

California Coastal National Monument – Stewards of the Coast & Redwoods Conduct “Citizen Science” Seabird Monitoring Training for Sonoma Coast

If you want to get something started on the Sonoma Coast, give the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods a small grant and they’ll find a way to do it and more. Needing to find a way to initiate a seabird monitoring program for the southern Sonoma coast, the California Coastal National Monument (CCNM) was able to provide the Stewards with some seed money to begin a “citizen science” effort. The Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods are a CCNM Collaborative Partner and the nonprofit environmental and interpretive organization for the California State Parks’ Russian River District (California State Parks is a CCNM Core-Managing Partner).

How do you start this “citizen science” effort? By recruiting and training “citizen scientists” of course, and that’s what the Stewards have done. Last week, the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods completed the initial seabird monitoring orientation and initial training for 20 enthusiastic volunteers, some with years of experience in bird watching and bird monitoring and some with none at all.

“This seabird monitoring program is carried out mostly by volunteers and will focus initially on the Sonoma Coast State Beach,” explained the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods executive director Michele Luna, but she adds that, “The vision is to eventually cover the entire Sonoma County coast.”



The Sonoma Coast seabird monitoring program’s volunteers orientation held at the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods training center at Armstrong Redwoods State Park. [Photo by Rick Hanks-BLM]

The Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods training program started with a two-hour volunteers orientation at their training center at Armstrong Redwoods State Park in Guerneville, CA. The orientation included presentations about the CCNM by monument manager Rick Hanks; the Seabird Protection Network by NOAA-Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary’s Seabird Protection Network coordinator Sage Tzsak; The Sea

Ranch Association's (TSRA) citizen science seabird monitoring program by TSRA CCNM Stewardship Task Force co-chair and Madrone Audubon Society conservation coordinator Diane Hichwa; and the initial training session by BLM California State Office ecologist Jim Weigand. The Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods executive director Michele Luna coordinated the orientation.

The following week's day-long training session on the Sonoma Coast involved a morning in the field and an afternoon at the Sonoma Coast State Beach's visitor center at Jenner, CA.



Left - Diane Hichwa, The Sea Ranch Association CCNM Stewardship Task Force Co-Chair (& Conservation Director of Madrone Audubon Society) explains seabird monitoring protocols to Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods volunteers at Bodega Head at the south end of Sonoma Coast State Beach. [Photo by Jim Weigand – BLM]

Right - View of Bodega Rock from monitoring viewing spot on Bodega Head. [Photo by Jim Weigand – BLM]

Beginning at Bodega Head, the group of about 20 volunteers and training staff hiked to the best spot to see Bodega Rock, situated at the mouth of Bodega Bay. At this location, the new volunteers learned how to use tripods and spotting scopes and Joe Mortenson, a local volunteer biologist, gave an overview of what he has been viewing for years on Bodega Rock and Bodega Headlands. With the spotting scoops, the group viewed cormorants, harbor seals, and sea lions on the rocks. They also saw a peregrine falcon fly by, as well as numerous brown pelicans.

The group then drove to the state beach's Gleason Beach where some of the group viewed the smaller rocks used by nesting birds, while others parked at a turnout just to the south where they had a good view of a large rock where three species of cormorants nest during the breeding season.

Arched Rock overlook in the northern portion of Sonoma Coast State Beach provided the last viewing spot for morning and a spectacular view of the state beach's northern coast.



View north looking up the northern portion of Sonoma Coast State Beach from Arched Rock overlook.
[Photo by Jim Weigand – BLM]



Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods volunteers gathered at Sonoma Coast State Beach's Arched Rock overlook along the Sonoma Coast for initial seabird monitoring training. [Photo by Jim Weigand – BLM]

The afternoon was spent at the Jenner visitor center with NOAA-Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary's Seabird Protection Network outreach specialist Mai Maheigan discussing human disturbance of seabirds and completing wildlife disturbance forms;

Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods' monitoring coordinator and board member Hollis Bewley presenting her historic bird observations and breeding success on the Sonoma coast and photographs of prominent seabirds; and BLM's Jim Weigand instructing the group on monitoring logistics and protocols. Michele Luna completed the session by setting up additional training days and other follow-up tasks needed (e.g., identifying the volunteers' availability in order to determine how often monitoring can be conducted during the non-breeding season).

According to CCNM manager Rick Hanks, "This is a citizen science program is the initial step towards establishing a chapter of the Seabird Protection Network without having to wait for oil spill funding." He added that, "The program will start with the monitoring part of the Seabird Protection Network and ultimately move into the outreach piece as well." The Seabird Protection Network is a multi-agency statewide program that strives to address human disturbance and enhance seabird recovery efforts, through an organized, place-based outreach and education program, coupled with monitoring, management coordination, and enforcement.