Seabirds and Marine Mammals on the NMFS Rockfish Recruitment and Ecosystem Assessment Survey: 2024 Data Report

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Introduction

Seabird and marine mammal observations are an integral part of the NMFS Rockfish Recruitment and Ecosystem Assessment Survey (RREAS). These data are valuable for several reasons: (1) measurements provide an upper trophic level perspective to complement the oceanographic and mid-trophic level data collected by NMFS, (2) estimates of seabird and marine mammal abundance, diversity and distribution may contribute to various aspects of ecosystem and fisheries management, and (3) by extending our existing time series, measuring annual variation in the top predator community contributes to understanding the effects of climate variability and change on the California Current Ecosystem (CCE). This data report summarizes the at-sea survey observations made during the 2024 cruise, and presents basic distribution and abundance estimates for seabirds and mammals.

Methods

Oceanographic conditions. We present sea surface temperature (SST; C°) and wind averages for the periods of 30 April to 15 May 2024 (survey Leg 1) and 30 May to 16 June 2024 (survey Leg 2) along the West Coast of the USA corresponding with the RREAS survey area. SST data were downloaded from the Multi-scale Ultra-high Resolution SST (MURSST) dataset (https://podaac.jpl.nasa.gov/dataset/MUR-JPL-L4-GLOB-v4.1), and wind (speed and direction) data were downloaded for NOAA/NDBC buoys (https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/). Sea surface temperature anomalies (SSTa) averages for the same period are presented, with a baseline calculation period of 1991–2020. SSTa data were downloaded from the Optimal Interpolated SST (OISST) dataset (https://psl.noaa.gov/data/gridded/data.noaa.oisst.v2.highres.html). Additionally, daily SST and wind averages for the study period are shown specifically for NOAA/NDBC buoy 46011 (https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/station_page.php?station=46011).

Seabird observations. Observations of seabirds and marine mammals are made continuously during daylight ship transits between oceanographic and fish sampling stations. The observer, located on the flying bridge approximately 15 meters above sea level, uses hand-held binoculars to assist in the identification and enumeration of birds and mammals. For seabirds, the observer records all individuals seen within a 300-meter strip transect to one side and front of the vessel while the ship is underway at speeds greater than 5 knots. For mammals, the observer records all individuals out to the horizon while the ship is underway. Observations are entered into a portable computer using the dedicated application "Dlog"; the ship's position is automatically recorded periodically from an external GPS. Each observation includes the species, the number of individuals observed, and their behavior (mostly "flying" or "sitting on the water" for birds). At-sea observation data are post-processed using standardized species codes, validation of positioning data, and binning of observations into along-track sections of 3 km in length. The data are then integrated into a survey database that contains data from May 1996 to the present. These data are used to derive summary statistics on density. Species data are presented for both the core region and the full (core + extended) region surveyed since 2004 (see Sakuma et al. 2006 for delineations).

Calculation of seabird densities. Taxa excluded from this summary were fish, terrestrial birds, and most shorebirds except phalaropes, which are largely pelagic. For seabirds, density is calculated as the total number of individuals observed per species divided by the area (km²) surveyed. For mammals, an "encounter rate" is defined as the total number of individuals observed per species divided by the linear amount of habitat (km) sampled. Density/encounter rate over time is shown for select seabird and mammal species in the core survey area 1996—2024 (Figures 5–8). Seabirds highlighted in this report include species with warm-water affinities: black-footed albatross (*Phoebastria nigripes*), Brandt's cormorant (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*), brown pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), and pink-footed shearwater (*Puffinus creatopus*). Species with cold-water affinities include: Cassin's auklet (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*), common murre (*Uria aalge*), northern fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), rhinoceros auklet (*Cerorhinca monocerata*), and sooty shearwater (*Ardenna griseus*). Marine mammals included are blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*), humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), Pacific white-sided dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*), and Risso's dolphin (*Grampus griseus*).

Results

Oceanographic conditions. The 2024 RREAS survey transited a wide range of water temperatures, with more cool temperatures along the coast during the first leg and reflective of a typical upwelling signature (Figure 1a). Conditions were still diverse for the second leg but there was more warm water in Southern California (Figure 1b). During the survey, ocean conditions were much cooler than average in the nearshore area during both legs (Figure 2), however, during Leg 2 the nearshore region of central California region from Monterey to San Francisco was anonymously warm (Figure 2b). This coincides with a warming event that happened on 18–19 May (Figure 3). Strong upwelling winds were detected throughout the survey (Figure 3) and are also indicated by the cool waters along the coast (Figures 1, 2).

Surveying effort. A summary of survey effort is shown in Table 1; transects surveyed are shown in Figure 4. Summarized species observations for all species in the core and total survey area are shown in Tables 2 and 3 (see Appendix 1 for exclusions). A total of 32 days of survey effort covering 3,107 km (932 km²) of ocean habitat is summarized; 15 days were spent covering 1,247 km (374 km²) in the core survey area between Cypress Point and Bodega Bay. Leg 1 of the survey ended early since the ship was damaged at sea and needed repairs, and Leg 2 departed two weeks later once repairs were completed. Surveying happened on Leg 1 from 30 April to 15 May (16 days) and in Leg 2 from 30 May to 16 June. During Leg 2, Brian Hoover observed until 6 June, and Jarrod Santora surveyed 9 June to 16 June (16 days of data).

Seabirds. Density/encounter rates over time in the core area for the selected species are shown in Figures 5–8. Notable results from the 2024 survey include very high density of brown pelican with the highest density of their time series (Figure 5). Two other species, Brandt's cormorant and common murre, also had very high observed density this year (Figures 5, 6). Cassin's auklet and rhinoceros auklet, both cold-water affinity species, were observed this year at the lowest density of the time series (Figure 6). Northern fulmar was also present at below average density at just below 1 standard deviation of the long-term mean density (Figure 6). Within 1 standard deviation of the long-term mean, pink-footed shearwater and sooty shearwater were present at average densities while black-footed albatross were below average density (Figures 5 and 6). Density for the nine species combined was near average (Figure 8).

Marine mammals. Our focal marine mammals were abundant in 2024 (Figure 7). Risso's dolphins were observed at the highest density of the time series, and humpback whales had the third-highest density in the time series. Humpback whales were primarily observed diving offshore during the survey, with very few observations of surface lunge feeding. Blue whales also had higher than average density, and Pacific white-sided dolphins were higher than average but within 1 s.d. of the mean. Our focal marine mammals, combined, had higher than average density (Figure 8).

Figure 1. Sea surface temperature (SST; C°) and wind averages (speed and direction). The direction the wind is blowing is shown at NOAA/NDBC buoys (purple dots and orange star). Data were averaged for A) Leg 1 (30 April to 15 May 2024), and B) Leg 2 of the RREAS survey (30 May to 16 June 2024).

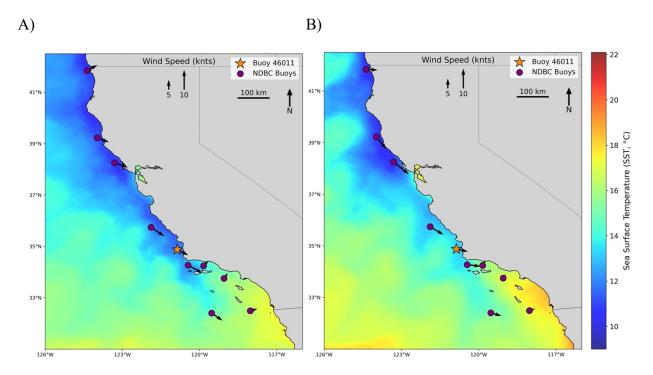


Figure 2. Sea surface temperature anomalies (SSTa; C°) averages for both legs of the RREAS survey. Baseline period: 1991–2020. NOAA/NDBC buoys shown in Figure 6 are shown again here. Data were averaged for A) Leg 1 (30 April to 15 May 2024) and B) Leg 2 of the RREAS survey (30 May to 16 June 2024).

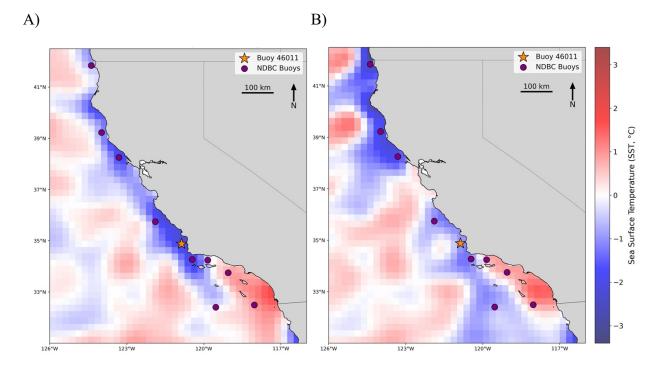


Figure 3. Daily SST (C°) and wind averages for the period of 30 April to 16 June 2024 at NOAA/NDBC buoy 46011; location is marked in Figures 6 and 7 with an orange star. The beginning of each cruise leg is shown with a dashed vertical line. Bottom panel: arrow direction indicates the direction the wind is blowing (up = north) and the y-axis indicates wind speed scale in knots. Upwelling-favorable winds are strong winds to the southeast.

Sea Surface Temperature and Wind for Buoy 46011

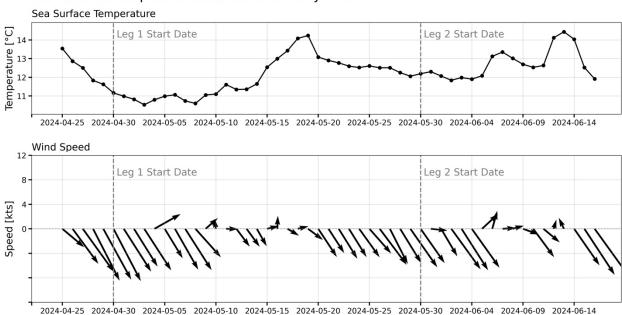


Table 1. Summary of survey effort and seabird and mammal community statistics.

2024	Core Area	Full Area
Survey vessel		R/V Reuben Lasker
Start date		4/30/2024
End date		6/16/2024
Number of survey days	15	32
Distance surveyed (km)	1,247	3,107
Area surveyed (km²)	374	932
Number of bird species	38	52
Overall bird density (per km ²)	41.355	31.563
Total birds observed	15,473	29,421
Number of mammal species	11	19
Overall mammal encounter rate (per 100 km)	100.5	168.6
Total mammals observed	1,254	5,238

Figure 4. 2024 survey transects for the full (left) and core (right) regions. Gaps usually reflect nighttime.

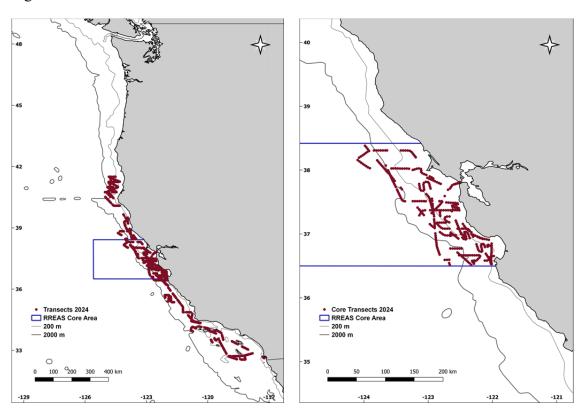


Table 2. Bird survey observations, stratified by area and species. Cell values represent: total number of individuals seen / number of species sightings / average density (birds/km²).

Common Name	Scientific Name	Core Area	Full Area
American White Pelican	Pelecanus erythrorhynchos		
Ancient Murrelet	Synthliboramphus antiquus		
Arctic Loon	Gavia arctica		
Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea		
Ashy Storm-Petrel	Oceanodroma homochroa	2 / 2 / 0.01	2/2/0
Black guillemot	Cepphus grylle		
Black Scoter	Melanitta nigra		
Black Storm-Petrel	Oceanodroma melania		2405 / 6 / 2.58
Black-Footed Albatross	Phoebastria nigripes	94 / 87 / 0.25	227 / 208 / 0.24
Black-Legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla	2 / 2 / 0.01	2/2/0
Black-Vented Shearwater	Puffinus opisthomelas		
Bonaparte's Gull	Larus philadelphia	2 / 1 / 0.01	119 / 13 / 0.13
Brandt's Cormorant	Phalacrocorax penicillatus	497 / 154 / 1.33	867 / 187 / 0.93
Brant	Branta bernicla		
Brown Booby	Sula leucogaster		
Brown Noddy	Anous stolidus		
Brown Pelican	Pelecanus occidentalis	162 / 73 / 0.43	205 / 97 / 0.22
Buller's Shearwater	Puffinus bulleri		
California Gull	Larus californicus	45 / 35 / 0.12	79 / 61 / 0.08
Caspian Tern	Sterna caspia	2 / 2 / 0.01	2/2/0
Cassin's Auklet	Ptychoramphus aleuticus	8 / 7 / 0.02	26 / 17 / 0.03
Clark's Grebe	Aechmophorus clarkii	10 / 2 / 0.03	10 / 2 / 0.01
Common Loon	Gavia immer	4 / 4 / 0.01	10 / 7 / 0.01
Common Murre	Uria aalge	7062 / 1388 / 18.87	8566 / 2005 / 9.19
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	1 / 1 / 0	3/3/0
Cook's Petrel	Pterodroma cookii		
Craveri's Murrelet	Synthliboramphus craveri		2 / 1 / 0
Dark Shearwater	(species group)		
Dark-Rumped Petrel	Pterodroma phaeopygia sandwichensis		
Double-Crested Cormorant	Phalacrocorax auritus		1 / 1 / 0
Eared Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis		
Elegant Tern	Sterna elegans	72 / 21 / 0.19	268 / 64 / 0.29
Flesh-Footed Shearwater	Puffinus carneipes		
Fork-Tailed Storm-Petrel	Oceanodroma furcata		296 / 231 / 0.32
Forster's Tern	Sterna forsteri		
Franklin's Gull	Larus pipixcan		
Glaucous Gull	Larus hyperboreus		
Glaucous-Winged Gull	Larus glaucescens	5 / 5 / 0.01	13 / 13 / 0.01
Glaucous-winged / Western Hybrid Gull			
Guadalupe Murrelet	Synthliboramphus hypoleucus		
Hawaiian Petrel	Pterodroma sandwichensis		

Heermann's Gull	Larus heermanni	4 / 4 / 0.01	10 / 10 / 0.01
Herring Gull	Larus argentatus		1 / 1 / 0
Horned Puffin	Fratercula corniculata		
Hybrid Gull	(species group)		
Juan Fernandez Petrel	Pterodroma externa		
Kelp Gull	Larus dominicanus		
Kermadec Petrel	Pterodroma neglecta		
Laughing Gull	Larus atricilla		
Laysan Albatross	Phoebastria immutabilis		4 / 4 / 0
Leach's Storm-Petrel	Oceanodroma leucorhoa	1/1/0	32 / 30 / 0.03
Least Storm-Petrel	Oceanodroma microsoma	-	
Least Tern	Sterna antillarum		
Long-Tailed Jaeger	Stercorarius longicaudus		
Manx Shearwater	Puffinus puffinus		1 / 1 / 0
Marbled Murrelet	Brachyramphus marmoratus		2.7.2.7
Masked Booby	Sula dactylatra		1/1/0
Mew Gull	Larus canus		17170
Mottled Petrel	Pterodroma inexpectata		1/1/0
Murphy's Petrel	Pterodroma ultima		17170
Nazca Booby	Sula granti		
Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis	7 / 7 / 0.02	60 / 54 / 0.06
Osprey	Pandion haliaetus	77770.02	007 317 0.00
Pacific Loon	Gavia pacifica	59 / 24 / 0.16	91 / 45 / 0.1
Parakeet Auklet	Aethia psittacula	1/1/0	1/1/0
Parasitic Jaeger	Stercorarius parasiticus	4/4/0.01	9/9/0.01
Parkinson's Petrel	Procellaria parkinsoni	17 17 0.01	3777 0.01
Pelagic Cormorant	Phalacrocorax pelagicus	3 / 3 / 0.01	8 / 8 / 0.01
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	37370.01	07 07 0.01
Pigeon Guillemot	Cepphus columba	8 / 6 / 0.02	10 / 7 / 0.01
Pink-Footed Shearwater	Puffinus creatopus	113 / 81 / 0.3	415 / 240 / 0.45
Pomarine Jaeger	Stercorarius pomarinus	1/1/0	5 / 5 / 0.01
Red Phalarope	Phalaropus fulicaria	152 / 16 / 0.41	243 / 30 / 0.26
Red-Billed Tropicbird	Phaethon aethereus	1327 107 0.11	21373070.20
Red-Footed Booby	Sula sula		
Red-Necked Grebe	Podiceps grisegena		
Red-Necked Phalarope	Phalaropus lobatus	1643 / 161 / 4.39	2088 / 202 / 2.24
Red-Tailed Tropicbird	Pheathon rubricauda	1015710171.59	2000/202/2.21
Red-Throated Loon	Gavia stellata		
Rhinoceros Auklet	Cerorhinca monocerata	14 / 11 / 0.04	34 / 24 / 0.04
Ring-Billed Gull	Larus delawarensis	1/1/0	1/1/0
Royal Tern	Sterna maxima	1/1/0	1,1,0
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres		
Sabine's Gull	Larus sabini	81 / 34 / 0.22	189 / 62 / 0.2
Scripps's murrelet	Synthliboramphus scrippsi	01/ 37/ 0.22	19 / 8 / 0.02
Short-Tailed / Slender-Billed Shearwater	Puffinus tenuirostris		177 07 0.02
Short-Tailed Albatross	Phoebastria albatrus		1/1/0
Solander's Petrel	Pterodroma solandri		1,1,0

Sooty Shearwater	Puffinus griseus	4942 / 1126 / 13.21	12290 / 2074 / 13.18
South Polar Skua	Stercorarius maccormicki		
Stejneger's Petrel	Pterodroma longirostris		
Surf Scoter	Melanitta perspicillata	3 / 2 / 0.01	6 / 4 / 0.01
Thayer's Gull	Larus thayeri		
Townsend's Storm-Petrel	Oceanodroma socorroensis		
Tufted Puffin	Fratercula cirrhata	3 / 2 / 0.01	5 / 4 / 0.01
Unidentified Albatross	(species group)		
Unidentified Auklet	(species group)		
Unidentified Booby	(species group)		
Unidentified Cormorant	(species group)		
Unidentified Duck	(species group)		
Unidentified Grebe	(species group)		
Unidentified Gull	(species group)	78 / 71 / 0.21	126 / 115 / 0.14
Unidentified Jaeger	(species group)		
Unidentified Large Alcid	(species group)		
Unidentified Leach's Storm-			
Petrel	(species group)		
Unidentified Loon	(species group)	4 / 3 / 0.01	8 / 6 / 0.01
Unidentified Murre	(species group)		8 / 5 / 0.01
Unidentified Murrelet	(species group)		
Unidentified Petrel	(species group)		
Unidentified Phalarope	(species group)	14 / 4 / 0.04	15 / 5 / 0.02
Unidentified Procellarid	(species group)		
Unidentified Shearwater	(species group)		1 / 1 / 0
Unidentified Skua	(species group)		
Unidentified Small Alcid	(species group)		3 / 1 / 0
Unidentified Storm-Petrel	(species group)		
Unidentified Tern	(species group)	1 / 1 / 0	3 / 2 / 0
Unidentified Tropicbird	(species group)		
Wedge-Rumped Storm-Petrel	Oceanodroma tethys		
Wedge-Tailed Shearwater	Puffinus pacificus		
Western Grebe	Aechmophorus occidentalis		
Western Gull	Larus occidentalis	368 / 335 / 0.98	629 / 502 / 0.67
Wilson's Storm-Petrel	Oceanites oceanicus		
Xantus's / Craveri's Murrelet	(species group)		
Xantus's Murrelet	Synthliboramphus hypoleucus		

Table 3. Mammal survey observation summary, broken down by survey area and species. Cell values represent: total number of species individuals / number of species sightings / average species encounter rate (individuals per 100 km).

Common Name	Scientific Name	Core Area	Full Area
Baird's Beaked Whale	Berardius bairdii		
Blue Whale	Balaenoptera musculus	11 / 6 / 0.9	25 / 17 / 0.8
Bottlenose Dolphin	Tursiops truncatus		51 / 2 / 1.6
California Sea Lion	Zalophus californianus	388 / 66 / 31.1	557 / 98 / 17.9
Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis		2930 / 6 / 94.3
Cuvier's Beaked Whale	Ziphius cavirostris		
Dall's Porpoise	Phocoenoides dalli	35 / 3 / 2.8	35 / 3 / 1.1
False Killer Whale	Pseudorca crassidens		
Fin Whale	Balaenoptera physalus		27 / 18 / 0.9
Gray Whale	Eschrichtius robustus		
Green Sea Turtle	Chelonia mydas		
Guadelupe Fur Seal	Arctocephalus townsendi		1 / 1 / 0
Harbor Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena		
Harbor Seal	Phoca vitulina	1 / 1 / 0.1	3 / 3 / 0.1
Humpback Whale	Megaptera novaeangliae	183 / 112 / 14.7	296 / 190 / 9.5
Killer Whale	Orcinus orca	6 / 1 / 0.5	6 / 1 / 0.2
Long-beaked Common Dolphin	Delphinus capensis		
Minke Whale	Balaenoptera acutorostrata		1 / 1 / 0
Northern Elephant Seal	Mirounga angustirostris		2 / 2 / 0.1
Northern Fur Seal	Callorhinus ursinus	1 / 1 / 0.1	5 / 5 / 0.2
Northern Right Whale Dolphin	Lissodelphis borealis	190 / 9 / 15.2	190 / 9 / 6.1
Pacific White-Sided Dolphin	Lagenorhynchus obliquidens	275 / 28 / 22	390 / 43 / 12.6
Pilot Whale	Globicephala spp.		
Pygmy Sperm Whale	Kogia breviceps		
Ridley Sea Turtle	Lepidochelys olivacea		
Right whale dolphin	Lissodelphis spp		
Risso's Dolphin	Grampus griseus	150 / 5 / 12	150 / 5 / 4.8
Sea Otter	Enhydra lutris		
Sei Whale	Balaenoptera borealis		
Short-Beaked Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis		502 / 15 / 16.2
Short-Finned Pilot Whale	Globicephala macrorhynchus		
Sperm Whale	Physeter macrocephalus		
Steller Sea Lion	Eumetopias jubatus		
Striped Dolphin	Stenella coeruleoalba		
Unidentified Balaenoptera	(species group)		
Unidentified Beaked Whale	(species group)		
Unidentified Cetacean	(species group)		
Unidentified Dolphin	(species group)		42 / 3 / 1.4
Unidentified Large Whale	(species group)		
Unidentified Pinniped	(species group)		
Unidentified Sea Lion	(species group)		
Unidentified Seal	(species group)		
Unidentified Whale	(species group)	14/9/1.1	25 / 16 / 0.8

Figure 5. Log₁₀ density anomalies over time from core area surveys for species with warmer-water habitat affinities, 1996–2024. A) black-footed albatross, B) Brandt's cormorant, C) brown pelican, and D) pink-footed shearwater. The dashed lines indicate ± 1 s.d. of the long-term mean, and 'x' indicates years when no survey was conducted. A constant of 0.01 was added to each density prior to \log_{10} transformation and the anomaly calculation.

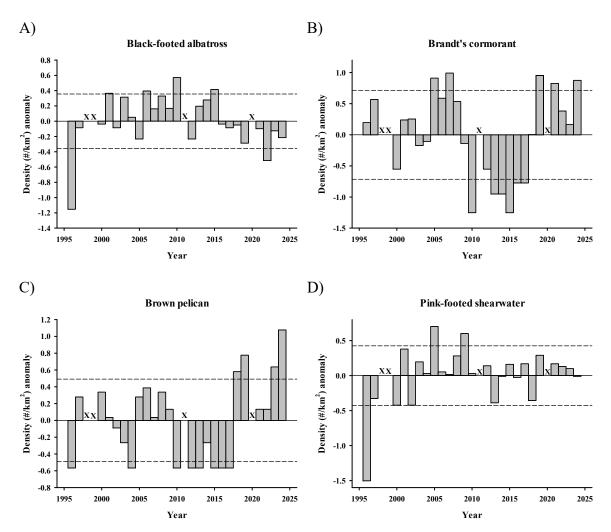


Figure 6. Log₁₀ density anomalies over time from the core area surveys for species with coldwater habitat affinities, 1996–2024. A) Cassin's auklet, B) common murre, C) northern fulmar, D) rhinoceros auklet, and E) sooty shearwater. The dashed lines indicate ± 1 s.d. of the long-term mean, and 'x' indicates years when no survey was conducted. A constant of 0.01 was added to each density prior to \log_{10} transformation and the anomaly calculation.

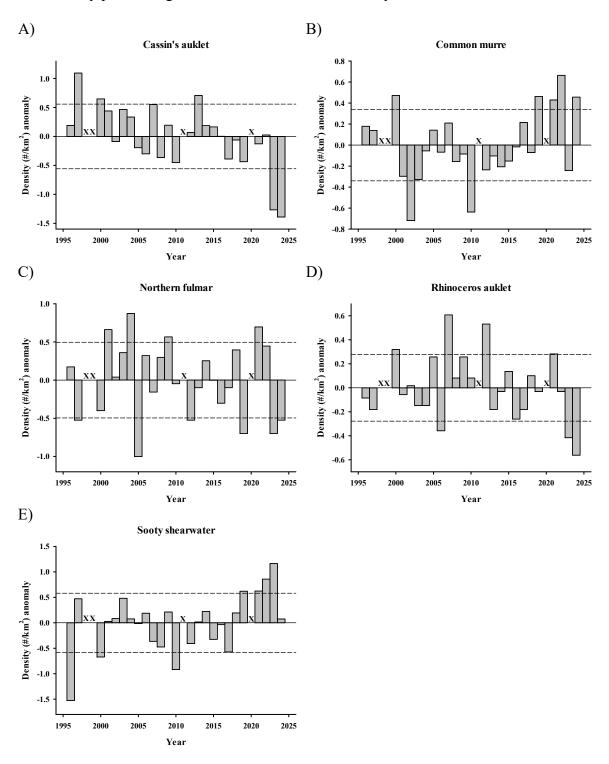


Figure 7. Log₁₀ encounter rate anomalies (#/100 km) over time from core area surveys, 1996–2024. A) blue whale, B) humpback whale, C) Pacific white-sided dolphin, D) and Risso's dolphin. The dashed lines indicate \pm 1 s.d. of the long-term mean, and 'x' indicates years when no survey was conducted. A constant of 0.01 was added to each density prior to \log_{10} transformation and the anomaly calculation.

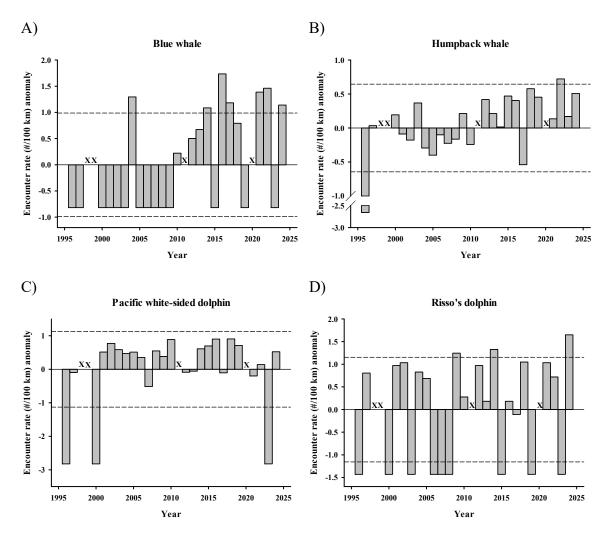
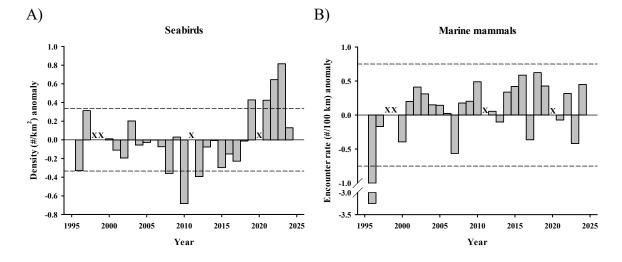


Figure 8. A) Log₁₀ density anomalies over time from core area surveys, 1996–2024, for the nine seabird species combined. B) Log₁₀ encounter rate anomalies over time from core area surveys for the four marine mammal species combined (note that not all four species were seen every year and none of these focal species were observed in 1996). The dashed lines indicate \pm 1 s.d. of the long-term mean, and 'x' indicates years when no survey was conducted. A constant of 0.01 was added to each density prior to log₁₀ transformation and the anomaly calculation.



Reference

Sakuma, K.M., Ralston, S., and Wespestad, V.G. 2006. Interannual and spatial variation in the distribution of young-of-the-year rockfish (*Sebastes* spp.): Expanding and coordinating a survey sampling frame. California Cooperative Oceanic Fisheries Investigations (CalCOFI) Report 47:127-139.

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Appendix. List of bird species excluded from this summary. These species may or may not have been observed during the survey.

Common Name	Scientific Name
American coot	Fulica americana
Black oystercatcher	Haematopus bachmani
Black skimmer	Rynchops niger
Black tern	Chlidonias niger
Black turnstone	Arenaria melanocephala
Black-throated gray warbler	Setophaga nigrescens
Brewer's sparrow	Spizella breweri
Brown-headed cowbird	Molothrus ater
Bufflehead	Bucephala albeola
Chaplan's storm-petrel	Oceanodroma leucorhoa chapmani
Eurasian collared dove	Streptopelia decaocto
European starling	Sturnus vulgaris
Great blue heron	Ardea herodias
Great egret	Ardea alba
Green heron	Butorides virescens
Least sandpiper	Calidris minutilla
Long-billed curlew	Numenius americanus
Long-billed dowitcher	Limnodromus scolopaceus
Mallard duck	Anas platyrhynchos
Marbled godwit	Limosa fedoa
Mourning dove	Zenaida macroura
Nazca booby	Sula granti
Red-breasted merganser	Mergus serrator
Ruddy duck	Oxyura jamaicensis
Sanderling	Calidris alba
Savannah sparrow	Passerculus sandwichensis
Snow goose	Chen caerulescens
Snowy egret	Egretta thula
Townsend's warbler	Setophaga townsendi
Unidentified bird	(species group)
Unidentified dowitcher	(species group)
Unidentified goose	(species group)
Unidentified hummingbird	(species group)
Unidentified passerine	(species group)
Unidentified raptor	(species group)
Unidentified shorebird	(species group)
Wandering tattler	Tringa incana
Western sandpiper	Calidris mauri
Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus
White-winged scoter	Melanitta fusca
Willet	Catoptrophorus semipalmatus
Wilson's warbler	Cardellina pusilla
Yellow-rumped warbler	Dendroica coronata