

westways

\$1.25

NOVEMBER 1983



Mending the Farallones

Text and photographs by Kim Heacox



31

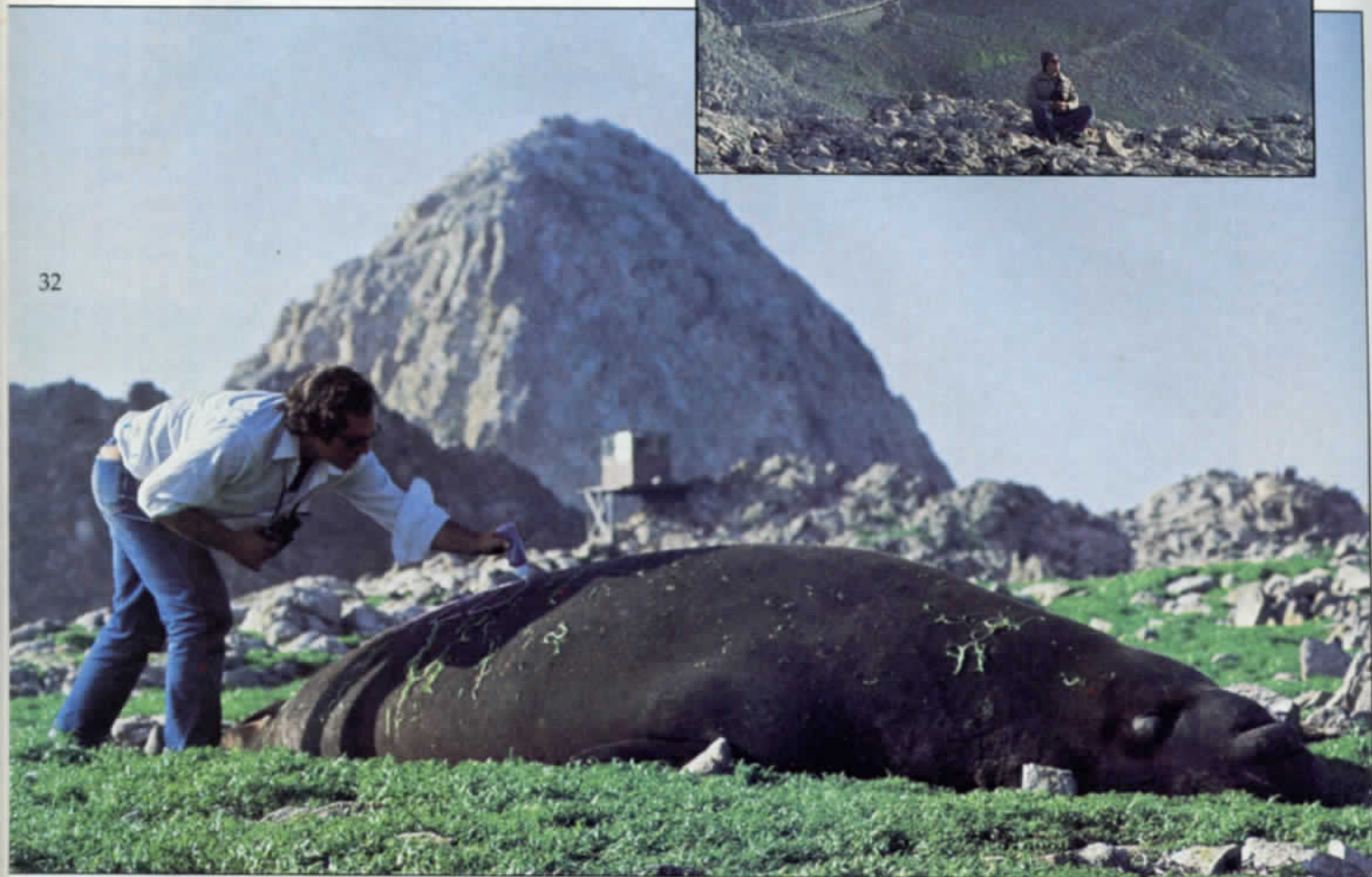
Pelicans and gulls glide overhead, returning to evening roost after a day of fishing. Sea lion bulls gather harems on wave-sculpted rocks. A peregrine falcon dives at unsuspecting shore birds, missing again. Even when night falls, the wilderness sounds of birds and seals carry on the salt air.

These are the Farallon Islands, located about 30 miles west of San Francisco and home of the largest seabird breeding colony in the contiguous United States. Roughly two-thirds of California's seabirds nest on the Farallones—approximately 300,000 birds from 13 species. Common murrelets, tufted puffins, pigeon guillemots, and Cassin's auklets nest on the islands, as well as the world's largest breeding populations of ash storm-petrels, Brandt's cormorants and western gulls.

Western gulls grace the cliffs of the Farallones, which boast the world's largest breeding population of these birds so familiar to Californians

Most of these species make their living on the open ocean, visiting land only to weather bad storms, raise their young or maybe to roost at night. For a few brief months each year, they arrive from all directions and transform the Farallones into a boisterous, feathered nursery.

It wasn't always so. For 300 years, the Farallon Islands grew more and more quiet as the wildlife became less and less abundant. By 1841, American and Russian fur traders had slaughtered the Farallon populations of seals and sea lions. An estimated 170,000 northern fur seals had been killed, and northern elephant seals disappeared completely and were presumed extinct. Only



The old lighthouse still dominates the top of Southeast Farallon Island (top). Volunteers and staff members are kept busy year-round with a variety of tasks. Above, a volunteer christens "Fred"—a two-ton elephant seal bull—with a squirt bottle of Lady Clairol Ultra Blue. The identification will last only until the bull molts its fur and outer skin. Left, plywood nest boxes are provided by biologists for Cassin's Auklets, birds which nest in burrows to avoid predators, particularly gulls. At right, a shore crab is another form of wildlife benefiting from the mending of the Farallones

Mending the Farallones

the birds remained.

Then the 1848-49 California Gold Rush converted San Francisco into a boom town. The Farallon Egg Company was established in 1850, and during the next 60 years over 14 million eggs were removed from the islands. One boat gathered 120,000 eggs in two days in 1853. Eggers would smash every egg in sight and then wait to collect newly laid eggs. Their customers thus received a fresh product, at one dollar per dozen. Competition grew fierce, and an "egg war" ensued, complete with high seas robbery and rifle fire.

The problems worsened with the introduction of Belgian hares in the 1860s. They overgrazed the vegetation used for nesting material by cormorants and gulls, and competed with auklets for nesting burrows. In 1854, a lighthouse was completed on Southeast Farallon Island, and the permanent residents who manned the lighthouse brought dogs, cats, chickens and a mule. Each in its own way menaced the birds.

The number of common murrels declined from an estimated 400,000 before the Gold Rush to 6,000 in 1959. The population of double-

crested cormorants dropped to only 20 pairs, and rhinoceros auklets stopped breeding altogether on the Farallones. A visiting journalist described the Farallon Islands as a "shameful testimony to human greed and ignorance."

Egg collecting was finally banned in 1897, although poaching operations continued for another decade. In 1909, President Taft signed an executive order creating the Farallon Reservation as "a preserve and breeding ground for native birds."

But this encompassed only half of the island area. Not until 1969

Continued on p. 79



Farallones

Continued from p. 33

did the entire archipelago become the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge. In 1981, the surrounding waters gained protection as part of the Point Reyes/Farallon Islands National Marine Sanctuary. The water for one mile surrounding the islands has been designated as a state ecological reserve.

Today, the Farallon wildlife is on the mend. Common murre numbers have climbed to above 70,000, and pigeon guillemots and three species of cormorants have tripled in number. Rhinoceros auklets returned in 1972, and 120 pairs now breed on the Farallones.

Probably the most celebrated recovery is that of the northern elephant seal. In 1972, a single elephant seal pup was born on the Farallon Islands—the first born there in 150 years. This year, about 500 pups were born. Back from the brink of extinction, there are now over 70,000 elephant seals reclaiming their lost territory.

The Point Reyes Bird Observatory, a private, nonprofit research organization, oversees the Farallon Islands under the auspices of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Coast Guard. Two to eight biologists, students and volunteers staff the Farallones every day of the year. As a national wildlife refuge under special protection, the Farallones are closed to the public.

Volunteers and staff members live in a rustic two-story house originally occupied by lighthouse keepers. Each morning they rise early, eat light and spread out over Southeast Farallon Island, the largest in the island chain. They census insects, birds and mammals, record the weather and take seawater samples. In the evenings, a communal dinner is prepared and researchers pool their field notes into report books and data tables.

The duties change with the seasons. In autumn, hundreds of small land birds are captured in mist nets, banded and safely released to continue their journeys to Central and


South America. The banding information is sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, for computer synthesis and storage. Thus far, 353 species of birds—including the 13 seabird species breeding on the Farallones, visiting seabirds and migrant land birds—have been recorded on the

Conditions for wildlife on the Farallon Islands have improved dramatically since the days of the fur traders and "egg wars."

Farallon Islands, including waywards from Eastern North America, Siberia, Mexico and tropical oceans.

In spring and summer, biologists monitor breeding seabirds from within five-foot cabinlike blinds built atop precipitous cliffs. Walking is restricted to a few specific trails where nests are least common. "You have to move slowly and keep low," says a volunteer. "I once slipped on fog-dampened rocks and frightened hundreds of screaming gulls off their nests. They seemed to recognize me after that, scolding me from a distance."

While loading a boat with supplies at the end of his stay on the Farallones, a volunteer sees a common murre caked in oil and barely afloat. The doomed bird paddles into his cupped hands. It will die soon, having lost all thermal insulation.

It is a reminder. The Farallon Islands are mending, but have not yet completely healed. "The Farallones are one bright light in conservation," notes Phil Henderson, a staff biologist with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory. "They've become richer for decades after severe exploitation. Yet when we see one oiled murre, it's an indication that there are still definite threats." 

GIVE THE TIMELESS GIFT THAT FITS ALL OCCASIONS.

The Automobile Club's Travel Gift Certificates.

This new travel service is appropriate for all occasions: weddings, graduations, anniversaries or birthdays.

The gift of travel may be airline tickets, a resort vacation in Hawaii or that cruise of a lifetime.

And the gift certificate is flexible—either benefactors or recipients may select the trip.



For details contact any of the Auto Club's 26 World Travel Agency Offices.



The Auto
World Travel Agency

THE TIMELESS
GIFT

Travel C



Auto Club

\$