

Waterbirds of Alcatraz

National Park Service
U. S. Department of Interior
Golden Gate
National Recreation Area



The Birds Return

Alcatraz takes its name from the word, *alcatraces*, or seabirds, from the early Spanish explorers. Generations of seabirds occupied the island until it became a military fortress in the 1850's. For the next hundred years, hardly any birds remained as the human activities of the fortress, military prison, and then federal penitentiary kept them away. Even *The Birdman of Alcatraz*, Robert Stroud, didn't have any birds here. When the cellhouse closed in 1963, the lack of human disturbance and land predators, as well as island topography and location, led to the return of the birds. Today, this National Historic Landmark is a haven for over 5,000 nesting birds.

Creating Their Niche

When the U.S. Army dynamited the island to build the fortress, the resulting steep cliffs and tide pools gradually became wildlife habitat. Garden plants that had been tended during the federal penitentiary years grew into dense thickets of cover for sensitive birds. Nests are even tucked within the rubble and concrete pipes left over from the era when correctional officers and their families lived here. A diversity of wildlife finds their niche within these manmade habitats.



U.S. Army soldiers, Alcatraz 1869

Bancroft Library, Eadweard Muybridge Collection

Birds of Warning



Oiled bird from spill

Alcatraz waterbirds feed nearby when their chicks are helpless and growing fast. Most dive in the bay or wade along shorelines and tide pools. But these birds face increasing threats as less fresh water and more pollution, sewage, and shipping traffic enters this estuary. Researchers studying nesting birds can

alert us to impacts to the ecosystem that may affect our health as well. On Alcatraz, National Park Service and PRBO Conservation Science staff, along with many dedicated volunteers, monitor the birds. Their scientific reporting and care make them the real bird men and women of Alcatraz!

What Can You Do?



Biologist observes nesting colony

Photos courtesy of PRBO Conservation Science, except where noted.
www.prbo.org

Keep oil, soaps, and other toxic substances out of storm drains.

Pick up litter before it gets carried into the water.

Buy recycled products and find alternatives to plastic, such as filling your own water bottles.

Eat sustainable fish and seafood.

Make a donation to a conservation organization.

Volunteer! Call our local NPS volunteer hotline at (415) 561-4755 or visit www.nps.gov.

This brochure was produced with the generous support of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. To become a member, call (415)4R-PARKS or visit www.parksconservancy.org.



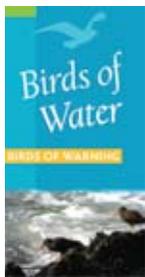


Nesting Waterbirds

February—September

Some areas of the island are closed seasonally because many birds are highly sensitive to disturbance and will abandon their nests, eggs, and chicks when people approach them. Other areas are closed year-round for your safety.

Shoo Fly Time on Alcatraz!
Starting in mid-August, thousands of cormorant flies hatch from the bird colonies and swarm the sheltered dock area. Although a pesky nuisance for visitors, these flies do not bite.



A. "Birds of Water, Birds of Warning" Exhibit

Check out this fascinating exhibit to learn more about the waterbirds of Alcatraz, their connection to the history of the island—and to us. Children can enjoy a surprising sneak-peak at the baby chicks year-round!



D. Black-crowned Night-Herons

Using binoculars you can look down on the rubble and shrubs to catch a glimpse of these striking herons crowned by black caps with delicate white plumes. These shy creatures are extremely vulnerable to human disturbance.



B. Pigeon Guillemots

These cheery black seabirds sport white wing patches easily seen near the dock. Their comically bright red legs, feet, and mouths counter the fog and dark bay waters. Old drainage pipes along the island's edge are now nesting habitat, as pigeon guillemots seek safe crevices to lay their eggs and raise their chicks.



E. Snowy Egrets

These lovely white wading birds with elegant plumes, or aigrette, were hunted to near extinction for feathers on ladies' hats. This fueled the formation of the Audubon Society (1886) and inspired the protection of many bird species. The egrets' gargling squawks may surprise you on your visit.



C. Western Gulls

Where once the army practiced their drills, now gulls ply their defensive skills as they return each February to claim their territory and raise their young. Male gulls court the females with gifts of regurgitated fish, becoming lifelong mates and taking turns caring for eggs and chicks. Alcatraz offers a rare chance to witness a seabird nursery in action.



F. Brandt's Cormorants

Like most seabirds, Brandt's cormorants spend their lives on the open ocean, returning in the spring to nest on islands and rocky coasts. In breeding plumage, the cormorants have brilliant blue throat patches that the male shows off in a "sky pointing" display.