

## Farallon Islands wildlife rebounds after a century of sanctuary

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A cluster of rocky outcroppings 27 miles west of the Golden Gate, the Farallon Islands, is celebrating a year packed with anniversaries.

In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt added several of the islands to the nation's then-new wildlife refuge system, established to help halt the destruction of U.S. natural resources. Fifty years ago, the first northern elephant seals returned after hunters killed off the islands' population decades earlier. Forty years ago, the federal government added the rest of the islands to the refuge.

And 430 years ago, English explorer Sir Francis Drake anchored his legendary ship, the Golden Hinde, off the islands, stocking up on seal meat before crossing the Pacific on his 1579 voyage around the world. He was the first European to set foot in what became San Francisco, as the islands form the city's westernmost edge.

At that time, the islands teemed with a million common murres, a black-and-white seabird that's an agile diver but waddles awkwardly on land. Many other seabird species — from western gulls and black-footed albatrosses to colorful tufted puffins — packed the island to nest and feed. Thousands of northern fur seals bred and hauled out on the islands, as did northern elephant seals, California sea lions, Steller sea lions and harbor seals.

Drake's visit marked the end of the islands' era as a pristine wilderness untrammelled by humans, although this year's centennial celebrates the return of the islands as land once again dedicated solely to wildlife.

"The Farallon Islands are so rich in wildlife, they're rightly called California's Galapagos," said Russell Bradley, a biologist with PRBO Conservation Science who works on the islands. They form the largest seabird rookery in the continental United States.

The islands were created 10,000 years ago as the Ice Age ended. The Pacific Ocean, fed by melting glaciers, spread eastward by 35 miles and turned foothills on the continent's edge into islands at sea.

In the early 19th century, Americans and then Russians came to the islands, hunting northern fur seals, prized for their pelts. By 1838, hunters had killed the last fur seal on the islands. Northern elephant seals, hunted for their blubber, met the same fate in the 1880s throughout California waters, according to the book, "Farallon Islands; Sentinels of the Golden Gate." Then the 1849 Gold Rush, which drew hoards to San Francisco, spurred demand for common murre eggs from the Farallon Islands and elsewhere to feed the exploding population, as the eggs were considered as good as hens' eggs. By the time the practice was banned in 1896, the population of common murres on the islands had plummeted to several thousand.

But since 1909, wildlife has slowly rebounded. Most management has been hands-off, said Gerry McChesney, acting manager of the 211-acre Farallon National Wildlife Refuge, letting the wildlife return on its own. The effort is helped along by restoring native plants, creating boardwalks for the handful of researchers working on the largest island, Southeast Farallon Island, as well as building blinds so they don't disturb wildlife while studying them. They are also trying to eradicate the non-native house mice that arrived after years of human habitation by military personnel and lighthouse keepers on the southern island.

Northern elephant seals returned to the islands in 1959, and to scientists' delight, northern fur seals reappeared in 1996. Common murres rebounded, and now 350,000 seabirds representing 13 species crowd the island, creating a cacophony that greets visitors.

"It's kind of weird," said Mendel Stewart, project leader with the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes the Farallon refuge. "You sit out at night, and it's cold and windy and all the birds are screaming. You hear birds all the time, all night long."

McChesney said he found the rugged islands "mesmerizing" when he first visited them in 1985.

"There are just birds out there everywhere, everywhere," he said.

And Lucky Jackson, who ran the lighthouse on the Southeast Farallon Island from 1953 to 1954, grinned as he looked around during a 2008 visit.

"It's just amazing what they've done to bring back the wildlife," he said in the film, "The Farallon Islands, Past, Present, and Future," produced by the Oceanic Society in San Francisco, which runs boat tours of the islands.

"I'll bet in this area there are more birds than there was on the whole island," Jackson said, gesturing around a wide flat area flanked by rocky cliffs.

While tourists aren't permitted on the islands, the Oceanic Society runs boat tours that circle the islands, and through the feeding grounds and migration paths of marine mammals such as gray, blue and humpback whales, and dolphins. And it's peak viewing season for humpback and blue whales, who feed in the nutrient-rich waters surrounding the islands.

For those who prefer to remain on land, the California Academy of Sciences on Monday launches a webcam set up on the tallest hill on the southern island, affixed to the now-automated lighthouse.

The webcam will offer unprecedented 360-degree views of birds, seals and other marine mammals and possibly even the great white sharks prevalent in the area.

"Not everyone is ready for a boat trip," said Birgit Winning, executive director of the Oceanic Society. "But the webcam is another layer of the experience."

To view the Farallon Island webcam, visit [www.calacademy.org/webcams/farallones](http://www.calacademy.org/webcams/farallones). For information on the eight-hour Farallon Islands and whale-watching boat trips, which run through Nov. 30 on Saturdays, Sundays and select Fridays, called 415-474-3385 or visit [www.oceanic-society.org](http://www.oceanic-society.org).

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