Point Blue's long-term data gathering and observations are critical to our understanding and protection of the wildlife and the oceans around us."

We're grateful to the Farallon Patrol for their dedication, generosity, and uncommon passion for marine conservation. Learn more at farallonpatrol.org.



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Support Point Blue's work, from the Farallones to Antarctica, by making a gift today at pointblue.org/donate!

Point Blue Conservation Science advances conservation of birds, other wildlife, and ecosystems through science, partnerships, and outreach. Our 160 scientists work to reduce the impacts of climate change, habitat loss, and other environmental threats while promoting nature-based, climate-smart solutions for wildlife and people.

facts:

The Farallon Islands by the Numbers

50 Years of long-term data collection by Point Blue on the Farallon Islands. This information is crucial for understanding and addressing threats to our climate, our ocean, and the marine food web. Our data sets also help to inform management and conservation actions on the island.

350,000 Number of breeding seabirds that occupy the islands, making it the largest colony of nesting seabirds in the contiguous United States.

1996 The year northern fur seals were first recorded (by Point Blue) breeding on the Farallones again after being hunted to near-extinction in the 1800s.

1 of 5 The islands are situated in one of only five ocean "upwelling" zones in the world. This creates a rich marine food web that is key to the islands' vibrant ecosystem, supporting wildlife from tiny krill to giant blue whales.

18,504 As of press time, the number of continuous days and nights Point Blue biologists have been on the islands, studying and stewarding this important ecosystem in partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

