

Letter From the Farallon Islands



A 22-YEAR CHRONICLE OF EVERYTHING THAT SWIMS, FLIES, OR CRAWLS

WINDSWEPT DESOLATION ONLY A BIOLOGIST COULD LOVE

Sailing past the Golden Gate Bridge on a cold Sunday morning, skipper Ron Levine ponders whether he should keep going. "This is the densest fog I've ever seen," he says, wiping his dew-soaked beard and squinting into the mist. But this is no pleasure trip: His 35-foot sailboat, the *Nausicaa*, is ferrying propane and much-needed groceries to a band of biologists hunkered down on the southeast island of the Farallons, a sanctuary for as many seabirds and marine mammals as one is likely to find outside Alaska. So, Levine does what he has been doing for 12 years: He cinches up his slicker and sets a course due west.

On a clear day, San Franciscans can just see the Farallon Islands, 27 miles off their coast. But few will ever visit them. It's five hours over rough seas until we reach the six-mile-long chain of islands—seven upright fists of granite and dirt, black against a gray sky. With no place to dock, Levine pulls into a small cove off the southeast island. A biologist and I huddle on a heavy plastic platform and clutch soggy ropes as a crane hoists us 100 feet into the air and delivers us with a bump on the concrete landing.

During spring and summer, as many as eight biologists from the Point Reyes Bird Observatory on the mainland live on Southeast

Farallon Island in a white-shingled house covered with lichen. Their task for the past 22 years has been to chronicle and map out the communities of every creature that swims, flies, or crawls in the vicinity. Filling binder after binder, they compile notes on migration and breeding habits and analyze everything from natural population cycles to the effects of pollution.

Seclusion doesn't necessarily mean serenity. From March through August, the 100-acre island is blanketed by 250,000 seabirds in a nonstop breeding frenzy. Biologist Bill Sydeman and his colleagues catch chicks, weigh them, and take detailed notes on any bird returning

with a leg banded some previous year on the island. Binoculars in hand, they spend two-hour shifts in cramped wooden blinds observing the birds, plus any of the four species of seals and sea lions that also use the islands as a tryst.

Much of the research is used by biologists in other parts of the world. Back in 1971, 840,000 gallons of oil spilled into the Gulf of the Farallons, killing 20,000 birds. In that incident and later ones, "the Farallons provided the basis for a model that showed how productivity and population would be affected,"

says Laurie Wayburn, executive director of Point Reyes.

Her teams have also provided depressing data showing how commercial net fishing is devastating the seabird populations. Birds diving for fish get tangled in the webbing and drown. In 1987, the California legislature outlawed gill-net fishing within three miles of the Farallons after biologists there estimated that nets had killed tens of thousands of birds in recent years. Other carefully monitored killers range from plastic six-pack harnesses, which strangle wildlife, to bottle caps that birds mistake for food and feed to their young. Toxic chemicals from the Bay Area, which are trickling into the ocean in unknown quantities, are believed to weaken the immune system of a species of large seals called Steller's sea lions, causing a surge in stillborn pups. Meanwhile, fish are being studied for radioactive particles seeping into the ocean from a mainland dump used from 1946 to 1970. As many as a quarter of 47,500 55-gallon steel drums of atomic lab and industrial waste are thought to have burst open.

'NOISY AND CHAOTIC.' While the biologists are taking great care to preserve the animals who call the Farallons home, the kindness isn't always returned. Western gulls are quite aggressive during the peak breeding season, sometimes dive-bombing biologists, smacking them in the head with their feet. "It's not a peaceful place," says Sydeman. "It's very noisy and chaotic." And one never knows what other surprises will come from above. "Wherever you go, you are in great danger of getting pooped on," says Bob Boekelheide, a biologist who wore a water-repellent coat, rain or





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shine, during his stints on the island.

Shrouded in a low, swirling fog, the islands must have seemed haunted even to the Spanish explorers who surveyed them in the 1600s. Seal hunters followed two centuries later. A ghost, possibly a woman who came to Southeast Farallon Island with the sealers, has been reported floating above the cliffs. Boats have washed ashore empty, and several laborers were killed fighting each other during the "egg wars" of the late 1800s, when more than 12 million bird eggs were gathered and fed to hungry gold miners.

The biologists talk a lot about the islands' history, always in great detail. "I got to this point that even when I was off the island, I kept thinking about it," says Boekelheide. The walls of their wind-buffed house are covered with bird charts and photos of marine mammals. A piece of shark-bitten plastic boat hangs like a trophy in the living room. The biologists have little contact with the outside world, except on Friday nights, when some of them break into the usually unoccupied Coast Guard house to watch *Dallas*.

SHARK ATTACK. Of course, their lives center on the animals. Oriane Williams, an intern who spent six weeks on the southeast island, follows a thin, weed-clotted path that leads to the cove favored by a colony of elephant seals. Even as she prepares to leave the island, she can't resist counting to see if any newcomers have arrived. Among the 50 or so plump seals, she notices blood on a baby's cream belly. "Shark attack," she says, pointing to the magenta flesh. She coos over the pup, wondering if it will survive the ragged gash, then adds: "I'm going to miss this place."

Since 1969, when the southeastern island was included in the larger Farallon National Wildlife Refuge by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, nearly 32 workers have spent from two weeks to six months on the islands each year. Several volunteers, such as computer consultant Levine, make supply trips or spend weeks at the southeast island assisting the biologists. The entire project has a budget of only \$250,000 annually, with money coming from grants and individual donations.

Loaded up with dufflebags and backpacks, the passengers are getting ready to head back to San Francisco. We talk about how we're dreading the trip. Not only is there seasickness to contend with, but some of us will probably never return.

LAURA HOLSON

Although *BUSINESS WEEK* intern Holson is a native Californian, this was her first sailing adventure on the Pacific.