



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

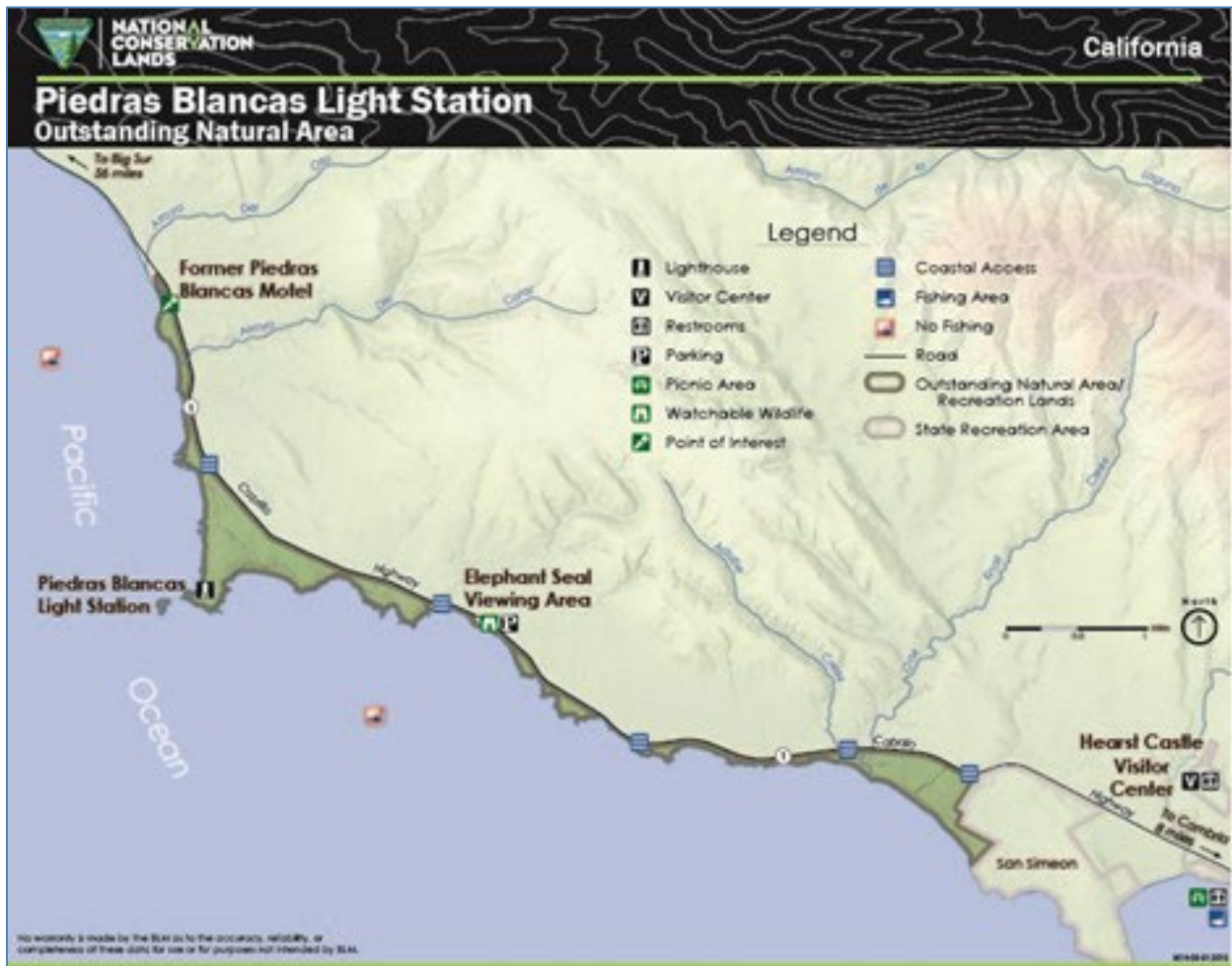
California  
2022 Annual Manager's Report

# Piedras Blancas Light Station

Outstanding Natural Area



# Map





# Accomplishments

---

The greatest accomplishment at Piedras Blancas Light Station Outstanding Natural Area (the ONA) in 2022 was the reopening of the area for more public tours. 2022 was a transition year because it was the first full year of public tours following the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic the interpretive program had to be modified for public safety. The Piedras Blancas tour switched from a fully guided tour to a newly developed partially self-guided tour with volunteer docents available to assist. This was to allow for social distancing and because Piedras Blancas could not host large groups inside buildings, including the light station. A fortunate outcome of the self-guided tours was that Piedras Blancas staff and visitors overwhelmingly liked this version of the tour. For this reason, all regular public tours are now partially self-guided. The number of tour participants dramatically increased in 2022, over the two prior years, as restrictions were lifted and more people were able to travel.

Another big accomplishment for 2022 is also tied to the transition out of the pandemic. 2022 saw the return of “hike in” days to the Piedras Blancas Light Station. This tour gives visitors an opportunity to hike from nearby California State Parks property onto Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land and explore the light station at their own pace. Visitors are encouraged to pack in a picnic lunch to enjoy on the grounds and meet the BLM staff and volunteers. One of the popular additions to this year’s “hike in” days was an educational scavenger hunt for kids.

Historically, BLM has operated the ONA with a small staff comprised of one manager, one outdoor recreation planner and a large crew of volunteers and interns. In 2022, BLM added a third staff member, a park ranger, to support operations and programs at Piedras Blancas. This position will not only help with the day-to-day maintenance of the site but will also be a huge help with interpretive programs.



# Challenges

---

Most of the challenges the ONA faced in 2022 were a product of the lingering COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. A great crew of volunteers is crucial to provide interpretive programs at Piedras Blancas Light Station and support Piedras Blancas operations. The crew has become smaller since the pandemic creating more work for the BLM staff and other volunteers. With the lighthouse closed for most of 2021, some volunteers did not return when the Light Station was opened back up to the public. Some volunteers expressed that they are not comfortable in large groups, while others have simply moved on to other things or lost interest. Volunteer recruitment is important to BLM and a priority in 2023 to keep up with the increased visitation and to keep morale high with the current volunteers.

Another challenge for staff in 2022 was the limitation on tour size and number of events as a response to the pandemic. In early 2022 tour size was initially limited to 20 people. As restrictions were lifted, the reservations allotted per day were raised to as many as 60 visitors. There were many days early in the year when people were turned away because tours were full. The tour size reductions have been lifted in general, but may be limited due to the availability of staff and volunteers.

School field trips were also impacted by pandemic-related challenges in 2022. This required creative solutions to continue delivery of programs to as many kids as possible. Local schools and BLM worked collaboratively on schedules and transportation for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade interpretive programs in order to make them successful. Some schools reduced contact by putting only one class on each bus, while others split their field trips into two days. Unfortunately, some were not able to facilitate field trips given the circumstances, so BLM staff and volunteers brought their field trip to the classroom when possible. While well received, the short-term response to this situation is not sustainable but will help inform a long-term approach to connect kids to Piedras Blancas.



# Visitors

---

Visitation to Piedras Blancas Light Station is limited to structured public access. BLM staff and volunteer docents lead public tours three to five days per week depending on the season. Summer “hike in” days, special events, and educational outreach programs are additional programs provided by BLM staff and volunteers at Piedras Blancas ONA. Public visitation numbers continue to rise in 2022. Sixty-two hundred and ninety-nine visitors enjoyed our public tour on over 180 tour days in 2022.

The Piedras Blancas 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Outreach Program continued to thrive in 2022. Three hundred seventy-five 4<sup>th</sup> graders from seven different schools participated in the program.





# Partnerships

---

The ONA partners with a variety of agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- **California State Parks** co-manage land within and adjacent to the ONA under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that incorporates approximately 450 acres of State Park lands into the management of the ONA. The MOU facilitates landscape management decisions for both agencies with regards to invasive plant management and land rehabilitation, trail maintenance, and sharing resources as needed.
- **The Piedras Blancas Light Station Association** works with BLM under a Cooperative Agreement to facilitate educational outreach, interpretation, restoration and replication of historic buildings, and other programs at the light station.
- **The Marine Protected Area Collaborative** provides technical information and interpretive materials to help with public outreach.
- **Emergency Services Communications** - Piedras Blancas is host to a radio communications tower managed by the County of San Luis Obispo that supports emergency services communication for California Highway Patrol, U.S. Forest Service, Cal Fire, California State Parks, and others.
- **The Friends of the Elephant Seal** cross-train Piedras Blancas volunteers about elephant seal natural history and biology and distributes information about the light station to the public.
- **The Lions Club of Cambria** helps to care for the Piedras Blancas Fresnel lens and promote tours of the light station.
- **The Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA)** participate in joint interpretive programs with BLM, cross-trains volunteers, distribute information about the light station, and assist in creating and providing interpretive materials about the Sanctuary to BLM.



# Science

---

The ONA is historically an important area for scientific research. The following research projects were conducted during 2022:

- **NOAA North Eastern Pacific Gray Whale Annual Calf/Cow Population Census** – Research biologists from NOAA and National Marine Fisheries survey the gray whale population by studying birth rate and survivability as well as health of mothers and newborn calves at Piedras Blancas. BLM contributes to logistics and interpretation of this study.
- **Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans (PISCO) Coastal Environment Study**- Research biologists from University of California at Santa Cruz and Santa Barbara conduct long-term research at Piedras Blancas tide pools to determine the health of the intertidal coastal environment in relation to pollution and human activity. The tide pools and coastal environment at Piedras Blancas have been studied for over 10 years. Research is ongoing and will continue in the future. BLM contributes to logistics of the study.
- **United States Geological Survey (USGS) Seismic/Plate Tectonic Studies**- USGS personnel place equipment and collect data on seismic movement at Piedras Blancas to trace and predict earthquake occurrence and magnitude. Research is ongoing. BLM contributes to logistics of the study.
- **United States Geological Survey (USGS) Acoustic Pelagic Bird Study** – USGS personnel place an acoustic recorder on the large rock immediately offshore of Piedras Blancas to study pelagic birds, in particular a storm petrel that feeds at night and can be difficult to study visually. BLM contributes to logistics and interpretation of this survey.
- **United States Geological Survey (USGS) Acoustic Pelagic Bat Study** – USGS biologist placed an acoustic monitor for bats on the bluff edge at Piedras Blancas. Little is known about bat populations west of the Rocky Mountains. The survey will give biologists more information about local bat populations on the Pacific Coast. BLM contributes to logistics of the survey.
- **California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly) Elephant Seal Study** – Cal Poly researchers conduct population surveys of the Piedras Blancas elephant seal rookery. Newborn seals are weighed, measured, and tagged to measure health and track the seals as they mature. BLM assists in logistics of the survey.
- **BLM Small Mammal Survey** – BLM biologists surveyed the 20 acres of the light station to gain insight into the species diversity and population sizes of small mammals. The survey was proposed as the first step towards a longer-term predator/prey study.
- **BLM *Dudleya sp.* Survey** – The BLM botanist surveyed and mapped the small native succulent plant at the light station to get baseline data in response to recent *Dudleya sp.* thefts along the Pacific coast and new California state laws regarding these plants.

- **Audubon Brown Pelican Survey** – Volunteers with the Audubon Society conduct an annual count of brown pelicans at Piedras Blancas to assist in population monitoring of the once Endangered birds.
- **Black Oyster Catcher Survey** – Volunteers conduct surveys of nests and successful hatchings as part of a 10-year United States Fish and Wildlife study of the black oyster catcher population. These birds occupy an ecological niche along the rocky coastline, feeding and nesting in areas predicted to be severely impacted by rising sea levels.

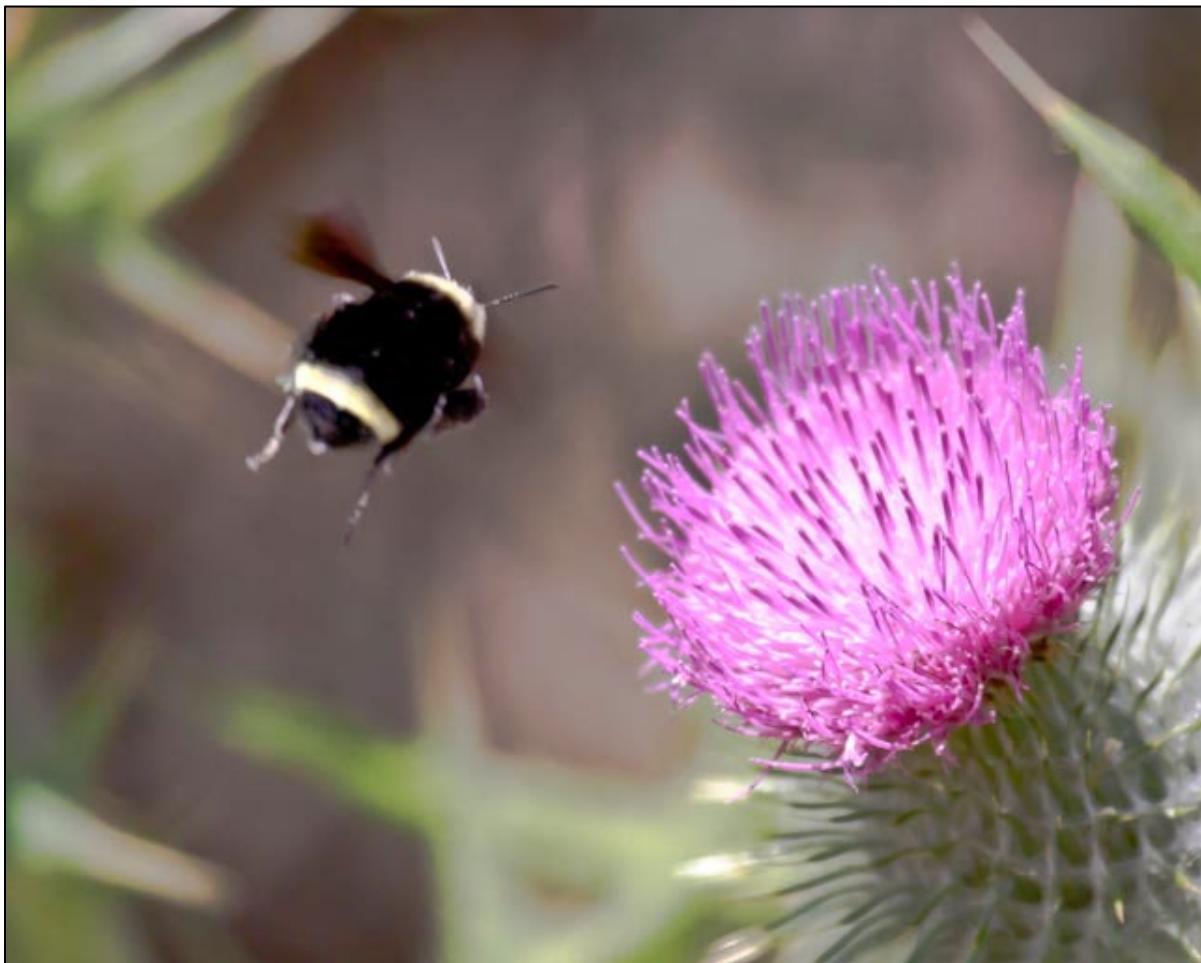




# Climate Impacts

---

Drought, increased tsunami warnings, predicted long-term sea level rise, increased wildfires and longer and increasingly unpredictable wildfire seasons are all indicative of climate change affecting the coast. Sea level rise has the potential to fundamentally challenge some species, particularly the black oyster catcher, a bird occupying a narrow niche of onshore rocks. Wildfires have affected air quality and have forced an alertness in case of immediate threat to the light station and the public. Road closures on Highway 1 due to wildfires and subsequent mudslides during rains have affected local tourism and the ability of visitors to reach the light station. Drought is the most immediate impact observed at Piedras Blancas. The local plant populations have experienced some drought stress but continue to persist. Long-term vegetation changes are expected if drought conditions continue.



# Climate Resiliency

---

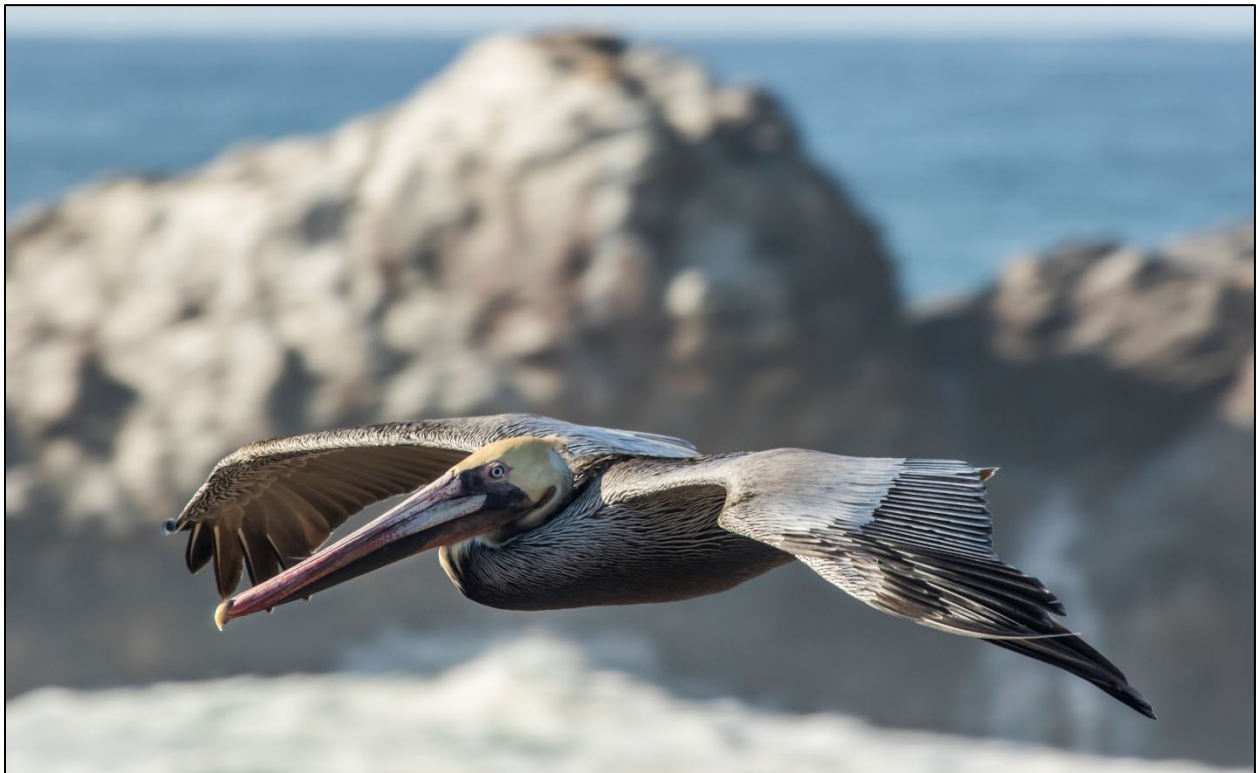
Restoration of the Light Station has included ongoing land rehabilitation. BLM staff, volunteers, interns, and groups with Sierra Club, Cuesta College, AmeriCorps and others have all worked on invasive plants removal, minimization of informal trails that fragment habitat, and improvement of conditions for native plants. Seeds of native plants are collected every year to create a small seed bank. The seed bank is then used to reseed areas of disturbance caused by projects or informal trails.



# Social and Environmental Justice

---

BLM has made a concerted effort to reach out to nearby lower-income schools and include them in educational outreach programs. The Piedras Blancas Light Station Association (PBLSA), our local non-profit friends group, pays for transportation to BLM's free school outreach programs to alleviate pressure on schools' field trip budgets. Many of the students are underserved youth and often first-generation Americans. Some of them have never been to the coast, despite living only 20 miles away. The focus of these programs is lighthouse history and ecology, emphasizing public lands as a place for everyone.





# Events

---

BLM hosts many events throughout the year. These include an annual “Meet the Scientists” event co-sponsored by the NOAA whale research team. Representatives from most of the research projects hosted at Piedras Blancas have an opportunity to make short presentations to our volunteers, partners, and community members.

In September of 2022 the Piedras Blancas Light Station was part of the Eroica California vintage cycling event held in Cambria, Ca. The lighthouse was the rest, refuel and turnaround spot for hundreds of cyclists. All of them were on vintage bicycles and some were even wearing vintage cycling costumes. This event allowed BLM to promote Piedras Blancas Light Station to hundreds if not thousands of people and let them know about tours, special events, programs, and volunteer opportunities.

In addition, Piedras Blancas hosts many other exciting and interactive events including sunset photography events in the fall when west coast sunsets are typically the most colorful, whale watching tours in March when the peak numbers of gray whales are migrating past, plein air paint-outs, fundraising events with partner organizations, hike in/open house days, and many more.



## Words from the staff

---

2022 was a refreshing year at the Piedras Blancas Light Station. We are getting back to what we love to do- having people come out and visit this gem of public property. BLM staff get to educate visitors about this wonderful place. We have the opportunity to let them know all the amazing things BLM and our partners are working on at the Piedras Blancas Light Station. The programs have evolved since the pandemic but continue to be successfully offered.

We are excited and to see what the future has in store for us in 2023. Our new Park Ranger has already been a great addition to our staff and has really helped round out our team. We are invigorated to have another staff member with new ideas and experiences to add to our already wonderful interpretive program.







**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

# Piedras Blancas Light Station

## Outstanding Natural Area

Central California District  
Bureau of Land Management  
Bakersfield Field Office  
35126 McMurtrey Ave  
Bakersfield Ca 93308  
Phone: 661-391-6000

**Report compiled by:** Ryan Cooper, Piedras Blancas Light Station Manager

The mention of company names, trade names, or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use by the federal government.

