

# Pigeon Point Light Station 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 **(650) 879-2120**. If you need this publication in an alternate format, contact [interp@parks.ca.gov](mailto:interp@parks.ca.gov).

**CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS**  
**P.O. Box 942896**  
**Sacramento, CA 94296-0001**

For information call: (800) 777-0369.  
(916) 653-6995, outside the U.S.  
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**Pigeon Point Light Station**  
**State Historic Park**  
**210 Pigeon Point Road, off Highway 1**  
**Pescadero, CA 94060**  
**(650) 879-2120**

*Front cover photo courtesy of Frank S. Balthis*

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*In June 1853 the Boston-based Carrier Pigeon, a clipper ship on her maiden voyage, was torn apart by a fog-blanketed rock off Whale Point. Thereafter, it was called Pigeon Point.*



## **P**erched where coast and ocean meet,

the lighthouse at Pigeon Point Light Station State Historic Park beckons motorists traveling Highway 1. They can't miss the stately 115-foot structure, the tallest operating lighthouse on the West Coast. Pigeon Point Light Station is

listed on the National Register of Historic Places—a reminder of the days when whalers and Gold Rush-era clipper ships fought gales, stiff seas, jagged coastal rocks, and unforgiving fog.

### **THE POINT'S COLORFUL PAST**

Pigeon Point's original name, Whale Point, was inspired by the gray whales that migrate past the point. California's boom from Gold Rush to statehood brought many ships to these perilous waters. The clipper *Carrier Pigeon*, on her maiden voyage in 1853, ran into fog-blanketed rocks off Whale Point (renamed Pigeon Point to honor the ship).

Between 1865 and 1868, three other major shipwrecks affirmed the danger of this foggy location. Finally, in November 1872, a lighthouse was built with a light and fog signal that guided mariners for more than a century.

The lighthouse was outfitted with the most powerful lens of the day—a first-order (the largest) Fresnel lens. Sitting in



*Left: Fresnel lens; right: docents dressed as lighthouse keepers*

a glass-enclosed room at the top of the lighthouse, the lens mechanism stood 16 feet tall and weighed two tons. Its designer, French physicist Augustin Jean Fresnel, used 1,008 handcrafted, brass-framed lenses and prisms to concentrate the source of light, maximizing light efficiency to throw its beam up to 24 miles.

The lenses and prisms, stacked vertically to form two dozen nine-and-a-half-foot tall panels, were joined together to form a six-foot-diameter circular frame

with the light source in the middle. A clockwork mechanism rotated the panels, producing a light flash precisely every ten seconds. The lighthouse's signature beam continues today, flashing light from an exterior automated beacon at ten-second intervals. A modern navigation aid replaced the original fog signal in 1976.

The lighthouse sits on an eight-foot foundation. Its walls, four-and-a-half feet thick at the base and tapering to two feet at the top, employ structurally connected inner and outer walls that were strong enough to emerge undamaged from the 1906 San Francisco and 1989 Loma Prieta earthquakes.

### **RESTORATION EFFORTS**

The lighthouse tower is closed to tours. Experts painstakingly dismantled the Fresnel lens and reassembled it for display in the Fog Signal Building. The California State Parks Foundation is raising funds to restore and reopen the tower to the public. For more information, visit [www.calparks.org](http://www.calparks.org).





*Spiral staircase inside the lighthouse*

### NATURAL HISTORY

History may be the park's top billing, but the point's natural beauty is also a major attraction. Its high bluff provides scenic views of harbor and elephant seals and whales. During spring and winter migrations, the whales travel relatively close to the lighthouse grounds, particularly in the shallow waters of the cove south of the point. Standing on the station's boardwalk overlook, visitors can observe northward-bound California gray whale cows and their new calves taking advantage of the safety of the cove. Farther out, the spouts of humpback and blue whales can often be seen.

About 50 species of migratory and native birds live here, including marbled murrelets, an endangered species that nests in nearby old-growth redwood forests and feeds in coastal waters. Tide pools are a short walk north of Pigeon Point (do not disturb or remove tide pool specimens). Below the point, frothy waves washing over rock ledges cause sea palms to sway.



### WHERE, WHEN, AND WEATHER

Pigeon Point Light Station is approximately midway between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz, near Pescadero. The grounds are open daily from 8 a.m. to sunset. Be prepared for unpredictable weather. Rain may fall between November and March, and even summer brings chilly fog, particularly in the mornings. Stiff northwest winds can develop anytime. Weather permitting, park docents recount the light station's rich history while leading visitors among the old buildings and around the grounds from Thursdays through Mondays. Exhibits and a bookstore are also available for visitors.

For docent tour schedules, a virtual tour of the light station, and more park information, visit the Pigeon Point Light Station SHP pages at [www.parks.ca.gov/pigeonpoint](http://www.parks.ca.gov/pigeonpoint).

### PIGEON POINT LIGHTHOUSE HOSTEL

Four Light Station buildings, converted to lodging for up to 59 people, are operated by Hostelling International. Accommodations are available in male, female, and co-ed bunkrooms, as well as private rooms for individuals, couples, or families.

*Gray whales are believed to live up to 80 years and grow as long as 50 feet.*

Hostel guests share bathrooms, kitchens, and living rooms. To make reservations, call (650) 879-0633 from 7:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Information is also available at [www.pigeonpointhostel.org](http://www.pigeonpointhostel.org).

### ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

The boardwalk, the Fog Signal Building, exhibits, and bookstore are accessible, as are parking, restrooms, and the picnic area near the park entrance. For accessibility updates, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

### PLEASE REMEMBER

- Except for service animals, pets are not permitted on the lighthouse grounds.
- Smoking is not permitted in the park.
- Cliffs can collapse onto the rocks below—stay on designated pathways.
- A public phone and restrooms are near the entrance to the park grounds.

### NEARBY STATE PARKS













- Pescadero State Beach  
14½ miles south of Half Moon Bay  
on Highway 1 (650) 879-2170
- Año Nuevo State Park  
1 New Years Creek Road, off Highway 1,  
Pescadero 94060 (650) 879-0227 / 879-2025
- Butano State Park, 1500 Cloverdale Road,  
Pescadero 94060 (650) 879-2040

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization.

For more information contact:  
Coastside State Parks Association  
New Years Creek Rd., Pescadero, CA 94060  
[www.coastsidestateparks.org](http://www.coastsidestateparks.org)

# Pigeon Point Light Station State Historic Park

## Legend

- |   |               |   |                    |
|---|---------------|---|--------------------|
|  | Road          |  | Accessible Feature |
|  | Trail         |  | Parking            |
|  | Fence         |  | Picnic Area        |
|  | Park Building |  | Restrooms          |
|   |               |  | Telephone          |
|   |               |  | Viewpoint          |
|   |               |  | Information        |
|   |               |  | Lighthouse         |

