

Southeast Farallon Island (SEFI) Fall Season Information

The Farallon Islands

The Farallon Islands are a collection of ~100 acres of offshore granite rocks 30 miles southwest of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California. The islands lie in the western region of the Gulf of the Farallons, ~6 miles from the continental shelf. There are actually 3 groups of islands – Southeast Farallon Island (SEFI), Middle Farallon, and the North Farallon Islands. SEFI is the only accessible island and is where research is conducted. The word “farallon” is Spanish for “rocks rising from the sea”. The Farallones have a long human history. The explorer Francis Drake is believed to be the first person to set foot on SEFI in 1579, when he wrote that the islands “held plentiful and great store of seals and birds”. However, sealers and egg collectors took a heavy toll on wildlife populations throughout the 19th century. In 1853, the first lighthouse on the Pacific Coast of the US was built on SEFI. After over 100 years of human occupation by the Lighthouse Service, Coast Guard, Weather Service, and Navy, the lighthouse was automated in 1972, and the island became a National Wildlife Refuge under the jurisdiction of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Public access to the refuge is not permitted. The waters adjacent to the islands are the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GOFNMS) administered by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and beginning in April 2010, the islands were included in one of the first “no take” marine reserves in California.

The Farallon Islands are the largest seabird rookery in the contiguous United States where hundreds of thousands of seabirds return annually to breed. There are 13 breeding seabird species: two storm-petrels, three cormorants, two gulls, five auks, and one shorebird – the Black Oystercatcher. The island is also an important haul out and breeding site for 5 pinniped species: Harbor Seal, Northern Elephant Seal, California Sea Lion, Steller Sea Lion, and Northern Fur Seal. In addition, the island attracts large numbers of migrant and vagrant landbirds, as well as an aggregation of feeding White Sharks during the fall months.

A short but detailed history of the islands by William Keener can be found at <http://footlooseforays.com/chronicles/?p=27>

What is life on the island like?

To put it mildly, SEFI is a very wild and special place. No day is the same, and just when you think you have seen it all, you will be surprised and amazed by something new. Life on the Farallones is unique. While we are surrounded by thousands of birds, the human population during the fall varies between 3 and 6 people, but may increase due to construction/maintenance projects undertaken by the USFWS. We live comfortably, but without many of the “creature comforts” of urban life. We share house cleaning and cooking duties. Having a relaxed demeanor and a good sense of humor greatly improves island dynamics. The excellent living facilities on SEFI help with this as well – living in a warm, dry house instead of a wet, moldy tent has great effects on morale. Though we work very hard and are constantly trying to learn more about the wildlife on SEFI, most people manage to have a great deal of fun and make some good friends.

AT SEA TRANSPORT

Seasickness

The passage to the Farallones crosses the open Pacific Ocean so heavy winds and large swells can make trips quite bumpy at times. If you are not used to the rolling motion of open water (and sometimes even if you are), there is a good chance you could get seasick. A good way to avoid seasickness is to keep your resistances up and avoid activities that could increase your chances of getting sick. Eat a good dinner, refrain from heavy alcohol consumption, get a good night sleep, and eat a neutral, non-greasy breakfast. Avoid acid liquids. If you know you tend to get seasick, you might want to take some precautionary medication the night before and/or a few hours before departure. We recommend Bonine, which is available over the counter. If you are queasy on the boat, stay topside in the fresh air, as going below can often increase your nausea. If you do get sick, use the lee side of the boat rather than the toilet or the sink. If you feel really sick, it's best to get it over with – over the rail. You will feel better afterwards. Once you are on the island you will feel better very quickly. Remember that even the hardest sailors get sick on occasion, so it's nothing to be embarrassed about.

Personal Preparation

The 1-3 hour crossing to the island can be cold. Warm clothes and raingear are essential. It is easy to get chilled very quickly if you are not prepared. Try not to wear dark soled shoes or hiking boots on the boats. Marks from these shoes are difficult for skippers to remove. Non-marking rubber boots are ideal, though, tennis shoes or light-soled work boots work fine. The trip can occasionally be sunny and warm, so sunscreen is also advisable.

Getting on the Island

Getting onto the island once you arrive presents its own set of challenges. There are no docks and no beaches suitable for landing. So in order to get onto land, the boat will tie up to a mooring buoy approximately ¼ mile off shore. From there we must transfer supplies to a small landing boat, which will then be hoisted onto the landing platform using a crane. Personnel will either be transferred onto the island using the boat or a Billy Pugh Personnel Basket (a system designed for the transfer of people on offshore oil derricks). Although it sounds unusual, the landing procedure is quite safe and safety equipment (PFDs) is provided. However, be sure to inform island biologists if at any time you feel uncomfortable or unable to take part in the landing (such as a debilitating fear of heights). The entire landing procedure will take a few hours and requires the assistance of the island biologists, Patrol skippers, and interns. Food and personal gear will be passed from boat to boat, so they should be well-packed. “Must stay dry items” should always be wrapped in plastic bags or dry bags.

LIVING AND WORKING ON SEFI

Life on the Farallons can be comfortable, enjoyable, productive, and rewarding, provided you bring proper clothing, equipment, and the right attitude.

Field Conditions and Fitness

SEFI has a maritime climate, which is highly variable and dominated by wind. Lots of wind! Fall is typically dry but occasionally foggy, with mixed warm and cool days. Strong winds often mean that you will be warm at wind-shielded spots and you will be chilled at exposed sites like the lighthouse. Temperatures average about 55°F. Field work proceeds in all kinds of weather.

SEFI is rocky and rugged and field conditions can be strenuous. Workdays are often long, and you may be exhausted by sunset. Anyone in good health can participate; however, those with bad backs or knees may not be able to work on some of the more physically demanding projects. If you have a pre-existing medical condition, you **MUST** inform the Farallon Biologists of this before coming out to the island.

Some people are sensitive to small bites from gull fleas, while they do not seem to bother others at all. Wearing rubber boots around the island is the best way to limit exposure to fleas if you think you might be sensitive. There will be an ample supply of anti-itch cream for those suffering from bites.

Housing

On SEFI we live in 130-year old Light-keeper's Houses. The houses were recently renovated and are very comfortable. There are limited bedrooms, so you will likely be sharing a room with at least one other person. Privacy is very limited. The island is small but affords many opportunities for quiet time. Please be considerate of other people's music preferences and space, and be conscientious about your household responsibilities. Everyone is expected to participate in a rotating cooking schedule and keeping the field station clean and orderly.

Food

SEFI is well-stocked with wholesome and hearty food, but does not provide "extras" such as alcohol or candy. Fresh food is brought out on the Patrol boats once every two or three weeks. If you have extensive special requests, it is often best to bring them with you when you arrive, as ordering them from the island can be a hassle. Let everyone know about any food allergies or dietary preferences. The kitchen is well equipped with a restaurant style gas range, coffee maker, toaster, microwave oven, three large refrigerators, and a freezer.

Water Conservation

Fresh water on the island is collected with an extensive catchment system. We have cold running water in the house and a flush toilet. Hot water is available for brief showers. Water is safe to drink and undergoes extensive filtration. However, water is a valuable commodity and strict water conservation is enforced. We take "ship showers" at a maximum of once every 3 days, although, the frequency depends on the amount of water collected the previous year.

In an effort to place less strain on the island's limited resources, there is a supply of bottled water which was brought onto the island for the hazing project which should be used for drinking water.

House Comforts

The house is very comfortable and amenities include: a work room with two PC computers, a living room, scientific and pleasure library, guitar, and a CD/MP3 player. We receive radio clearly from San Francisco and have a TV (no cable) and DVD/VCR in the secondary house. We suggest you bring an MP3 player if you like lots of music or loud music.

The primary power source on SEFI is an extensive and expensive solar power system. This system has worked very well, but we must be mindful of power conservation. It can malfunction so there may be periods of limited power. Bring batteries for portable devices. There will be beds or cots for everyone, as well as sleeping bags, pillows, and pillow cases.

RULES TO REMEMBER WHILE ON THE ISLAND

- Do not step on pipes. They are fragile. If they break, we lose precious water and then have to fix them.
- Do not step on boards lying on the ground that are not part of a walkway. The endemic Farallon salamander lives under boards and rocks.
- Block the wheels on the railroad cart with a rock. If you forget to block the wheels, the cart will eventually roll downhill and crash into East Landing.
- Park the electric cart (AKA, Dumper Jet) in the Powerhouse and turn the power off when it is not being used.
- Shut refrigerator doors completely and turn off lights not being used. Unplug all computers at night. The island runs off solar power and has limited electricity.
- Shut pantry door completely unless you are standing in the doorway. We do not want mice getting in there!
- Close shades on windows at night. Seabirds are attracted to lights and can crash into windows.
- Do not drag stuff (e.g., Action Packers) over the linoleum floors in the houses. They will get scratched.

WHAT TO BRING

We provide general first aid type medications, but please bring any specific medications/prescriptions you may require. You will need to bring your own toiletries (soap, toothpaste etc.) to last the duration of your stay. Remember if you want to ensure your items stay dry during landings on the island, pack them appropriately.

Clothing you should bring

Workpants (at least 2 pairs) – durable jeans or Carharts recommended

Foul weather gear – not expensive

Windbreaker or some layer against wind

Warm jacket

Warm hat
Warm gloves
Long underwear
Layered, warm, washable clothes
Rubber boots (especially if you are prone to flea bites)
Hat for sun
Field shoes/boots (granite will destroy soles, you can bring some beater shoes)
House shoes/slippers/crocs (outside shoes are not allowed inside)
House clothes – it is often nice to have a set of clean clothes to change into when you come in from doing field work.

Essential Gear

Wrist watch with timer function
Simple day pack (let us know if you want us to bring a pack for you)
Alarm clock
Batteries for personal items
Water bottles
Pocket knife/ multi-tool
Headlamp
Towel

Optional Items not supplied

Camera
Computer disks or USB thumb drives for personal use
Personal medication
Extra pair of prescription glasses
Books (there are good books on the island, but bring your own too)
Thermos
MP3 player
Laptop

COMMUNICATION

Email and Phone

We have wireless internet access and a phone line (Voice Over IP) with our new computer system on the island. The phone number is 415-367-7482 and has a message machine. This system works well when it is running, but can go down often due to weather effects on the microwave radio transmission that links us with the mainland. Be prepared for disruptions in internet and phone connectivity. While we encourage interns to use these technologies to keep in touch with the mainland, know that your time on the internet and phone will be limited and should not affect your work on the island. Your cell phone is unlikely to get service on the island. We have a special back-up cell phone for emergencies.

We look forward to working with you!

MORE INFORMATION

Los Farallones – PRBO’s Farallon Blog

<http://losfarallones.blogspot.com/>

Check out what’s happening on the island with updates from current researchers.

Farallones Web Cam

<http://www.calacademy.org/webcams/farallones/>

See what’s happening at the lighthouse live!

General Island Info

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVL_2exHQrg

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farallon_Islands

USFWS Farallon National Wildlife Refuge Brochure

<http://library.fws.gov/refuges/farallon02.pdf>

Books about the Farallon Islands

- Seabirds of the Farallon Islands by David Ainley and Robert Boekelheide
- The Farallon Islands: Sentinels of the Golden Gate by Peter White