

The Point Lobos Log

Point Lobos State Natural Reserve, Monterey County, California

6 March 2023

The winter of storms

1 *Day at the beach*
Monastery Beach



2 Lonely cypress
Headland Cove

The winter of storms

You've undoubtedly heard about California's drought-busting winter so far, with snow totaling more than 40 feet / 12 meters in some places in the Sierra Nevada since the annual "wet season" began in October. As I write this, [Yosemite National Park](#) is closed to visitors for six more days at least because snow on the ground today is up to 15 feet / 4.6 meters deep. There was no way to know at the time, but my [holiday newsletter in December](#) (and accompanying [video](#)) offered a preview of what was to come.

The Sierra snowpack is the largest single reservoir of fresh water in the state, accounting for 30% of our water usage in an average year, and Friday's report from California's 130 electronic snow sensors placed throughout the mountains show [the current snowpack at 190% of normal](#). March is the last month of our wet season.

I'd love to get back up to the Sierra to photograph what has happened there; alas, the family helicopter is in the shop for a major overhaul.

Yet while the Sierra presents the most dramatic evidence that this winter has been packed with storms, the place where most of the 38.5 million Californians experience the weather change for themselves is along the coast, where [nearly seven of every 10 of us live](#). There's been snow on our puny mountains, too, but most of the water has swept in on high winds from the Pacific Ocean as rain, downing trees and rendering the landscape soggy but refreshingly green. There's a little bit of Alaska and Hawaii in every drop.

It's all visible at the [Point Lobos State Natural Preserve](#), a tiny Monterey County peninsula that juts into a 276-mile / 444-kilometer long protected portion of the ocean called the [Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary](#). There's a [YouTube video that accompanies this newsletter here](#).

Point Lobos — named *Punta de los Lobos Marinos* by the first Spanish explorers, whose term for what we call "sea lions" in English was "sea wolves" — snags more than its share of harsh weather and cold-water sea creatures.

It is surrounded by undersea kelp forests, thousand-foot / 300-meter depths within a few kayak strokes from shore, spied upon by migrating whales and topped by a delicate landscape covered with rare and weather-tortured vegetation that requires confining hikers to narrow paths except when walking on bare bedrock.

Only 75 cars at \$10 apiece are allowed in at a time, but you can park alongside the highway and walk in for free.



3 *Birds on a rock*
Guillemot Island



4 *Wave explosion*

Cannery Point



5 Layered history
Hidden Beach



6 *Clinging to life*

Cypress Cove



7 *Lookout*
Whalers Knoll



8 *Down the up staircase*
Cypress Grove Trail



9 *You talkin' to me?*
Whalers Cove



10 *North Shore Trail*
Bluefish Cove



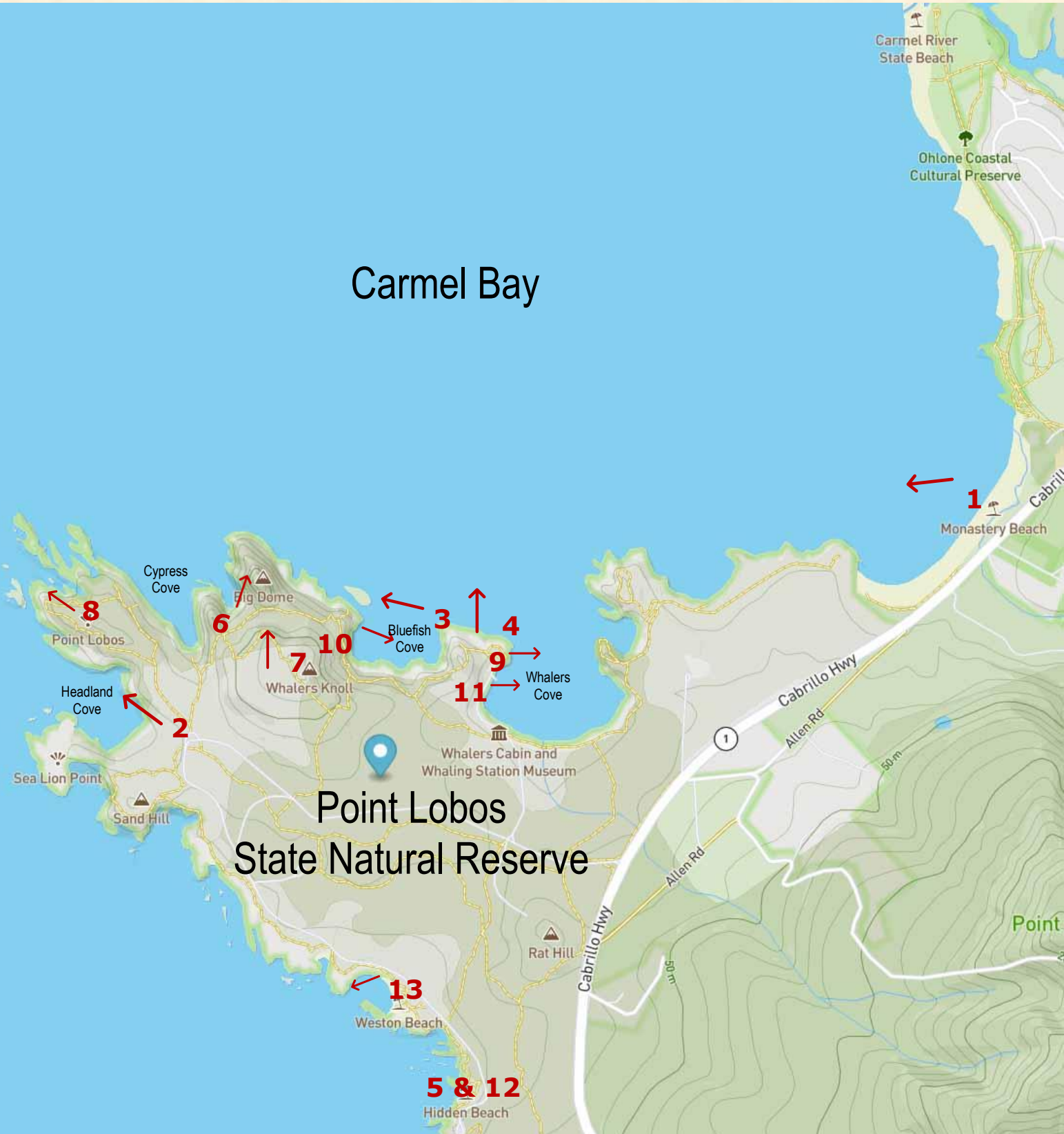
11 *Plump & precious*
Whalers Cove



12 *Post-storm*
Hidden Beach

Photo locations

The title of each picture in this newsletter contains a red number that corresponds to the red number on the Point Lobos map below. The number is where I was standing to make the shot, and the arrow indicates the direction of the shot. **Notes on photos** on the next pages has more information about each picture.



Notes on photos

*I shot all the pictures in this newsletter on hikes at Point Lobos State Natural Reserve on February 11, 24 and 28, 2023 except for **11 PLUMP & PRECIOUS**, which I shot December 28, 2011*

1 DAY AT THE BEACH — Motorists headed for Point Lobos from the north — the vast majority of visitors since nearly 8 million people live in the Bay Area and the coast south of the point called Big Sur is sparsely inhabited — get their first glimpse of this wild and beautiful peninsula at Monastery Beach, which is outside the Point Lobos reserve boundary.. This beach is named for the Carmelite Monastery on the opposite (east) side of Highway 1. Three Carmelite friars were chaplains of the 1602 expedition of Don Sebastian Vizcaino, which landed on the beach. The “Carmel” name, which comes from Mount Carmel in Israel, was taken up by the friars’ order and now is the name of the nearby town of Carmel-by-the-Sea on the Monterey Peninsula and the river that flows into Carmel Bay. The first Carmelite nuns didn’t arrive in what is now the United States until 1790, a year after the Constitution was ratified. The monastery here was founded in 1925 and today’s nuns live cloistered lives in a building constructed in 1931.

2 LONELY CYPRESS — There are only two natural stands of this Monterey cypress, one a few miles north at Pebble Beach on the Monterey Peninsula and here at Point Lobos. Their range was once much wider but only in places where there is cool marine air. They get most of their water in the form fog drip. The trees have been successfully planted in New Zealand, Great Britain, France and on the northern Mediterranean coast. See also picture **6 CLINGING TO LIFE**.

3 BIRDS ON A ROCK and the inset photo — It wasn’t until I looked closely at this photo and noticed the vertical columns of black marks on the gray rock called Guillemot Island that I realized exactly what I was seeing. They are Brandt’s Cormorants, an aquatic bird that dives as deep as 200 feet / 60 meters beneath the waves to feed on fish. On a hike a few days before, I photographed the same island from the opposite side, which you can see in the inset photo. The blue throat on the nearest bird is an indication we’re at the beginning of mating season.

4 WAVE EXPLOSION — This rock is among those in the crashing surf of the cover photo. This time I’m looking down on it from atop Cannery Point at the entrance to Whalers Cove. This view is to the north across Carmel Bay to the town of Carmel-by-the-Sea. The water covers a 1,000-foot / 300-meter deep undersea canyon.

5 LAYERED HISTORY — Lying on the driftwood in the foreground is the brown, partly eaten carcass of a California sea lion that washed up on the beach. You can see part of the white bones of the spinal column through the large hole in its skin. Sea lions are prey for orcas (killer whales) — which migrate along this part of the coast — but since so much of the carcass is intact, I think that’s unlikely in this case. Washed up on land, dead sea lions are food for many scavengers including California condors, which I wrote about here last summer. The layered rocks here tell another history. The strip of coastal California from San Francisco southward is on the western side of the San Andreas Fault, which means

it really belongs to the tectonic plate that is the floor of the Pacific Ocean, not the North American plate ([I wrote about this a year ago here](#)). The rocks of Point Lobos have been sliding northward slowly, in earthquake fits and jerks, for about 30 million years. The "[Carmelo Formation](#)" — layers of sediments that are one of two types of bedrock at Point Lobos — are clearly visible in this picture at Hidden Beach. These layers contain the fossilized tracks of ancient undersea animals, such as worms and shrimplike creatures. Had I known that before I visited, I would have gotten some fossil pictures, too. But you can see one [photo here](#).

6 CLINGING TO LIFE — "The Old Veteran's" trunk splayed across the cliff above Cypress Cove clearly shows the beating that a century of Pacific storms can hand out to cypress trees on this rugged coast.

7 LOOKOUT — The annual migration of gray whales along the coast between Alaska and Baja California (I live in what the Spanish explorers called Alta California) not only attracted orcas to these waters but human whalers as well. From 1861 to 1882, Portuguese whalers operated out of Whalers Cove and used this hilltop as a lookout for their spouts.

8 DOWN THE UP STAIRCASE — Point Lobos trails are easy but extraordinarily scenic. The Cypress Grove Loop, one of the longest, is just 0.8 miles / 1.3 kilometers, easily covered in 30 minutes with photo stops.

9 YOU TALKIN' TO ME? — Sea otters are the hit attraction at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. You can see them wild in Whalers Cove. Sit on the rocky shore for a few minutes and you'll begin to see that the dark dots scattered among the waves are the heads of bobbing sea otters. This one is in a classic pose, floating on his/her back. In this arrangement, an otter will place a rock on its belly and slam down a shellfish in its front paws to crack it open for lunch. Mother otters float this way while their pup sleeps on their belly. Unlike whales, seals and sea lions, otters don't rely on blubber to insulate themselves from the cold ocean but depend on their dense fur. It is the densest fur of any animal with between 600,000 and 1 million hairs per square inch. Human head hair comes in at about 100,000 hairs.

10 NORTH SHORE TRAIL — This and the Cypress Grove Trail are the quintessential Point Lobos walks, taking in cliffs, crashing waves, marine mammals and Monterey cypress. This is ¾-mile / 1.2-kilometer walk has a little bit of up and down following the contours of the land around Bluefish Cove..

11 PLUMP & PRECIOUS — I shot this harbor seal back in 2011. The best place to find them is sunning on China Cove Beach, but that area was closed because of storm damage during my visits.

12 POST-STORM — These visitors from Vermont once lived in Monterey and return about once a year to visit family. The rock is part of the Carmelo Formation (see **5 LAYERED HISTORY**).

13 CLEARING STORM (next page) — Just off the right edge of the image, the sun is falling into the Pacific.

