

Fort Ross State Historic Park



Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at **(707) 847-3286**. If you need this publication in an alternate format, contact interp@parks.ca.gov.

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Fort Ross State Historic Park

19005 Highway 1

Jenner, CA 95450

(707) 847-3286

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In 1812, Russian and Alaskan explorers and traders established Fort Ross at Metini, a centuries-old Kashaya Pomo coastal village.



Fort Ross State Historic Park, one of the oldest parks in the California State Park System, was established in 1906. Located on the Sonoma coast 11 miles northwest of Jenner on Highway 1, the 3,386-acre park preserves North America's southernmost Russian settlement. The Fort Ross Colony was founded in 1812 by members of the Russian-American Company, who built it with the help of Alaskan Alutiiq natives. Northwest of the fort, the old Call Ranch House and buildings represent the ranching era that followed the Russian settlement. Park facilities include a visitor center with interpretive exhibits and a research library, a museum bookstore, gardens, the Russian Cemetery, and the Historic Orchard. The fort and its buildings have a sweeping view of the Pacific Ocean, coastal terraces, and densely forested ridges.

Winter storms frequently batter the coastline with gale-force winds. Normal annual rainfall averages 44 inches, with 35 inches falling between November and April. Spring can be windy, and summer often brings a thick layer of fog.

PARK HISTORY

Native People

Metini was a village between the Gualala River and the Russian River that had been occupied for centuries by the Kashaya band of Pomo people. Archaeological evidence shows that Kashaya Pomo would move their villages from ridgetops to camps in the foothills and along the coast, according to the season. At the shore, they found plentiful

supplies of abalone, mussels, fish, and a rich variety of sea plants. The Kashaya harvested sea salt for domestic use and trading. Plants, acorns, deer, and smaller mammals provided abundant foods inland.

The Kashaya Pomo excelled in the art of basket making. They wove intricate containers of wooly sedge grass and bulrush roots, redwood bark, and willow and redbud branches. The baskets were used for cooking and storing food, trapping fish or animals, toys, cradles, gifts, and ceremonies. Some baskets were colored with wild walnut juice and berries and decorated with beads, quills, or feathers. One prized feather came from the red spot on a red-winged blackbird.

The Kashaya bartered with the neighboring Coast Miwok, who lived south of the Russian River near Bodega Bay. Kashaya first encountered non-native people when Russians came to Metini.

Russians in North America

Beginning in 1742, *promyshlenniki* (Russian serfs or native Siberian contract workers) began to leave the Siberian mainland by ship to seek fur-bearing marine mammals on and near the many islands to the east.

In 1784 Gregory Shelikov built the first permanent Russian settlement on Kodiak Island, in what is now Alaska. The organization he led became the Russian-American Company in 1799, when Tsar Paul granted the company a charter giving it monopoly over all Russian enterprises in North America. The Russian-American Company established colonies from Kodiak

Island to Sitka in present-day Alaska, as well as in Hawaii.

The operation expanded when American ship captains contracted with the Russian-American Company for joint ventures, using Alaska natives to hunt sea otters and fur seals along the coast of Alta and Baja California. Otter pelts were highly valued in trade with China, and large profits flowed to company shareholders, including members of Russian nobility.

The Russian-American Company's chief manager, Alexander Baranov, sent his assistant, Ivan Kuskov, to locate a California site that could serve as a trading base. Kuskov arrived in Bodega Bay on the ship *Kodiak* in January of 1809 and remained



Artifacts of settlement life

until late August. He and his party of 40 Russians and 150 Alaskans explored the entire region, taking more than 2,000 sea otter pelts back to Alaska.

Kuskov returned to California to establish a Russian outpost at Metini, 18 miles north of Bodega Bay. The site had plentiful water, forage, and pasture, and a nearby supply of coast redwood for construction. The village's relative inaccessibility from the Spanish-occupied territory to the south also gave the settlers a defensive advantage.

In 1812 Kuskov brought 25 Russians and 80 Alaskans to build houses and a stockade. They established a colony to



*Ivan Kuskov,
first manager of Fort Ross*



grow wheat and other crops for Russians living in Alaska, to hunt marine mammals, and to trade with Spanish Alta California.

On August 30, 1812, the colony was formally dedicated and renamed “Ross” to honor its connection with Imperial Russia—or *Rossiiia*. The colonists called their new home Fortress Ross or Settlement Ross.

Life at the Ross Colony

The newcomers built redwood structures and a wooden stockade with two cannon-fortified blockhouses on the northwest and southeast corners. A well in the center of the fort provided water. The interior contained the manager's two-story house, the clerks' quarters, artisans' workshops, and Russian officials' barracks. In the mid-1820s, the chapel was built.

Outside the stockade to the northwest, lower-ranking employees and people of mixed ancestry gradually established a village, and to the southwest the native Alaskans lived in another village on a bluff above a small cove.

One surviving original structure at Fort Ross is the Rotchev House, renovated about 1836 and named for Alexander Rotchev, the last manager of Ross, who lived there with his wife



Russian flag at the Rotchev House

Elena. Several other buildings have been reconstructed: the first Russian Orthodox chapel south of Alaska, the stockade, and five other buildings—the first manager's home (Kuskov House), the Officials' Quarters, a Fur Warehouse (or *magazin*), and two blockhouses.

Only a small number of Russian men and fewer Russian women are believed to have lived at Ross. The settlement was multicultural for at least thirty years—with native Siberians, Alaskans, Hawaiians, Californians, and individuals of mixed European and Native American ancestry.

In addition to farming and hunting sea mammals, Ross colony industries included blacksmithing, tanning, brickmaking, barrel making, and shipbuilding. The first ship built in California, *Rumiantsev*, was completed in 1818.

By 1820 the marine mammal population was depleted from over-hunting by the Americans, Spanish, and Russians. The Russian-American Company subsequently introduced hunting moratoriums on seals and otters, establishing the first marine-mammal conservation laws in the Pacific.

Russians contributed greatly to California's scientific knowledge. Their voyages expanded the study of geography, cartography, ethnography, geology, meteorology, hydrography, botany, and biology. Results gained from Russian voyages brought about many early charts of California's north coast.

In 1840 Russian naturalist and artist Ilya Voznesenskii spent a year at Ross, gathering specimens of California's flora and fauna. He also collected native California artifacts, such as the acclaimed Kashaya Pomo baskets. Many of these specimens are displayed today in the Peter the Great Museum (the *Kunstkamera*) in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Post-Russian Period

In December 1841, the Russian-American Company sold its Fort Ross holdings to John Sutter. Sutter sent his trusted assistant, John Bidwell, to gather up the Ross hardware, cattle, sheep, and other animals and transport them to the Sacramento valley, where Sutter had built his own fort.

William Otto Benitz arrived to manage Fort Ross for Sutter in 1843. Subsequent owners sold to George W. Call in 1873. Call established the 8,000-acre Call Ranch and exported cordwood, railroad ties, fence

posts, tanbark, apples, and dairy products well into the 20th century. Workers loaded cargo onto vessels anchored at the wharf in the sheltered cove below using a cargo chute. The Calls owned the ranch property until 1973.

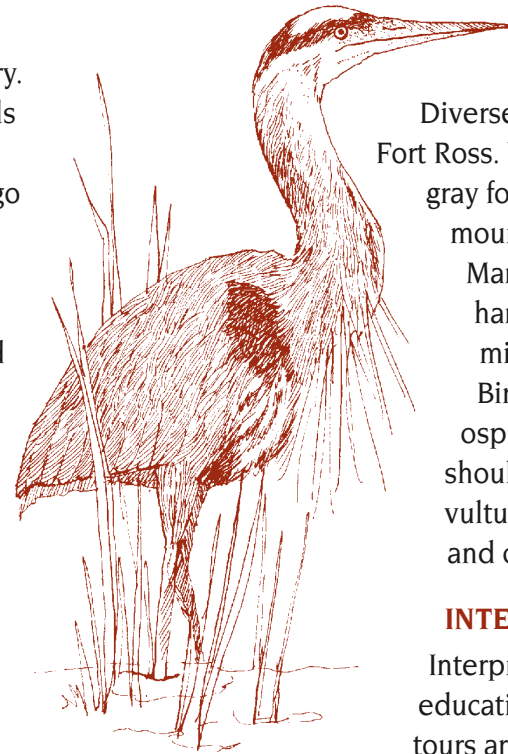
In 1903 the California Historical Landmarks Committee purchased the Ross stockade area from the Call family; the State of California acquired the site in 1906.

California State Parks has done extensive restoration and reconstruction while adding acreage to preserve the surrounding environment. The refurbished Rotchev House has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

NATURAL HISTORY

Fort Ross is located on a wave-cut marine terrace between the ocean to the southwest and high, forested hills to the northeast. Steep bluffs drop several hundred feet into the sea to the southeast. Below the fort, sheltered Sandy Cove features a serene beach and still waters. Fort Ross Creek flows over two miles to Sandy Cove.

Redwood and coniferous forests, grasslands, scrub, and coastal strand make up the park's four distinct vegetation types. The upland slopes are covered in Bishop pine and Douglas-fir while the coastal shelf is open grassland. Protected hollows and ravines shelter old- and second-growth



Great blue heron

stands of redwood trees.

Diverse wildlife species live at Fort Ross. Visitors may encounter gray foxes, black-tailed hares, mountain lions and bobcats. Marine mammals include harbor seals, sea lions and migrating gray whales. Birdwatchers may find osprey, red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks, turkey vultures, kestrels, herons and other shore birds.

INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS

Interpretive presentations, educational programs, and tours are offered. Fort Ross Festival is held annually in July. School groups may participate

in "living history" Environmental Living Programs, taking participants back to the early 1800s, or in Marine Ecology Programs. For more information, please contact Fort Ross Conservancy at (707) 847-3437 or visit the website at www.fortross.org.

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Picnicking—Tables are located near the visitor center, the Call Ranch House, in the historic compound, and at Sandy Cove beach. **Trails**—Pedestrian trails lead to Sandy Cove beach from the Reef Campground, the fort compound, and from the Russian-American Company Cemetery.



Russian-American Company Cemetery

Fishing—Abalone and rockfish usually abound in the coastal waters in season. However, there have been recent abalone closures. Check before diving.

Anglers aged 16 and over must possess a valid California fishing license. All abalone divers must adhere to current legal limits and carry a current Abalone Report Card. See www.wildlife.ca.gov.

Diving—Certified scuba divers can explore the wreck of the S.S. Pomona, a ship that sank more than 100 years ago off Fort Ross Cove. **Dive and swim at your own risk.** Always dive with a buddy and exercise caution in the ocean.

Hazardous rip currents and large waves can appear out of nowhere and sweep unsuspecting visitors out to sea. Never turn your back to the waves. No lifeguards are on duty.

Camping—Reef Campground has 21 primitive sites (first-come, first-served) with flush toilets but no showers. For campground status, call (707) 847-3437.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Parking, fort buildings, the visitor center, and picnic area are fully accessible. Paved trails lead to the windmill and the fort. Walkways within the stockade are ADA-accessible. A beach wheelchair may be borrowed. For updated information, visit the website at <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

PLEASE REMEMBER

- Park grounds open ½ hour before sunrise and close ½ hour after sunset. Visit the website for current operating hours.
- Stay on designated trails to protect plants, prevent erosion, and avoid poison oak.
- Except for service animals, dogs are not allowed on beaches or trails. All pets must be on a six-foot-maximum leash at all times and be confined to a tent or vehicle at night.
- Fires are not allowed in the park except in designated fire rings or park barbecues.
- Natural and cultural resources are protected and may not be disturbed or removed.



Living History program participants

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Salt Point State Park/Kruse Rhododendron State Natural Reserve (SNR), 8 miles north at 25050 Hwy. 1, Jenner 95450 (707) 847-3221
- Sonoma Coast State Park, 14 miles south at 3095 Hwy. 1, Bodega Bay 94923 (707) 875-3483
- Armstrong Redwoods SNR/Austin Creek State Recreation Area, 17000 Armstrong Woods Rd. Guerneville 95446 (707) 869-2015



Settlement Ross, 1841 by I.G. Voznesenskii

Fort Ross
State Historic Park



0 0.25 0.5 Miles
0 0.4 0.8 Kilometers



This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization.
For information, contact:
Fort Ross Conservancy
19005 Highway 1, Jenner, CA 95450
(707) 847-3437 • www.fortross.org

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