# Point Sur

## 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 **(831) 625-4419**. If you need this publication in an alternate format, contact **interp@parks.ca.gov**.


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**Sacramento, CA 94296-0001**
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**www.parks.ca.gov**


**Point Sur State Historic Park**
**Highway 1, 19 miles south of Carmel**
**Big Sur, CA 93920**
**(831) 625-4419**

*Inside panel image courtesy of Barbara Taylor, NOAA*

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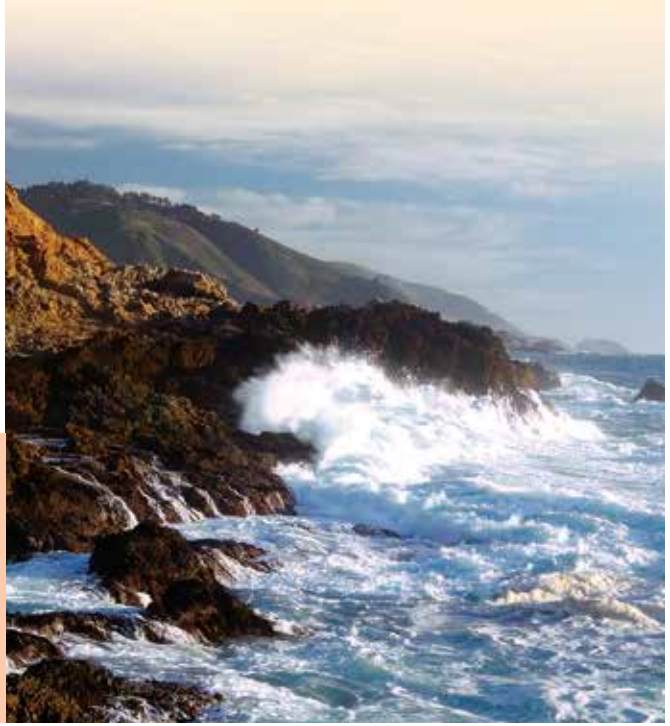
*Since 1889, the Point Sur Lighthouse beacon has warned sailors away from the craggy shores of the foggy Pacific Ocean.*



**High above the Pacific Ocean, the Point Sur Lighthouse in Big Sur** has provided mariners with a navigation beacon since 1889. This late 19th-century light station has remained in continuous operation since that time.

The weather at Point Sur combines moderate temperatures between 50 and 75 degrees with frequent whipping winds and summer fog.

## PARK HISTORY

### Native People and European Explorers

The Big Sur area was home to the Esselen and later the Rumsien native people.

Today's descendants of the surviving Esselen and Rumsien people revere and perpetuate their cultural heritage.

Point Sur was first mentioned in the logs of Portuguese explorer Juan Cabrillo in 1542. Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaíno's 1602 map called it a "point that appears as a small island."

### Rancho and Farming Periods

Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1821, and California became part of Mexico. In 1834 the Governor of Mexican California granted Juan Bautista Alvarado land adjacent to Point Sur, creating El Sur Rancho.

The large land grant was owned and leased by successive ranching families. The seaside meadows were used for grazing cattle. In the 1920s, tenant farmers tried growing crops such as artichokes. Parts of the Rancho El Sur grant, including the private land directly below Point Sur Lighthouse, are still used for cattle. The rock was called Moro Rock until 1851, when it was renamed Point Sur.

### Building the Lighthouse

After California joined the United States in 1850, Congress ordered a survey of the state's unexplored coast to identify sites for lighthouses and other aids to navigation.

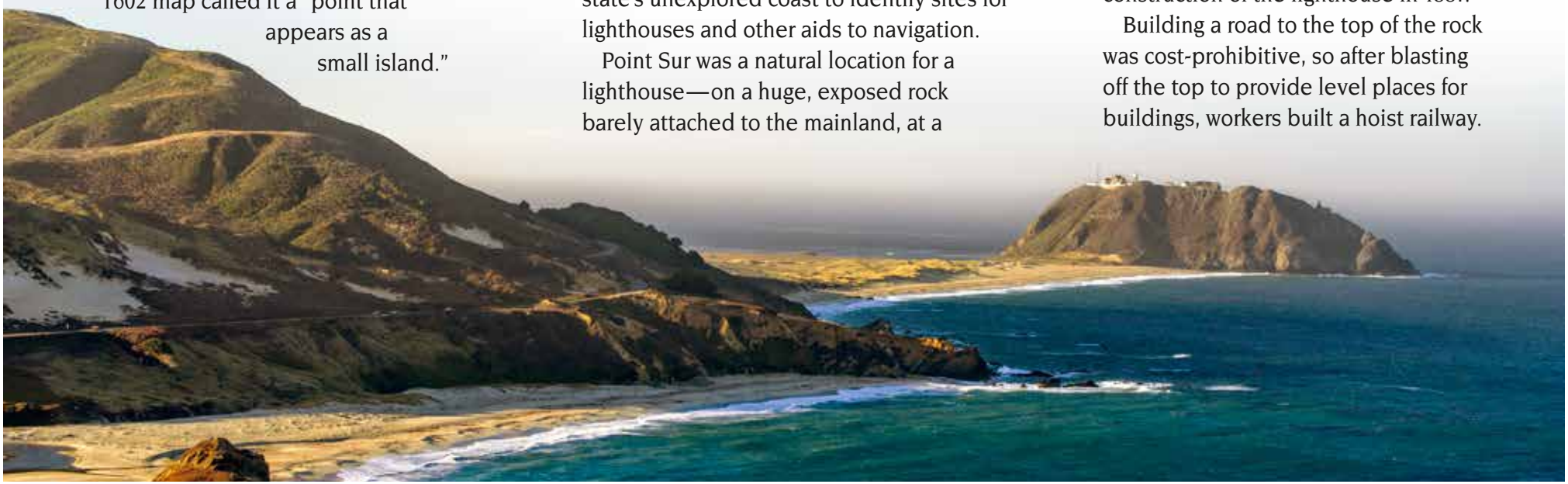
Point Sur was a natural location for a lighthouse—on a huge, exposed rock barely attached to the mainland, at a natural course-change point for ships traveling the coast. Although the land at Point Sur was reserved for a lighthouse in 1866, Congress did not provide funding for the lighthouse for almost 20 years.

Hidden rocks, uncertain currents, and fog made the waters off Point Sur hard to navigate. The shipwreck of the coastal steamer *Ventura* in 1875, north of Point Sur, resulted in Congress finally funding construction of the lighthouse in 1887.

Building a road to the top of the rock was cost-prohibitive, so after blasting off the top to provide level places for buildings, workers built a hoist railway.

Photo courtesy of Wayne Piland

*Keepers wrestled the occasional fallen boulder.*



The railway, powered by a coal-fueled, donkey-steam engine, ran up the rock's east face and out to the lighthouse site. The light first shone on August 1, 1889.

### Family Life

The light station buildings and keepers' homes were built of local sandstone and redwood. The light station housed up to four lightkeepers and their families at a time. To leave Point Sur in the early years, residents had to climb down nearly 400 stairs adjacent to the railway, cross the sand flats, and trek several miles to the county road. Use of the hoist railway was restricted to moving supplies.

*Keepers with family and friends, ca. 1914*

The light station was an isolated post for the keepers and their families. A stagecoach came to Big Sur from Monterey twice a week with mail. The keepers often kept a horse and wagon to retrieve mail from Pfeiffer's Resort (now Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park). Each family was allotted a garden area to grow vegetables.

Point Sur's lightkeeper families waited many years for electrical power. While the lighthouse itself received electricity via generator in 1925, the keepers' quarters did not have generators until 1939. Power from the electrical grid was not supplied to Point Sur until 1949.

### Getting Supplies

Most supplies, except locally obtained meat and vegetables, came via lighthouse tender boats that anchored offshore, out of the kelp beds and the dangerous, shallow rocky shoals. From the tender, supplies were transferred to smaller whale boats and brought to the light station.

The tender often brought the dreaded lighthouse inspector, who inspected both the lighthouse and the keepers' living quarters for cleanliness and general shipshape conditions.

The original hoist railway could not withstand the harsh elements at Point Sur, and upkeep was constant. Construction on the "too expensive" road to the top of the rock was begun in 1900. A local crew used dynamite and hand tools: picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows. The road was completed in 1901 and widened in 1936. Another hoist railway from the rock top to a dock on the point's south side was constructed in 1915 to help unload supplies from tenders.

After Highway 1 was completed from Carmel to San Simeon in 1937, supplies were delivered to Point Sur via truck, a safer and more cost-effective system.

### School Days

Until 1927, children at Point Sur would stay with nearby ranch families during the week, going home on weekends. In 1927, head keeper William Mollering requested that the school district provide a teacher at the light station. Six students were required to meet the quota to have a teacher. One or two lighthouse children received "revised" birthdates, and the quota was met. The teachers, unmarried and young, lived with the head keeper's family. They held classes in a shed behind the dwelling. Later, a one-room schoolhouse was built near the point off Highway 1.

### Technology – Fresnel Lens

The Point Sur light station originally contained a first-order (the largest size) Fresnel lens. Invented by French engineer Augustin Jean Fresnel, the complex Fresnel lens revolutionized lighthouse technology worldwide by making the light visible for longer distances.

Concentric rings of glass prisms and a round bullseye lens bend the light into a concentrated narrow beam that can be seen from 23 miles at sea.

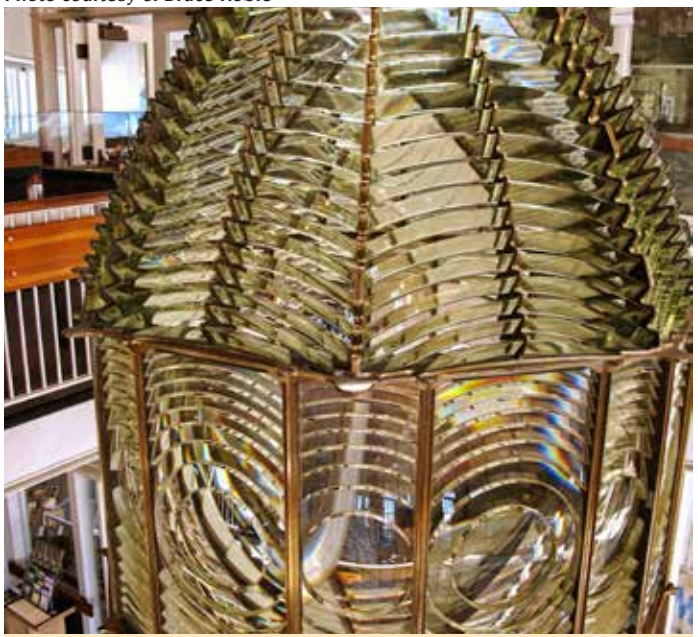
Point Sur's Fresnel lens was replaced in 1972 by a rotating aero-beacon light

mounted on the fog signal room's roof. The disused Fresnel lens remained in the lighthouse tower until 1978, when volunteers disassembled and transported it to Monterey for display. The aero-beacon was later moved into the light tower to protect it from the wind. Light from today's aero-beacon is visible for 23 nautical miles.

### Lighthouse Signal Characteristics

Every lighthouse has a different characteristic or flash pattern. Ships are able to determine their exact location by triangulation, using bearings for two or more known points to determine the position of the ship. No more reassuring sight greets a ship at sea than a lighthouse. Point Sur's light is still in use—a low-tech backup to high-tech satellite navigation.

*Photo courtesy of Bruce Robie*



*The lens—4,330 pounds of glass and brass—was illuminated for the first time on August 1, 1889.*

### Fog Signals

Until the 1970s, Point Sur also had a fog signal. The original signal was made by twin steam whistles. Steam was produced by a boiler using wood for fuel. Over the years, the steam whistles were replaced by air horns. The fog signal was used whenever fog reduced visibility offshore. Fog signals also had individual sound patterns.

*"Super Tyfon" 1972 double fog signal*

### The Coast Guard Years

The U.S. Coast Guard replaced the U.S. Lighthouse Service in 1939 and renovated lighthouse buildings. The Coast Guard donated most of the buildings to California State Parks in 1984. The lighthouse was classified part of the historic park in 2006.

### Point Sur Naval Facility

During World War II, naval personnel stationed at Point Sur conducted experiments with early sonar and radar systems. As World War II ended, the Cold War began. In 1958, the Navy built a Naval Facility (NAVFAC) ½ mile from Point Sur, to provide top-secret submarine surveillance employing the classified SOSUS (SOund SUrveillance System), partially developed at Point Sur light station.

The NAVFAC was closed in 1984, when its operations were computerized and centralized in another location. Most of the naval facility was donated to California State Parks in 2000.

### State Historic Park

Point Sur light station is unique, having all of its original buildings intact, including the Assistant Keepers' Quarters, the largest light station building in the West. The light station complex is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and it has been a state historic park since 1986. The light station is being restored by a coalition of State Parks staff, volunteers, and members of the Central Coast Lighthouse Keepers cooperating association.

Guided tours are given by trained volunteers who love to share the stories, romance, and mystery of Point Sur.

## NATURAL RESOURCES

Harsh wind conditions dictate that only the most rugged plants and animals live at the park. The Point Sur parcel encompasses rocky headland, sandy beaches and dunes, and a marine terrace near the ocean. The park hosts a variety of bird species migrating on the Pacific Flyway path. White-crowned sparrows and western gulls nest in rock crevices.

Native dune plant species include beach evening primrose and yellow sand verbena while the scrubland near the lighthouse hosts coast buckwheat and dwarf shrubs such as lizard tail.

Stay on marked trails since hardy poison oak grows at Point Sur.

Non-native grassland plants, including European beach grass and iceplant, were introduced to Point Sur many years ago. Eradicating these invasive species allows native plants to grow and thrive.

*Sea lions thrive in Point Sur's protected areas.*

**Marine Life**

Just offshore from Point Sur is the Point Sur State Marine Reserve. This protected area hosts a rich and diverse ecosystem. Point Sur is one of the spots along the California-Oregon coast that features upwelling, which occurs when deeper, more nutrient-rich waters rise to the surface, creating a haven for aquatic plant and animal life.

Gray whales pass by seasonally, and blue and humpback whales may be seen during the summer.

Southern sea otters float in the waters off Point Sur, part of the state's 100-mile Sea Otter Game Refuge. Sea otters were once nearly hunted to extinction; today they face different threats. Protecting their coastal habitat helps chances for their survival.

## TOURS

Point Sur can be accessed only by guided interpretive tours. Tours meet several times a week at the locked gate on Highway 1, 19 miles south of Rio Road in Carmel, at mile marker 54.1. For details, please visit **www.pointsur.org.**

The three-hour walking tour is on a paved surface with a moderate 350-foot rise in elevation and two stairways; the longer stairway has 61 steps. Docents lead the tours at a leisurely pace.

## ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Parking on a partially paved lot is available. A steep and unshaded paved road leads to the light station support buildings, and a narrow path and steep run of stairs lead down to the lighthouse. With prior arrangement (four weeks in advance), visitors with disabilities who can transfer to a park sedan may arrange a ride to a drop-off point where they may view some of the restored light station buildings. Accessible portable restrooms are at the base of the hill.

Accessibility is continually improving. For updates, visit the website at **http://access.parks.ca.gov.**

## PLEASE REMEMBER

- Be prepared for cold and windy weather, even in summer. Comfortable walking shoes and layered clothing are recommended. Tours may be cancelled due to extreme weather.
- Everyone must stay with the tour group.
- No strollers or baby carriages
- No beach access
- No smoking
- No large motorhomes or campers
- No pets (even left in cars)
- No food or picnicking is allowed. Hot drinks are available at the visitor center.

## NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Andrew Molera State Park
  Highway 1, 20 miles south of Carmel
  Big Sur 93920 (831) 667-2315
- Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park
  Big Sur Station #1, 47555 Highway 1
  (seven miles south of Point Sur)
  Big Sur 93920 (831) 667-2315
- Garrapata State Park
  Highway 1, 6.7 miles south of Rio Road
  Carmel 93923 (831) 624-4909

*Yellow sand verbena*
*Courtesy of Peter Pearsall, USFWS*

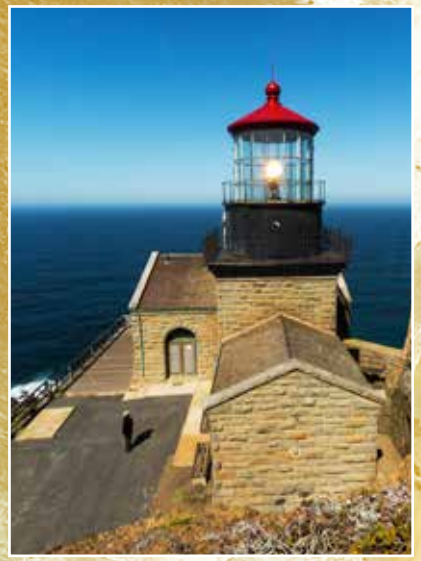
# BUILDINGS AND RESTORATION:

**The exteriors of all the buildings at Point Sur are restored to reflect their look in the late 1920s. By this time, all the major buildings had been constructed at Point Sur. Restoration at the light station is ongoing.**

## LIGHTHOUSE (1889)

Point Sur Lighthouse's beacon is 270 feet above sea level. It was placed below the top of the rock, on its northwest slope, to shine the broadest visible arc below coastal summer fogs, which hover above 300 feet.

Improvements kept pace with new technology. The steam-driven fog signal—whose two boilers required burning up to 100 cords of wood a year—was replaced in 1908 with a more efficient, kerosene-fueled system that made and stored compressed air. The original oil lamp was replaced by a generator-powered electric light in 1925.



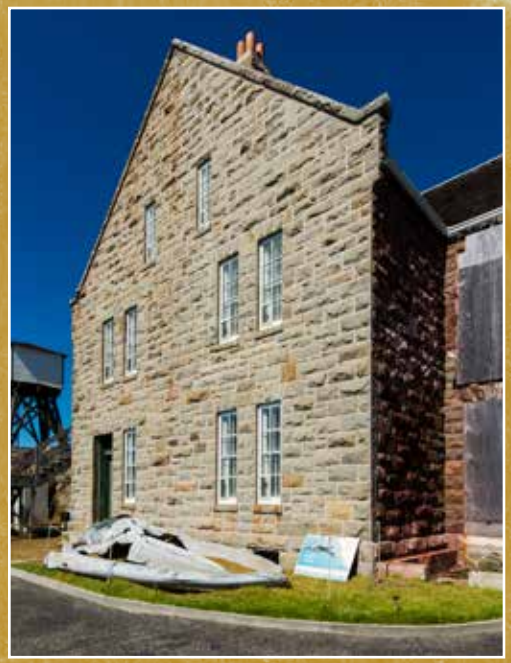
## CISTERN (1887)

The cistern was the first structure built at Point Sur when construction began in 1887. It originally held 53,000 gallons of fresh water, pumped up from a well in the sand flats at the base of the rock. After the well water became brackish (salty), water from a spring higher in the hills east of the rock filled the cistern. In 1907, the cistern was augmented by a water tower to provide water pressure for the newly installed flush toilets in the keepers' quarters.

**CARPENTER/BLACKSMITH SHOP (1907)**
Until Hwy. 1 was opened to Big Sur in 1932, trips to Monterey took a full day. This isolation required that the keepers do many of the repairs at the light station. The carpenter/blacksmith shop was built in 1907 to facilitate repairs, including the extensive metal water piping system and the cast-iron lantern on the lighthouse tower. Woodwork, painting, and glass repairs were also done here. The building was restored in 1999.

**HEAD KEEPER'S QUARTERS (1889 & 1902)**
In 1889, supplies were hauled to the top of the rock via a hoist railway by a steam-driven donkey engine housed in a one-story stone building, adjacent to the tracks at the top. After the road to the top was built, the hoist railway was abandoned in 1900. A second wooden story was added to the top of the hoist house in 1902, and it was converted into quarters for the head keeper. The building was restored in 2012, with the interior shown as it looked in 1950.

**BARN (ca. 1900)**
The isolated keepers and their families kept livestock for food and transportation here. The barn's top floor was used for storage until the Coast Guard era began in 1939, when it was converted to a recreation room and the lower level was converted to a garage. The barn, including the deck, was restored in 2000.



**ASSISTANT KEEPERS' QUARTERS (1889)**
Originally this building had one three-story apartment on the south side and a shared unit on the north side, housing two families. While each family in the shared unit had their own kitchen, parlor, and later, bathrooms, they did share a common stairwell and hallways between all the rooms. In 1939, the common stairwell in the north unit was removed—creating two separate sets of quarters.

# Point Sur
## State Historic Park

This park receives major support through a nonprofit organization. For information, contact Central Coast Lighthouse Keepers P.O. Box 223014, Carmel, CA 93922 (831) 649-7139 • **www.pointsur.org**

### Legend

- Paved Road
- Natural Preserve
- State Marine Reserve
- Historic Site
- Accessible Feature
- Lighthouse
- Locked Gate
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Stairs
- Viewpoint

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PACIFIC OCEAN

POINT SUR DUNES NATURAL PRESERVE

Point Sur Light Station

POINT SUR SHP

POINT SUR STATE MARINE RESERVE

PRIVATE PROPERTY

to Carmel

Historic Schoolhouse Site

Park Entrance

POINT SUR NAVAL FACILITY

AREA CLOSED TO PUBLIC

to Big Sur

Santa Cruz
Monterey
Garrapata SP
Andrew Molera SP
Big Sur
Pfeiffer Big Sur SP
Julia Pfeiffer Burns SP
Limekiln SP
Hearst San Simeon SP & SHM
Morro Bay
Point Sur SHP
152
1
33
25
5
68
198
101
46
229

0 10 20 30 40 MI
0 20 40 60 KM

0 0.25 0.5 Miles
0 0.25 0.5 0.75 Kilometers

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