

# FORT ROSS NEWS

December Newsletter | Fort Ross Conservancy



## Foreword

IAN TAYLOR, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends of Fort Ross Conservancy,



As we approach the close of another remarkable year at Fort Ross, we are reminded how much your generosity makes possible. Thanks to supporters like you, Fort Ross Conservancy (FRC) continues its mission to protect the cultural and natural history of Fort Ross and Salt Point Parks, support vital education programs, and steward these treasured coastal landscapes for future generations.

To help us fulfill our mission, we invite you to consider making an end-of-year contribution to Fort Ross Conservancy. Your gift—no matter the size—directly supports preservation efforts, community programming, and hands-on learning opportunities for thousands of visitors and students each year.



OPEN DAILY 10:00 AM - 4:30 PM

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**ONLINE AUCTION**

**ENDS DECEMBER 9**

**Score valuable gifts, artwork,  
experiences and more!**

Fort Ross Conservancy acknowledges that the lands on which we operate is the occupied ancestral land of the Kashia Pomo, Metini.

## Two Ways to Give This Season:

1. Donate through our website or by mail

Send your donation by mail to:

Fort Ross Conservancy  
19005 Coast Highway One  
Jenner, CA 95450

(Please make checks payable to Fort Ross Conservancy.)

**DONATE**

2. Donate Online Through **Our Silent Auction Site**

Beginning December 2 (Giving Tuesday), our online silent auction will launch. You can bid on unique items—or simply make a direct donation to FRC through the online platform. The auction closes on December 9.

Your generosity ensures that Fort Ross and Salt Point continue to thrive as places of learning, reflection, and cultural connection. We are deeply grateful for your ongoing support.

Warmest wishes for a holiday season filled with peace and joy,

Ian Taylor  
Executive Director,  
Fort Ross Conservancy

Support FRC while grocery shopping.  
Community cards at Oliver's Market in  
Santa Rosa, Windsor and Cotati are free!

## ONLINE HOLIDAY AUCTION DECEMBER 2-9

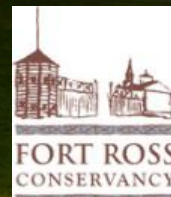
Your gift directly supports preservation efforts, community programming, and hands-on learning opportunities



**See Page 4 for more**

*Place your bids on  
exquisite gift items  
and packages and win!*

<http://fortrossconservancy.betterworld.org/auctions/fine-gifts-fort-ross>







## Updates and Events

### Winter Weather

The coast has already started to get hammered by strong wind storms. We are expecting more storms as winter sets in that may lead to power outages and park closures. Check our social media and website for updates when planning to visit Fort Ross State Historic Park. Everyone near the coast, stay safe!

### The Harvest Festival

To everyone who joined us for Harvest Festival this year - thank you! Approx. 500 people came to taste sea urchin uni, listen to music, and browse local artisan stalls. We had two full-house film screenings + Q&As of "Sequoias of the Sea" by Ana Blanco and Natasha Benjamin through the International Ocean Film Foundation. Thanks to Birgit Nielsen, FRC's Event Coordinator, for organizing the bands, stalls, food, drink and silent auction. We are already looking forward to the next festival!

### Russian Orthodox Pilgrimage

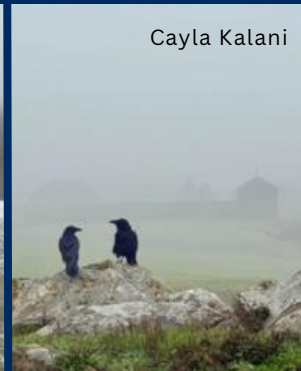
Over 1230 people journeyed to Fort Ross to celebrate 100 years of services at the Fort Ross Chapel!

### Workshop

FRC staff had an incredible time learning more about outdoor education at a weekend training with National Geographic Explorers and California State Parks. We can't wait to teach more Marine Ecology Programs (MEPs) in 2026! See page 10 - 11 for more details.

### Happy Holidays from FRC!

As a busy 2025 comes to a close, the FRC team wishes everyone in the Fort Ross Community a very happy holiday season and New Year! If you are in need of presents or a treat, come and see the jewelry, puppets, books, and art in our Visitor Center and be sure to have a look at our **online holiday auction (Page 4)**! We hope to see you next year!



Cayla Kalani

Russian Orthodox Pilgrimage  
Photo by Hank Birnbaum



Cayla Kalani

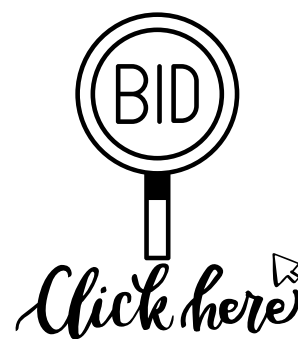
**Reef Campground is closed for winter until April 2026**



# Online Holiday Auction

On December 2nd, we launched our End-of-Year online auction. This is your chance to score valuable gifts, experiences and outings!

The auction will end December 9 at 8 pm!



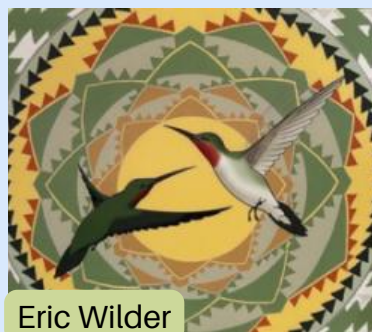
## Fork in the Path - Foraging Class



## Paintings by local Artists



## Kashia Inspired Package



## California State Parks



## Celebrate the holiday season with some of the best of Sonoma County

Bid on high-end items donated to FRC to support our interpretive & educational programs. There is gorgeous art, jewelry, wellness packages, and more. How about a gift certificate for lunch for 4 at Russian River Vineyards in 2026?

Learn about the local marine vegetation, the bull kelp restoration efforts and so much more by bidding on "Beautiful Seaweed & Algae" package. Learn the names of our wildflowers. Go out and forage urchins, mushrooms, greens.

## Russian-made shawl & chocolate with earrings



## Roses from Three Sisters Apothecary



## Local wines and wine tastings



## Activity packs for kids



DONATE



FRC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit. Every \$ raised supports the educational programming at Metini/Fort Ross. All donations and purchases through the silent auction are tax-deductible.

Thanks to Birgit Nielsen and Cayla Kalani for organizing the auction



SILENT AUCTION





# 2025 IN REVIEW

**63,609**

Visited Fort Ross  
State Historic Park

**2500**

Attended Special  
Events

**574,717**

Reached through our  
social media, website,  
visitor center etc.



**Alaska Native  
Day**



**Ocean & Art Festival**  
Sonoma County Pomo Dancers



**Citizen science  
programs**



**Harvest Festival**  
*The Barn Wreckers*

# Thank you

**37**

**Volunteers**

**625**

**Volunteer Hours**

## Education and Service Programs

**42**

Programs

**1,500**

Students

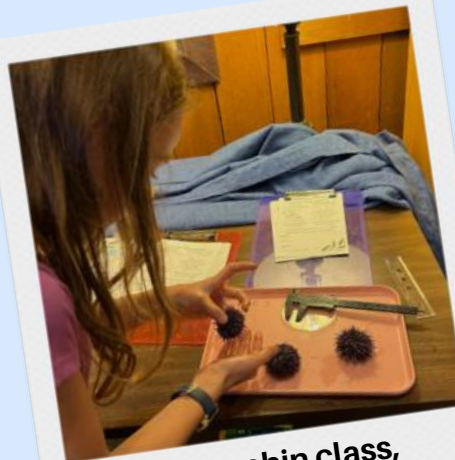
**11**

Scouts Programs

**250**

Scouts

*In 2025, schools from Las Vegas and  
Maryland participated in the Marine  
Ecology Program!*



**Sea urchin class,  
Marine Ecology Program**



**Tidepooling  
and finding urchins!**



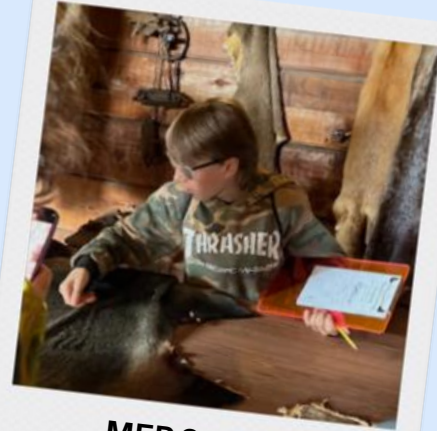


# IMPROVEMENTS IN 2025

In 2025, we launched the Coastal Academy! A hub for environmental stewardship on the Sonoma Coast that includes community programs, conservation initiatives and our Marine Ecology Program (MEP).

A huge thank you to our funders and donors who have improved our Marine Ecology Program this year. We can now provide students with clipboards and activity booklets to facilitate their learning, teach dissections and habitat restoration classes, and survey the beach for sand crabs. We have also purchased important safety and teaching equipment for instructors. This has been a game changer as our program continues to grow - and there is still so much to do!

Donations are still needed to provide program and transport scholarships to underserved schools and continue to provide resources to enhance learning and student experiences.



**MEP Student**  
Exploring the Fur Warehouse



**The new greenhouse**



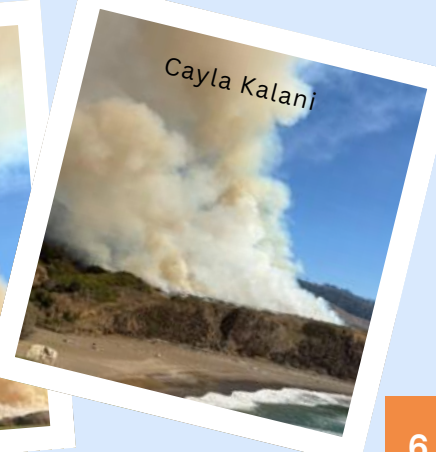
**Ready for a class!**

## New Greenhouse

Thanks to funding from USFWS and help from Brad Wilson, we have a new greenhouse where we have started teaching students about habitat restoration, native plants and pollinators. In the new year, we will be ready to grow native plants for our gardens! See page 13 about becoming a garden volunteer

## Fire management

California State Parks in coordination with Cal Fire and local fire agencies have been clearing vegetation and conducted a prescribed burn near Reef Campground in October. These burns are part of State Park's Prescribed Fire Program for vegetation management, hazardous fuel load reductions and wildlife habitat improvement.



Cayla Kalani



# Fort Ross Community Appreciation

Everything we do and achieve at FRC would not be possible without our amazing, dedicated staff and all the volunteer support we receive throughout the year. This team is the backbone of everything we do from the events to the daily operations.

## Special thanks to....

### The FRC Staff

Ian Taylor, *Executive Director*  
Sarah Thompson, *Director of Operations*  
Dr. Dione Deaker, *Coastal Naturalist and MEP lead*  
Birgit Nielsen, *Events Coordinator and Interpreter*  
Cayla Kalani, *Visitor Center Coordinator*  
Hank Birnbaum, *Instructor and bilingual tour guide*  
Jianna Satore, *Bookshop, campground and kiosk*  
Carolyn Adams, *Bookshop*  
Kerry White, *Kiosk*

### Call House Volunteers

Barbara Wong  
Carol Goralski  
Cathryn Maloney  
Kathleen Rasmussen  
Marcia Joyce  
Mary Pat Jacobs  
Susan Zerwick

### Marine Mammals Volunteers

Betty Di Rigolo  
Daryle Yount  
Gail Wight  
Jane Straight  
Jianna Satore  
Jody Nunez  
Laura Gordin  
Lauri Arnold  
Maryellen Blackburn  
Mary Pat Jacobs  
Merryl Mendelson  
Naomi Granoff  
Sandee Swanson and Stan  
Sue Morgan-Yount  
Susan Stephens  
Susan Zerwick  
Tracey Weatherby  
Warren Doyle

### Other Volunteers and help

Sue Morgan-Yount and Daryle Yount  
- Weekends, Visitor Center, Fur Warehouse,  
Ocean & Art Festival, Harvest Festival  
Anton Korbets - Library, Harvest Festival  
Lilia Ponce - Harvest Festival  
Thia Jackson - Harvest Festival  
Galen Camp and Dara - Harvest Festival  
Sterling Buell - Harvest Festival  
Warren Doyle - Harvest Festival  
Vincent Saccomanno - Harvest Festival  
Russian House Kedry - Festivals  
The Barn Wreckers and Gradina - Harvest Festival  
Brad Wilson - Greenhouse  
Marlene Hild - Harvest Festival Pumpkin Carver  
PURP 707 sea urchin volunteers - Harvest Festival  
Local fire agencies - reducing fuel load for fires

# Thank You





## See you in 2026!

### First Day Hike

January 1<sup>st</sup>, 10:30 am

#### Stump Beach to Phillips Gulch Falls & beyond.

SAVE THE DATE: Meet the New Year right by joining us for an invigorating hike embracing the elements, land and sea, on our scenic Sonoma coast!

Meet at Stump Beach Trailhead, 1.3 miles north of Salt Point State Park's Gerstle Cove Park Entry Kiosk and Campground. This easy-moderate hike, featuring stunning coastal geology, flora and fauna, is approximately two miles (2.5+ h) roundtrip, including lunch break.

Please bring water, a bag lunch, layered clothing, sunscreen, headwear, hiking boots (be prepared for some possible brisk wind and seaside moisture) and if desired, optional hiking sticks, binoculars, and camera. Not recommended for kids under eight and - sorry - no dogs are permitted on Salt Point State Park trails or beaches.

For more information: Please check Fort Ross Conservancy's Events webpage, email [hankb@fortross.org](mailto:hankb@fortross.org) or call (707) 847-3437.

## Gerstle Cove Visitor Center

A special moment when Rich Draffon, the first volunteer from the Visitor Center's original opening in 1989, joined Ian Taylor to celebrate the reopening!

**We are looking for volunteers** to open this visitor center on weekends from March to September in 2026. Welcome visitors and campers to the park, provide tips about points of interest and hiking trails and hand out California State Park resources and Junior Ranger booklets and badges to kids.

This is a lovely, quaint visitor center overlooking Gerstle Cove State Marine Reserve and Salt Point State Marine Conservation Area with beautiful murals of local wildlife and taxidermy.



Hank Birnbaum



Hank Birnbaum







## FRC Events on the horizon

First Day Hike, January 1st  
Alaska Native Day, May  
SnapShot Cal Coast Bioblitz, June  
Summer Festival, July  
Harvest Festival, October  
Planting Party, November

## Fort Ross Tours

**Tours about the rich and diverse natural and cultural history of Fort Ross and Salt Point led by our knowledgeable guides**

### **Public Tours\***

Three guided group tours per day on weekends and most holidays. \$15/person, Children 10 & under are free.

### **Private Tours**

Book a guided tour of Fort Ross or Salt Point parks \$25/person per hour (\$100 minimum). Children 10 & under, free.

### **Tours are led by:**

Hank Birnbaum, FRC Interpreter  
Birgit Nielsen, FRC Event Coordinator and Interpretive Senior Park Aide at California State Parks.

### **Call House Open days**

First full weekend of every month

Contact us by email at [info@fortross.org](mailto:info@fortross.org) or phone at 707-847-3437 (10 am - 4:30 pm) to verify availability and timing of tours.

Alaska Native Day 2026



Hank Birnbaum leading a Fort Tour



Birgit Nielsen (photo by LesCar)



# Marine Ecology Program in 2026

## School programs

Field trips, in-class lessons and assemblies!

## Any group welcome to book

The MEP is for anyone and all ages. Families, friends, corporate and social groups - anyone!\*

## Programs at Fort Ross

Day programs: 1-5 hours

Overnight programs: 6.5 h of activities across 2 days.

Sleep overnight in the Fort or at Reef Campground!

**For more details and to book, visit the FRC website or email [mep@fortross.org](mailto:mep@fortross.org)**



## Book for 2026

Book now for Spring, Summer and Fall 2026. Winter is possible although storms may lead to park closures and program cancellations.

Pssst...low tide dates are the most popular so book early to go tidepooling!

## School Partnership Program

FRC will work with you to organize an *MEPlan* so your students can experience the different fun-filled activities we have on offer. We have worked with schools to provide:

- Field trips for multiple grades across years
- Multiple field trips for one grade/class
- In-class lessons and field trips for the whole school



Sea urchin under the microscope

## In-class programs

Pair a field trip with an in-class program\*\* to set the scene for your students. FRC can also provide stand-alone in-class programs and assemblies.

\*Program minimums apply. Special allowances may be made for schools

\*\*Available if ~2 hours away from Fort Ross





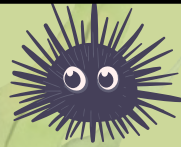
# Marine Ecology Programs in 2026

**If you want to learn about coastal ecology, the MEP is for you!**

Everyone is welcome to these public programs led by FRC's naturalists. Bring your friends, family or just come by yourself! These programs will be also be offered to homeschool families throughout the year.

[Watch this space!](#) Dates for Help Kelp and Invert Alert will be released on our website in February 2026

## HELP KELP!



Over 90% of kelp forests have been lost in California! Learn about what led to an increase in purple sea urchins causing kelp decline while exploring the restored Fort buildings.

Do a sea urchin class, then go tidepooling to see the population boom of sea urchins and directly contribute to their removal!

**Early Spring 2026**

## INVERT ALERT!

Find fish, sea stars, urchins, anemones and more - tidepooling is great for the whole family!

Explore the intertidal zone with an ecologist, learn species ID, and use digital microscopes to look at intertidal critters up close.

**Late Spring 2026**

## SAND CRABS

Dig in the sand to search for the Pacific sand crab!

Learn about the importance of these unassuming crustaceans and use sampling equipment to find them at the beach.

**Summer 2026**



## AMAZING MARINE MAMMALS



Sea lions | Harbor seals | Humpback whales

See and learn about resident and migrating marine mammals and learn about the species hunted during the 1800s Fur Trade in a tour of the Fort and the Fur Warehouse.

**Early Fall 2026**



## Planting Party



Learn about pollinators and how we are restoring their habitat at Fort Ross! Make seed bombs and help us plant for endangered butterflies.

**Late Fall 2026**

TO OPT-IN FOR EMAIL ALERTS WHEN DATES ARE ANNOUNCED OR IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

Email [mep@fortross.org](mailto:mep@fortross.org)

Visit Marine Ecology Program  
on the FRC website



# 2021 Annual Harbor Seal Report published

**REPORT:** Pacific Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina richardii*) Monitoring at Point Reyes National Seashore and Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Published November 2025 by Sarah Codde and Sarah Allen

## VOLUNTEER HARBOR SEAL SURVEYS

In spring every year, volunteers at Fort Ross Conservancy count harbor seals every two weeks for Point Reyes National Seashore. These efforts contribute to a wider dataset that includes four sites in Sonoma County, eight sites in Marin County, five in San Francisco Bay, six in San Mateo County, and one site in Mendocino County at the Point Arena lighthouse.

The survey data spans from 2000 to 2021 with a gap in 2020 due to COVID-19. The breeding season where harbor seals are pupping is March - May and the molting season where they shed their brown, year-old fur coats for a fresh-new spotted silver look is in June-July.



In 2021, Sonoma Coast, Jenner, and Fort Ross were surveyed (usually Bodega Headland is also counted). Of these sites, the highest counts of adult/immature seals in the breeding season were at Sonoma Coast (148 seals) and Fort Ross (146 seals). At Fort Ross, the number of pups counted (32 pups) was also above average (17 pups, standard deviation = 8.6). Having said this, Fort Ross had the biggest decline since 2019 among the sites and numbers were low (44 seals) compared to long-term averages (174.6 seals, standard deviation = 36.9) during the molt season.

The best time of year to see pups at Fort Ross is the end of April, or early May. Always remember to keep your distance from seals, especially during the pupping season when scared moms may abandon their pups.

At Drakes Estero, Marin County, two harbor seal pups were preyed upon by coyotes!

For the full report: <https://doi.org/10.36967/2315873>

Pages of interest for Fort Ross with graphs: Page 25 - 28







# Volunteer Opportunities

## Fort Ross State Historic Park

Volunteering is a great excuse to get outdoors and come down to the coast. If you are a birder or love hiking, teaching, wildlife, tide pooling and gardening, we have a number of opportunities to get involved with.

**The perks** | Log your hours as a California State Parks Volunteer  
40 hours = a district day use pass for the next year.  
200+ hours = a statewide day use pass for the next year.

### GARDEN VOLUNTEER

Help us make the Visitor Center native garden and education garden beautiful! Our staff have been working away at the gardens but many hands make light the work. We will be collecting seeds and growing new plants in the greenhouse to add to the garden, too!



### CALL HOUSE

Join the volunteer group for the only building that truly represents the ranching era at Fort Ross! The volunteers help maintain the garden, open the Call House on the first full weekend of the month and provide free docent-led tours to the public.



### MARINE MAMMAL SURVEYS

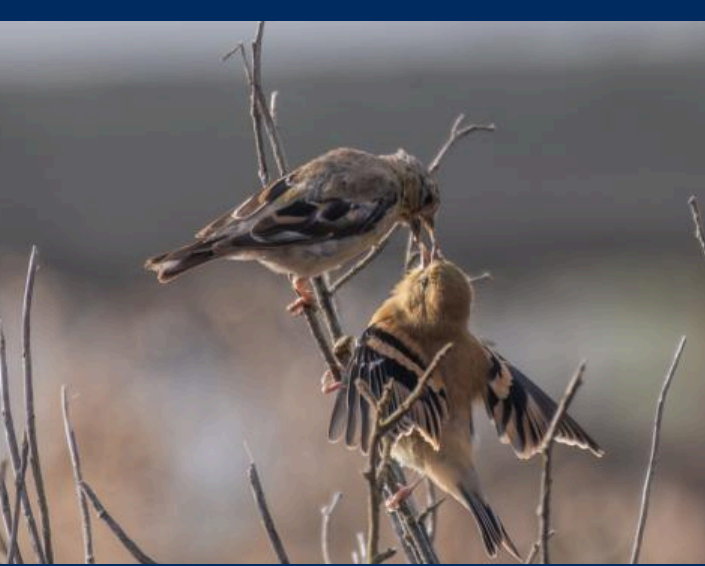
We are always looking for more sets of eyes for our fortnightly seal surveys in the spring (weekday or weekend) and sea lion surveys once a month throughout the year (weekdays)! [Click here to learn more!](#)



Moose Henderson via Getty Images

**Interested in helping in a different capacity?** We have many opportunities throughout the year including festival support, program support, tabling at events and more! [Check Careers for new position announcements](#) too

Email [dioned@fortross.org](mailto:dioned@fortross.org) for more information and to sign up!



# WILDLIFE

## SPOTTED ON THE COAST

### >>> AMERICAN GOLDFINCH

September 1

Snack time for this juvenile! Photographed by Miles Heisel, iNaturalist.

### >>> INTERTIDAL JUMPING SPIDER

October 31

This spider was aptly photographed on Halloween in Salt Point State Park. These spiders are found along America's West Coast.

Photographed at Salt Point, Ken-ichi Ueda, iNaturalist co-founder

### SPOTTED <<<

### DORID

October 6

This is a great photo of a nudibranch showing the oral tentacles used to "smell", taste, and navigate through the water by detecting chemicals.

### >>> TIDEPPOOL SCULPIN

October 6

These sculpin have a home area among the tidepools where they return to and can change color to hide from predators.



### SEE YOUR PHOTO HERE

Post photos taken in Salt Point or Fort Ross to iNaturalist to have the chance at being selected for the next newsletter!

DONATE

Dorid and sculpin photographed by Bella McCracken, iNaturalist

PHOTOS IN THIS ISSUE BY  
DIONE DEAKER UNLESS  
OTHERWISE STATED