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NOAA's Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary urges pilots, boaters, visitors to avoid stress to wildlife

With seabird breeding now underway, [Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary](#) urges pilots, visitors, boaters, paddlers and unmanned aerial vehicle, or drone, operators to avoid disturbing nesting seabirds in and around the sanctuary. Seabird harassment is illegal.

These normally food-rich waters sustain the Farallon Islands breeding colony, the largest in the contiguous United States, and several mainland rookeries, including the Point Reyes and Marin headlands, Devil's Slide Rock and Sonoma County's rocky coast.

The scenic locations near San Francisco are popular places for boating, flightseeing tours, wildlife viewing and other potentially disruptive activities. Seabird colonies may consist of several hundred thousand birds, but still are only a fraction of their size prior to human impacts, including egg harvesting and coastal development. When disturbed, parent seabirds fly away, leaving eggs and chicks at the mercy of hungry ravens and gulls. Repeated disturbances, even small ones, may result in entire colonies being abandoned.

"Seabirds are excellent indicators of changes in ocean conditions, an early warning system for scientists and managers of fisheries and marine protected areas," said Maria Brown, sanctuary superintendent. "Many species have been reduced by human activities such as habitat destruction. Healthy colonies are our best baseline for detecting the type and severity of changes that occur in our oceans. Disturbance further harms already-declining seabird populations."

Data from the sanctuary's seabird monitoring revealed a spike in seabird deaths hundreds of times higher than normal among Cassin's Auklets, a small seabird that breeds in the sanctuary. The 2014-2015 data from the Farallones' Beach Watch program reflected a death rate 320 times higher than normal, which scientists attribute to persistently warm ocean waters.

Since 2005, the sanctuary has worked with state, federal and local agencies and other partners to protect seabirds along the north-central California coast. The [Seabird Protection Network](#) is a program for coordinated seabird colony conservation and management, and is now a statewide strategic partnership. Pilots, boaters and other coastal users should visit the Seabird Protection Network website to download maps of sensitive areas, and overflight and approach regulations, at: <http://farallones.noaa.gov/eco/seabird/welcome.html>.

Designated in 1981, Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary encompasses nearly 3,300 square miles of ocean and coastal waters beyond San Francisco's Golden Gate, north to Mendocino County. The sanctuary supports economically important fisheries, endangered sea turtles, seabirds, and species such as giant blue whales and white sharks.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Join us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and our other [social media channels](#).

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