

# Photographing Point Lobos

*Hidden Beach sunset*

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On a sunny afternoon in late January I took a friend on a short hike at one of my favorite places, Point Lobos State Reserve, just south of Carmel, California. The temperature was in the 70s. My friend, Arthur, a British hiker and birder, had just arrived from cold, dreary London. He was astounded by the wildflowers, birdlife, sea creatures, and magnificent scenery. He was one of the many thousands of visitors from all over the world who have

*Great Blue Heron*



learned why Point Lobos is called the Crown Jewel of the California State Park system. Photography at Point Lobos was made famous by Edward Weston, who made many of his images there. Weston Beach, on the south shore of the Reserve, is named for him.

I am a Point Lobos State Reserve docent, one of the volunteers who have the privilege of answering questions, selling postcards, staffing the historical museum, leading nature walks, and, in general, doing everything we can to help visitors enjoy their experience. This task obliges me to be at the Reserve at all times of the year and in all kinds of weather, and it gives me unparalleled opportunities to make photographs.

### **When To Go**

Point Lobos is a small place; I have led a group of high-schoolers around the perimeter in about three hours. But there is so much to see, and so much variety, that it is worth spending the better part of a day there if conditions are good. Spring and fall are the best times to go. The wildflowers start in January and are at their peak in March and April. Summer days are frequently chilly and foggy, and the best weather is actually



*Pinnacle Rock*

between late September and early November. Like everywhere on the California coast, it can be rainy between November and May, but the weather is unpredictable, and it can be cold and miserable in the morning and magnificent in the afternoon.



*Anemones*

The Reserve opens at 9 a.m. and closes at 7 p.m. during daylight savings time and 5 p.m. otherwise. Once when I tried to arrange to stay late, the head ranger told me “even Ansel had to leave at closing time.” Therefore you can photograph sunsets only during late October, late December, and early January. Even then, there is often a fogbank out to sea that makes the sunsets rather boring.



*Photos © Joseph Hearst*

*Veteran cypress*



Cypress Point fog

### The Rocks

There are two major kinds of rocks at Point Lobos: granitic rocks, mainly on the north shore, and sedimentary sandstones and conglomerates, mainly on the south shore. The erosion of these rocks results in strikingly different scenery. The granitic shorelines, mostly whitish, are steep cliffs, with trees clinging to their sides and waves crashing on their bases. The sedimentary rocks, on the other hand, are colorful, with more gentle slopes, and with many contorted layers and fascinating details, especially at Sea Lion Point and Weston Beach. For the best detail shots of Weston Beach try to get there at low tide. The ability to photograph everything from magnificent vistas to interesting closeups in such a small area is one of the things that gives Point Lobos its charm.

### Vegetation

The most important trees at Point Lobos are the Monterey Cypress and the Monterey Pine. In fact, Point Lobos is home to one of the only two native groves of Monterey Cypress in the

world. The cypresses make wonderful subjects for photography, and details of their trunks were one of Weston's specialties. They look very well in monochrome. On the other hand, their dark green color provides a delightful contrast with the orange encrustation, *Trentepohlia* (which looks like lichen but is actually a green alga, and is harmless to the trees), which grows on many of the cypresses on the north side of the Cypress Point trail. Some of the trees along that trail and also on the well-named Lace Lichen Trail, are festooned with Lace Lichen, which some people think looks like Spanish Moss but is indeed a lichen. Amanita mushrooms are seen from the Lace Lichen Trail in season.

In spring (which starts in late January or early February) the wildflowers are magnificent, and because of the differences in geology and soil and the various microclimates there is a great variety of them. The biggest contrast is probably between the Bird Island Trail on the south shore and the Moss Cove Trail on the north shore. Some of my favorites are the Douglas Iris, the Bluff Lettuce or *Dudleya*, the Douglas Nightshade, the Star Lily, and the Seaside Painted Cup. If you take a nature walk with one of the docents you will be introduced to the flowers, and many of the docents know far more than I do about them. I suggest buying an inexpensive (\$1.00 as of this writing) poster, showing the principal wildflowers of the Reserve, at the Information Station where

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Rattlesnake grass

many of the nature walks start. Because there is a high overcast much of the time, especially in the morning, the light is usually excellent for photographing flowers. I should warn you, however, that while the wildflowers are profuse, and easily accessible, the wind is often strong and gusty, so be prepared.

### Wildlife

I am not a birder, but those who are love the place. Bird Island, to no one's surprise, is home to many birds, especially a colony of nesting cormorants and a lot of Brown Pelicans which have not nested there for many years but are beginning to exhibit nesting behavior. There is also a new cormorant nesting colony near the Cypress Grove Trail. Various species of gulls abound, of course, and there are ducks, scoters, mergansers, grebes, and other seabirds to be seen all around the Reserve, most easily in Whalers Cove, and guillemots on Guillemot Island. Great Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Great Egrets are plentiful, and both the herons and egrets nest at Bluefish Cove. There are a number of Canadian Geese in the area, and they do not migrate. I often see Black Oystercatchers near the South Shore Trail, and there has been a Red-tailed Hawk near the Information Station. Scrub Jays and White-crowned Sparrows are very common, and will eat your lunch for you if you let them. Please don't. This is only a sampling of the birdlife at the Reserve, so bring a long lens if you like birds.

There are plenty of mammals, from Blue Whales to California Ground Squirrels, but not all are easy to photograph. Whale spouts are easy to see with the naked eye from the Information Station parking lot and the Cypress Point Trail. Migrating Grey Whales are often seen from December to March, with the peak of the migration in January, but they are much too far out to photograph. California Sea Lions, (in Spanish, *Lobos Marinos*), for which the point is named, cover the Sea Lion Rocks off Sea Lion Point for much of the year, but are also too far for photography. Harbor Seals, on the other hand, are common and often close to shore. They haul out on the beaches in Whalers Cove and Headland Cove at low tide, and can be seen draped over rocks all over the Reserve. In pupping season, generally April and May, mothers and pups can be seen at low tide on a very small beach just off the Whalers Cove road below Whalers Cabin. Elephant Seals are rare, but I have occasionally seen a juvenile.

Sea Otters can usually be seen from somewhere on the trails, but they move around

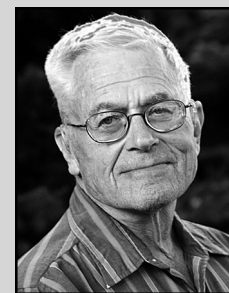
a lot. The west side of Whalers Cove is a good place to spot mothers and pups if you are lucky, and there is no particular pupping season. They are too far out for anything but a very long lens. Another good place for both otters and seals is The Pit.

Blacktailed Mule Deer are very common throughout the Reserve; you will rarely take a hike without seeing some, and rabbits and California Ground Squirrels are also commonly seen.

If you really want to photograph Sea Lions, though, you should go to Monterey Harbor or Pier 39 in San Francisco. If you are anxious to photograph Sea Otters, White Pelicans, and shorebirds you should go to Moss Landing, 15 miles north of Point Lobos, and either rent a kayak and go up Elkhorn Slough or arrange to take a boat ride with the Elkhorn Slough Safari (831-633-5555 for reservations). The boat captain is very knowledgeable.

The tidepools at Weston Beach, while not the best on the coast, provide many kinds of snails and limpets, sea anemones, sea urchins, and some sea stars. You may find better viewing at The Slot, but you have to wade. Point Lobos is the premier dive site in the Monterey area, and has magnificent underwater life. But the water is very cold (most divers use dry suits) and "good" visibility is about 25 feet. Diving is permitted only out of Whalers Cove, and is by reservation only.

In summary, Point Lobos provides far more photographic opportunities in a small area than any other place on the Central California coast. 🌿



**Joe Hearst**



*Star lily*