



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

California
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Piedras Blancas Light Station ONA

California Coastal National Monument



Accomplishments

2023 was a great year for the Piedras Blancas Light Station (Light Station). For the first time since BLM took over management of the Light Station, the facility is staffed with 3 full-time employees. In November 2022, Piedras Blancas hired a new park ranger, allowing the Light Station to expand its interpretive programming while continuing the robust public tour schedule and expanded 4th Grade Outreach Program. Staff provided astronomy and night sky programs as well as full moon hikes. The Light Station also established a partnership with California State Parks to provide campfire programs at San Simeon State Park Campground.

The BLM worked closely with the Piedras Blancas Light Station Association to make great progress toward the stabilization and restoration of the lighthouse tower itself. Staff conducted extensive testing and engineering on the tower and will work toward a finalized restoration plan in 2024.



Challenges

Increased visitation was a welcomed challenge at Piedras Blancas Light Station in 2023. Visitor use and special use requests increased exponentially in 2023. The Station saw a vast increase in participation at the public tours.

The Station also saw an increase in requests for special use permits such as film permits ranging from a collegiate senior project to feature length Hollywood film with a 30- person crew. One filming venture was at the light station for several weeks.

One of the biggest challenges that the light station faced in 2023, and will continue to face in the future, is meeting the increased visitation demands while preventing excess wear on the historic site. This challenge can be a logistical problem for a small staff.



Visitors

Public visitation numbers increased 10% from 2022 to 6,720 visitors over 180 tour days in 2023. Visitation to Piedras Blancas Light Station continues to be limited to structured public access. BLM staff and volunteer docents led public tours 3-5 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 Light Station Outstanding Natural Area (ONA).

The Piedras Blancas 4th Grade Outreach Program continued to thrive in 2023. The Station hosted 400 fourth grade students and school staff, from seven different schools, an 8% increase from 2022 to 2023.



Partnerships

Piedras Blancas Light Station Outstanding Natural Area partners with a variety of agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations.

- **California State Parks** – BLM works closely with CA State Parks to assure the resource values are not affected by activities on the surrounding State Parks property. In the past BLM has had an MOU with State Parks and looks to explore ways to cooperatively manage properties surrounding the Light Station.
- **The Piedras Blancas Light Station Association** – BLM works closely with the Piedras Blanca Light Station Association to facilitate educational outreach, interpretation, restoration, and replication of historic buildings, among other programs at the light station.
- **The Marine Protected Area Collaborative** – BLM works with the Marine Protected Area Collaborative to provide 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, CA State Parks, and others.
- **Friends of the Elephant Seal** – The BLM works with Friends of the Elephant Seal to cross-trains Piedras Blancas volunteers about elephant seal natural history and biology and distributes information about the light station to the public.
- **Lions Club of Cambria** – The BLM works with the Lions Club of Cambria to help care for the Piedras Blancas Fresnel lens and promote tours of the light station.
- **Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and NOAA** – The BLM works with Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and NOAA to participate in joint interpretive programs, cross-trains volunteers, distribute information about the light station, and assist in creating and providing interpretive materials about the Sanctuary.



Science

Piedras Blancas Outstanding Natural Area is historically an important area for scientific research. The following research projects were conducted during 2023:

- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Eastern North 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.
- **Bureau of Land Management (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.
- **Bureau of Land Management (BLM) *Dudleya sp.* Survey** – 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.
- **USGS Motus Tower**-The Motus Station at Piedras Blancas is the second of twenty-five that will be installed by the USGS Western Ecological Research Center along the California coast. The Motus Wildlife Tracking System is an international collaborative research network that uses coordinated, automated radio telemetry to facilitate research and education on the ecology and conservation of migratory animals.



Climate Impacts

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.

King tides paired with increased storm activity, have brought waves unlike anything seen at the Light Station in the past decade. Waves crashed up onto the bluff and over the interpretive trail. While these waves did not cause a threat to the public, they could create an erosion hazard over time. Trails may need to be relocated in the future.



Climate Resiliency

Restoration of the light station has included ongoing land rehabilitation since BLM assumed management in 2001. BLM staff, volunteers, interns, and groups including the Sierra Club, Cuesta College, AmeriCorps and others have worked on invasive plant 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. This work will allow the public to enjoy this beautiful ecosystem for generations to come.



Social and Environmental Justice

BLM provides educational and experiential opportunities for a variety of audiences. San Luis Obispo County experiences a wide range of income disparity. Schools are deeply affected by these income differences. BLM works with schools at all levels, but has made a concerted effort to reach out to lower-income schools and include them in Piedras Blancas ONA educational outreach programs. The Piedras Blancas Light Station Association (PBLSA) 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 our educational program is lighthouse history and ecology, emphasizing public lands as a place for everyone.



Events

BLM hosted many events throughout the year. Piedras Blancas hosted multiple “Meet the Scientists” lectures, in which researchers conducting studies at the Light Station presented lectures about their work to the public.

BLM also participated in many other events, including staffing a table with kid friendly activities at the Morro Bay Bird Festival family day, the Earth Day event at the Charles Paddock Zoo in Atascadero CA, and providing a research information booth at the local wildlife symposium.



Words from the staff

Greetings from the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse,

Every year when I compile this report I am amazed at the cool and interesting things the team here at the lighthouse can accomplish in 365 days. This team consists of three hard working staff members and an army of dedicated volunteers. This site could not offer the public a fraction of the activities and access without this incredible team.

With the addition of a park ranger this year, we were able to expand our interpretive program into the night. We now have regular astronomy, full moon, and night sky hikes. This has allowed visitors to experience the light station in a way no other visitors have been able to experience it before. It has also allowed a new group of people to enjoy Piedras Blancas who may have never thought of visiting this little sliver of public land. This is not something I thought would happen even just a few years ago.

Even though everything around Piedras Blancas seems to be ever-changing, we recognize the keystone of these 20 acres of public land has been standing solid for over 148 years. In early 2025 the lighthouse will celebrate 150 years as a beacon of light along the California coast. We are not yet sure of planned events, but we will be celebrating in 2025! The staff and volunteers here at Piedras Blancas are excited to hit this milestone.

While we look into the future, we have no idea what is in store for us or the lighthouse. All I know is that things are going to keep changing, the lighthouse is going to continue to be a beacon of light and the team at the Piedras Blancas Light Station is going to do all we can to make visiting this location the best experience possible.

Thanks,
Ryan Cooper
Manager Piedras Blancas Light Station



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