



# Point Reyes National Seashore

The official visitor guide  
of Point Reyes National Seashore



## Point Reyes Has a Season for Everyone

A typical year on the Point Reyes Peninsula abounds with opportunities to enjoy an enormous variety of natural experiences. Each season has its own character and delights making a visit worthwhile at any time of year. Even shrouded in August fog or pummeled by a drenching cloudburst in March, the beauty of this singular dynamic landscape is inescapable.

### Spring - Greening of the Landscape

Spring is the natural beginning of the year, when the first flowers emerge and migrants, both fluked and feathered, pass by Point Reyes heading north to nesting and feeding grounds in Canada and Alaska. The peninsula hosts nearly one hundred resident bird species, and another one hundred migrant species winter here. In spring and fall, many birds stop by to take advantage of the abundant food and water available here.

Just offshore, the gray whales that passed by in January and February on their way to birthing lagoons in Mexico swim past the lighthouse returning to the rich feeding in the cold waters off Alaska. Mothers traveling with their newborn calves can be seen approaching from the south, passing very near to the Point. From the lighthouse we see their barnacle encrusted backs as they blow a few times and then dive to round the Point.

On the opposite end of the Point Reyes headland, at Chimney Rock, wildflowers such as pussy ears, iris, poppies, blue-eyed grass, and larkspur—among dozens of other species—color the hillsides. Down on the pocket beaches below, elephant seal pups—born during the cool rainy winter, nursed for about a month, and then left on the beaches by their mothers—are seen throughout the spring. Joining them, after the adults leave, are the juveniles, returning to molt on the beaches where they were born.

Bolinas Lagoon and Drakes Estero provide havens for harbor seal pupping. In these protected waters the seals haul out on sandbars, rest and nurse their young. At low tide they are a common sight from Highway 1 turnouts. These areas are closed to kayakers in order to protect them during this vulnerable time. (Continued on page 2)



Photos from top: A beautiful day on Drakes Beach. Mule ears are a beautiful sight during the Spring wildflower bloom. Least sandpipers are among the many shorebirds that can be seen foraging on seashore beaches. Elephant seals are winter guests. Weaned pups, like those pictured, are the last to leave in the late spring.

## Welcome

For nearly a century, National Parks have been sanctuaries for people seeking peace from the turmoil of daily life. Since 1962, Point Reyes National Seashore has been a refuge, protected as a living landscape, and abundant seascape, and wilderness.

From a peaceful walk through a misty shrouded forest to a sunny perch above the wide open expanse of the Pacific Ocean, you have plenty of opportunities to find a suitable retreat. In doing so, you may witness the drama of the changing seasons, as foggy summers give way to clear autumn days, and as sun-browned fall gives way to winter's replenishing rains.

You may also observe the magic of this place as snowy plovers nest among the seaside pebbles and as harbor seals give birth to their young in the esteros. While the bugling of tule elk on Tomales Point symbolizes fall on the peninsula, the year closes with the return of the northern elephant seal and the migration of the Pacific gray whale.

Enjoy your visit and help us to preserve this national treasure so that future generations may find wonder and solace here as well. Through active stewardship, this place will remain a refuge for all.

*Don L. Neubacher*

Don L. Neubacher  
Superintendent

### Fire Permit

You may obtain a free permit for a beach fire at Point Reyes National Seashore from any park visitor center. You must follow regulations as described on the permit. On high fire days, all permits are null and void. Call (415) 464-5100 for current fire conditions.



### Emergencies

Report emergencies to visitor center staff or call 911. Cellular service is not available in most park locations. Pay phones are located at all three visitor centers.

### Lost and Found

Items may be turned in or reported missing at Bear Valley, Drakes Beach, or the Lighthouse Visitor Center.

### Become a Junior Ranger!

Ask at the Bear Valley Visitor Center or the Lighthouse Visitor Center for your Junior Ranger activity packet.



For more fun, visit these websites:  
[www.nps.gov/pore/forkids/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/pore/forkids/index.htm)  
[www.nps.gov/webrangers](http://www.nps.gov/webrangers)

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Visit us on the web at [www.nps.gov/pore](http://www.nps.gov/pore)



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

### Point Reyes National Seashore

Established in 1962, Point Reyes National Seashore preserves and protects over 71,000 acres including 32,000 acres of designated wilderness and 80 miles of wild, undeveloped coastline. With its rich biological diversity, and cultural history Point Reyes provides critical habitat to wildlife, is a repository for over 3,000 years of cultural history, and serves as a haven for the restoration of the human spirit.

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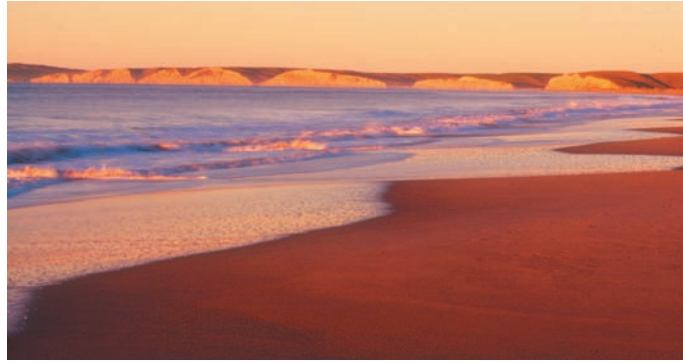


This publication was funded through a grant from the Point Reyes National Seashore Association (PRNSA). PRNSA is the primary non-profit park partner working with the community to fund and implement preservation projects throughout the park and to educate people about the environment. To learn more visit [www.ptreyes.org](http://www.ptreyes.org).

 This publication was printed on recycled paper.

# Seasons of Point Reyes

Limantour Beach is a fine destination in any season, but spring walks along its shore reveal the results of winter and spring storms. Driftwood and kelp wash up on the beach and changing wind patterns strand thousands of *Vellela vellela*, a colonial hydroid, coloring the beaches a bright blue.



Limantour Beach © Susan Van Der Wal

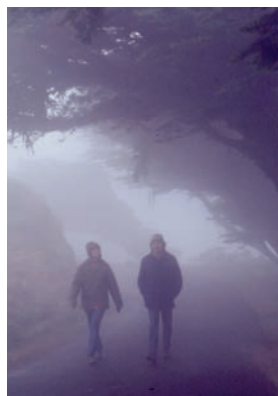
Tule elk, a species reintroduced to Point Reyes in the 1970s, flourish on Tomales Point. In spring, they are calving and should always be observed from a safe distance. These majestic animals once numbered 500,000 in California, but following the Gold Rush, they were hunted nearly to extinction. In 1874, a Los Banos rancher discovered a few elk on his property and became the first to commit efforts toward protecting them. Today more than 3,200 Tule elk range over several protected areas of California.



Tule elk cow & calf © Frank Binney

### Summer—Fog Over Fields of Gold

In summer, the hillsides made green by the abundant winter and early spring rains, turn a golden brown. Flowers still bloom along the coast and in cool, wet areas where water is still plentiful. In stark contrast to hot inland areas, thick fog blankets the headlands, making it necessary to bundle up in warm layers. To find the warmth of the sun, you need only return to the Bear Valley area where temperatures can be 20 degrees higher.



Lighthouse fog



Golden hills of summer

Abbotts Lagoon, a good wildflower destination in spring, bears fruit in the form of blackberries and salmonberries in summer. The dunes provide good nesting habitat for the Western snowy plover, a bird protected under the Endangered Species Act and monitored at Point Reyes since 1977. The critical nesting habitat among the low dune vegetation has been altered by the spread of non-native beach grasses, that predators use as screens to access birds and nests. Human activities, such as dog-walking, also impact the nesting success of the plovers. Exclosures around the nesting sites help protect the birds. Please don't approach or disturb these sites. On weekends and holidays during nesting season, docents are on site to help you learn more about these threatened shorebirds.



Western snowy plover © Callie Bowdish

(Continued from front page)

Over 130 bird species nest at Point Reyes. As the season progresses the young birds test their wings. This is an opportunity to see juvenile plumage and feeding behaviors, as young birds continue to beg for food from parents. Over 20 federally and state protected bird species, such as the Northern spotted owl and the Bank swallow, make their home on the peninsula. A natural stopover for migratory birds jutting ten miles out into the Pacific Point Reyes has abundant wetland areas for resting and feeding.



Northern spotted owl fledglings

The Tule elk enter into their mating rut in late summer. The bulls' plaintive bugle resounds along this headland a few hundred feet above the crashing waves. The bulls challenge each other for control of large harems of females with which to mate. To aid you in spotting elk and understanding their behavior, docents are on site at Tomales Point on weekends and holidays, from June to September.



Tule elk bull © Bruce Farnsworth

Labor Day signals summer's end with the Drakes Beach Sand Sculpture Contest. Dozens of competitors arrive in the morning to carve their masterpieces, while spectators and judges provide encouragement.



2007 Sand sculpture contest

### Autumn—Sunny Days and Warm Southerly Breezes

Fog and wind subside on the coast, bringing forth the warm days that we longed for during the summer chill. The Lighthouse and Chimney Rock temperatures can climb to near eighty degrees during these warm spells. Stalks of dried hemlock and cow parsnip rise up from the drought-laden hillsides, reminders that it has been six long months since the last rain storm.



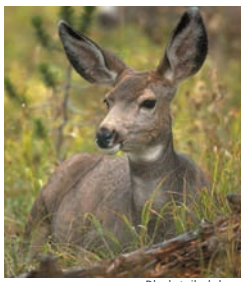
Great Beach

Acorns, the season's bounty, droop from live oaks and tanoaks in the Bear Valley area. In autumn, Coast Miwok Indians sent their sons into the trees to dislodge this coveted seed. Acorn woodpeckers store them in excavated niches for future eating. Insect larvae invade the cached acorns, providing the woodpeckers with protein to complement the fat.



Tan oak acorn

The black-tailed deer enter their rut during this time. The Bear Valley area is full of this activity in autumn. Out on the coast, visitors might catch a glimpse of blue or humpback whales, as they make a brief, but unforgettable, appearance for the fortunate onlooker.

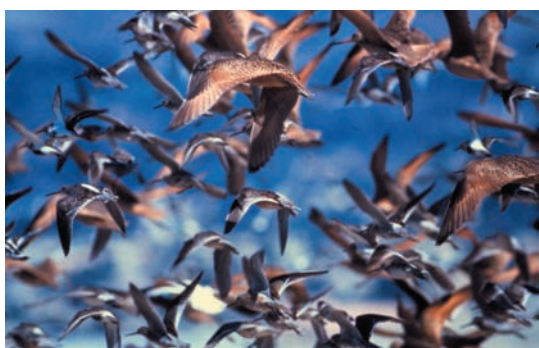


Black-tailed deer



Humpback whale spouting

Migratory birds are winging over the peninsula again. This year's fledglings, inexperienced in long-distance travel, often end up in the Monterey cypress trees near the ranches and the lighthouse.



Godwits & willets © Rich Stallcup

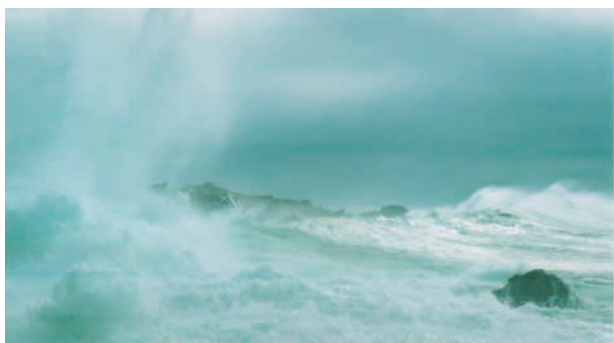
Fall is a great time for hiking and backpacking. Without the fickle weather and high winds of spring, hikers can rely on more amenable conditions. The summer rush is over and camping permits are easier to obtain.



Common Yellowthroat © Susan Farrar

### Winter—Blow, West Winds, Blow

Winter storms ravage the coastline, depositing wrack on the beaches and occasionally causing landslides. But between storms, some of Point Reyes' most beautiful days offer ideal weather for being outdoors. Come prepared for these capricious conditions.



Winter storm © Al Simms

Winter is far from a dormant season here. Visitors crowd the lighthouse observation deck to watch for the return of the Pacific gray whales, usually first seen in December. Making their annual 10,000-mile roundtrip journey between Alaska and Mexico, they are drawn to the protected, warm-water lagoons of Baja to bear their calves. By the 1930s, intensive whaling along the California coast caused the gray whale population to dwindle to a mere 1000 individuals. A ban on gray whale hunting adopted in 1937, and an international whaling ban signed in



Whale watching at the Lighthouse

1946, led to the recovery of this gentle species. The Pacific gray whale population is estimated at about 20,000 today.

Another conservation success story, the Northern elephant seal hauls out on pocket beaches surrounding the Point Reyes headland in early winter. Females are among the first to arrive, giving birth to pups conceived during the previous year's visit. By the end of the 19th century, Northern elephant seals had declined to as few as 20, victims of hunters taking advantage of the seals' vulnerability during breeding season. Elephant seal populations are now estimated at 150,000, thanks to Mexico's 1922 seal hunting ban, which helped save these charismatic giants from extinction.



Northern elephant seal bull © Susan Farrar

From late December through March, on weekends and holidays, a shuttle bus is required for transport to whale and elephant seal observation areas. Inquire at any visitor center for more details.

In January and February, Coho salmon and Steelhead trout swim up the creeks from their ocean home to spawn. Lagunitas and Olema Creeks flash with silver as the thrashing fish create depressions in the river gravels, called



Coho salmon

redds, and lay their eggs. The males fertilize the eggs and the fertilized eggs are covered by gravels when the female scrapes out another redd just upstream. The young spend 1—2 years in freshwater before tackling the open ocean, where they spend their adult lives before returning to spawn. Human activities, such as logging and dam construction, have impaired and destroyed fish habitat, leading to a drastic decline in the species' numbers. Through habitat restoration efforts, stream conditions are improving and Coho salmon and Steelhead trout are returning to many of their historic spawning streams.



Coho salmon eggs

Hidden underground, networks of mycorrhizae facilitate the water and nutrient uptake of trees and plants. These structures are the result of the integration of fungi with specialized plant roots. In winter, this hidden process erupts to the surface when the fungal reproductive structures—what we call mushrooms—emerge. Hundreds of mushroom hunters also emerge, seeking delightful edibles—such as chanterelles and boletus—but also to simply enjoy the amazing diversity of these often overlooked beauties. Please use extreme caution as many mushrooms are not edible and some can be fatal if consumed.



Clockwise from top left: *Amanita franchetii*; *Clavulinopsis comiculata* © Dimitar Bojantchev; *Melastiza chateri*; *Inocybe cinnamomea*; © Darvin DeShazer

Every season at Point Reyes has a flavor and texture all its own, leading millions of visitors to return year after year, to walk the shoreline, hike the trails, explore the forests, and enjoy the great natural variety of plants, animals, and landscapes protected here.

## Be on the Lookout for...

### Poison Oak *Toxicodendron diversilobum*

Contact with any part of the poison oak plant causes a blistering rash. Generally this can be treated at home. More severe cases may need to see a health professional. If you know you have had contact with poison oak, thoroughly wash the affected area as soon as possible to remove the active oils. Preventative topical ointments are available to help avoid reactions to poison oak.



Poison oak

### Stinging Nettle *Urtica dioica*

Bare skin brushing up against a stinging nettle plant tends to break delicate defensive hairs on the leaves and stems that protect the plant from browsing animals. This releases a trio of chemicals, usually resulting in a painful skin rash, typically lasting less than 24 hours. A topical analgesic (used to treat poison oak or bug bites) can be applied to help alleviate the sting.



Stinging nettle

### Deer Ticks

Ticks that carry Lyme disease are known to occur in this area. Stay on trails and check your clothing frequently. The sooner that ticks are removed, the less the chance of transmittal of the organism that causes illness. Wearing light-colored, long pants helps you spot them; tuck your pant legs inside your socks to keep them from crawling up your legs. Always check your body completely at the end of your hike.



### Just For Kids—Answer Key

Seashore Scavenger Hunt:  
Across: 1. Drake 5. Lighthouse 7. Chimney 8. elephant

Down: 2. Andreas 3. Miwok 4. dairy 6. Tule

Who am I?

1. Tule Elk; Habitat: open grassland and marshes. 2. Brown pelican; Habitat: prefer shallow inshore waters such as estuaries and bays; never found more than 20 miles out to sea or inland on fresh water. 3. California quail; Habitat: open woodlands, brushy foothills, desert washes, forest edge, chaparral, stream valleys, agricultural lands, and suburb areas. Cover is needed for roosting, resting, nesting, escaping from predators, and for protection from the weather. 4. California sea lion; Habitat: mostly water but they will haul out for long periods of time on rocky shorelines.

Arrowhead Challenge:

1. Plants 2. Animals 3. History 4. Land forms (beautiful scenery)

5. Water resources

Bonus Question: late December through early April with peak sightings mid-January and mid-March.

