



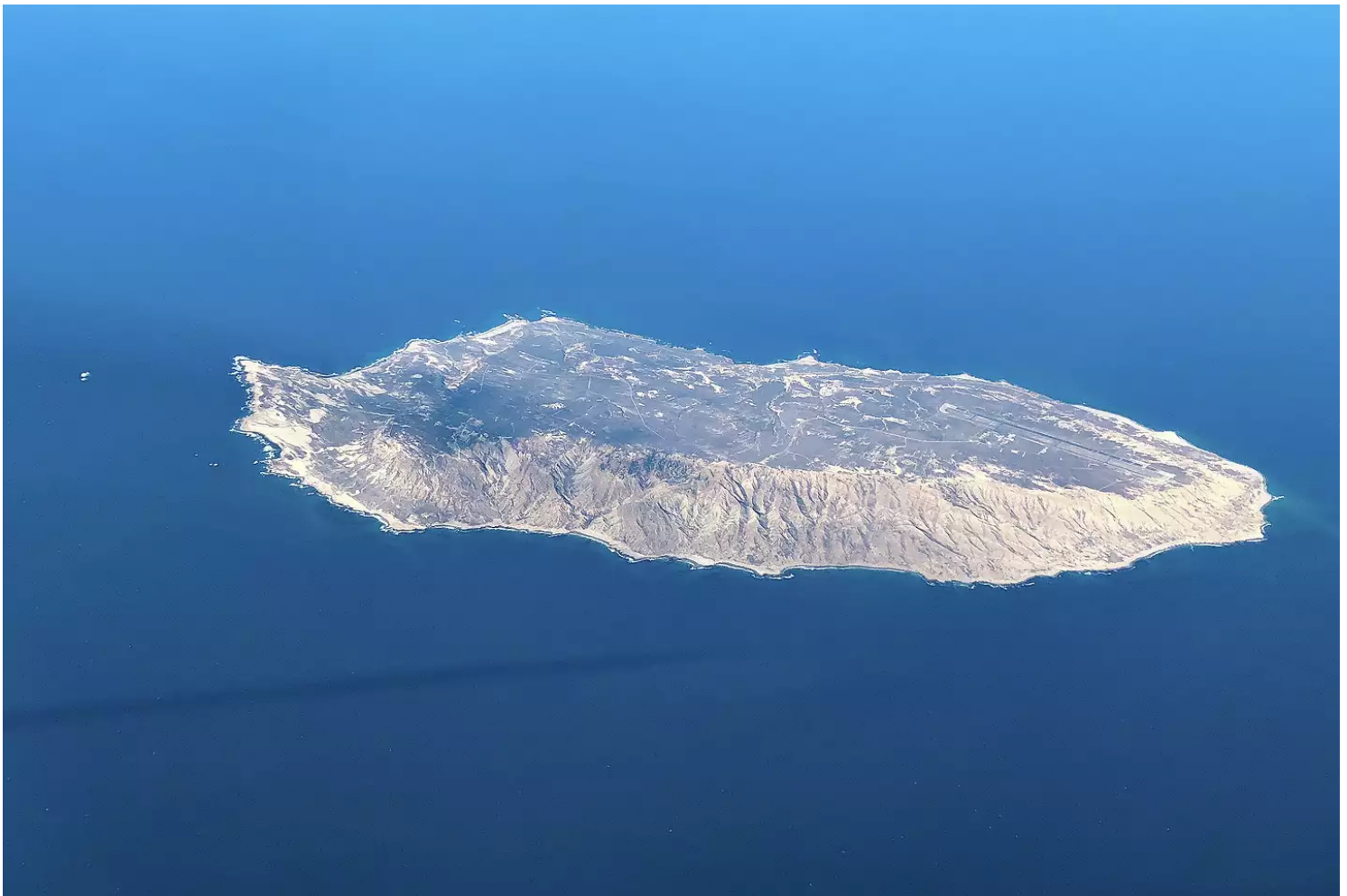
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## San Nicolas Island is off-limits to the public



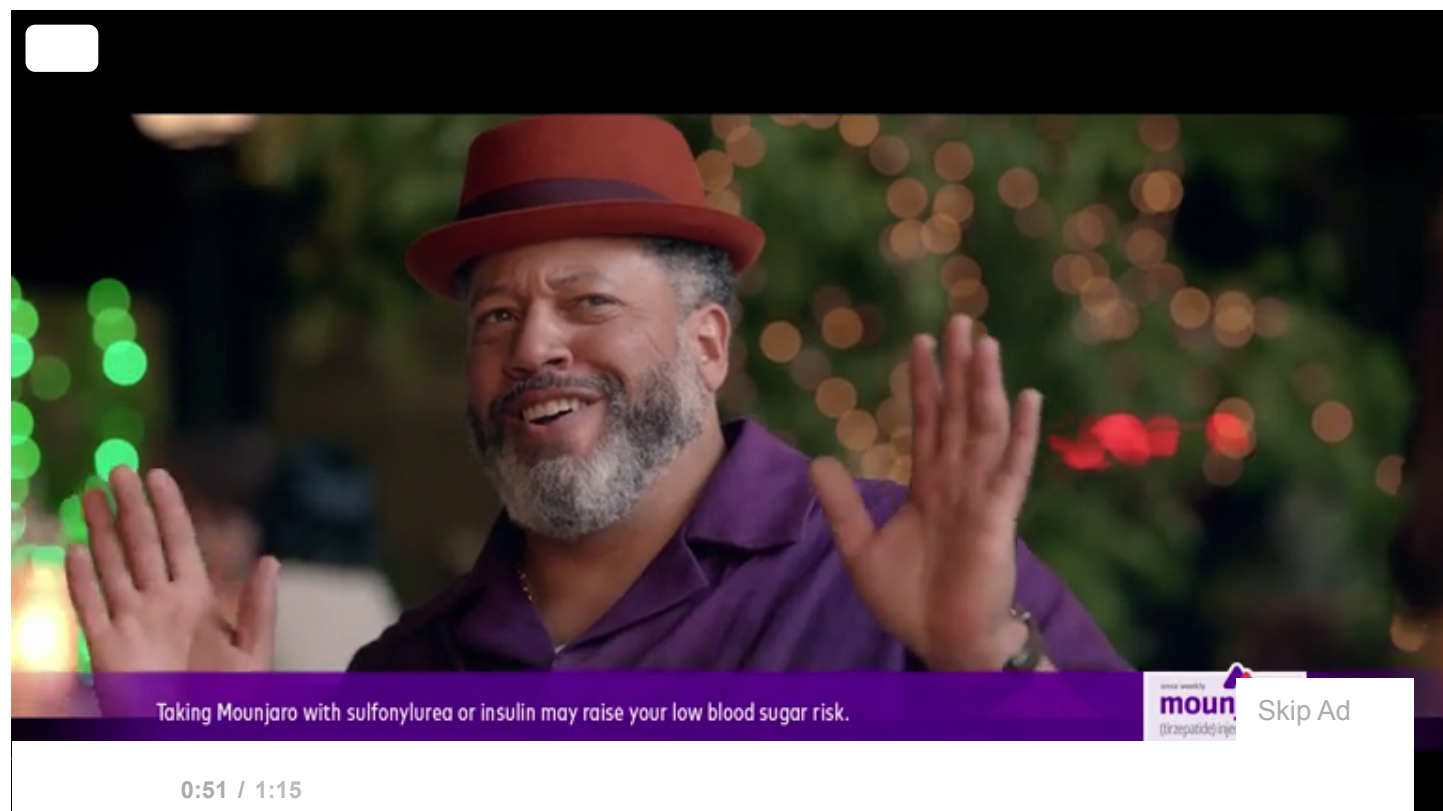
San Nicolas Island in Ventura County, Calif., on Nov. 14, 2017.  
Dan via Wikimedia CC 2.0

By **Erin Rode**, *Contributing LA Outdoors Editor*

Nov 14, 2024



San Nicolas Island is possibly the most well-known of the eight Channel Islands off the coast of Southern California — even though it's completely off-limits to visitors and doesn't appear in any tourist guidebooks.



For decades, Scott O'Dell's 1960 children's novel "Island of the Blue Dolphins" has introduced elementary and middle school students to the rugged landscapes of the Channel Islands. The book was inspired by the true story of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, who spent 18 years mostly alone on the island after the rest of the Nicoleño people were brought to the mainland in 1835.

But good luck visiting this famous place. Unlike the five islands that comprise Channel Islands National Park (or Catalina Island, which isn't part of the national park but is open to the public), San Nicolas Island is owned by the U.S. Navy and used for weapons testing and training, resulting in a different legacy for wildlife and the landscape than the other islands.

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San Nicolas Island is around [22 square miles in size](#), landing it in fifth place among the eight islands. It's also considered the most remote, [located 61 miles](#) from the closest point on the mainland. The more frequently visited islands, Catalina and Santa Cruz, are just 22 and 20 miles from the mainland, respectively.

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An aerial view of San Nicolas Island with three FPS-16 and one FPQ-10 radar antennas visible on Nov. 23, 2020.

U.S Department of Defense/Wikimedia

Don't mistake isolated for unpopulated, though. San Nicolas Island is home to around 200 military and civilian personnel at any given time. San Clemente Island is also owned by the U.S. Navy and serves as the Navy's last remaining live firing range.

Surprisingly, many Californians have little idea that these government-owned islands are more than just a backdrop for a famous story. The Channel Islands receive little travel, and Channel Islands National Park is one of the least-visited national parks in the state. The California Channel Islands All 8 Club, which compiles members who have visited all eight islands, lists just 267 people who have set foot on every island.

San Clemente and San Nicolas Island likely represent the biggest barriers for joining the club, with visits only allowed on official business and no public access or transportation to the islands.

## The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island

San Nicolas Island was officially handed off to the U.S. Navy by President Herbert Hoover in 1933. Besides being temporarily borrowed by the U.S. Army and used as a gunnery range during World War II, the island has remained with the U.S. Navy. While ranching dominated the other Channel Islands in the 20th century decades prior to the national park's creation in 1980, San Nicolas Island supported a different industry — the military.

But before the Channel Islands became weapons testing sites and parkland, they were home to several Native populations for thousands of years, including the Chumash and Tongva peoples and the Nicoleño on San Nicolas Island.

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“Our ancestors, in our culture for Chumash people, the first people came from the islands,” said Nakia Zavalla, the cultural director for the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians Culture Department. The Chumash mainly lived on four northern Channel Islands: San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz and Anacapa.



A portrait believed to depict Juana Maria, the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, in 1853.

Black Gold Cooperative Library/Calisphere

“The Channel Islands are all very much connected, and our people intermarried with people of San Nicolas Island. We shared natural resources, and we had a trade system that extended to San Nicolas Island as well,” said Zavalla. “Our traditional story is definitely connected to all of the islands.”

In 1835, the Nicoleño of San Nicolas Island were brought to the mainland and forced to work on missions, with most dying shortly after that due to harsh labor conditions and disease. The Lone Woman remained on the island for years before she was also brought to mainland California in 1853, where she found a similar fate, dying just weeks later from dysentery.

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When the Lone Woman arrived in Santa Barbara, she shared a traditional song from San Nicolas Island with Chumash people, according to Zavalla, and that song was passed down over generations and saved in a wax cylinder recording.

About a century after the Lone Woman was left on San Nicolas Island, ownership of the island was officially transferred to the U.S. Navy (In the intervening years, it was used by the government as a lighthouse location and leased for sheep ranching).

“We’re absolutely aware that we can’t change what’s been done,” said Zavalla. “I guess they took that island for a reason, part of home defense, but that island is very sacred and special. It’s unfortunate it’s been utilized as a base.”

## Impacts on the island

U.S. Navy operations have greatly reshaped the island over the decades, affecting its landscape and more. Passing vehicles and other ongoing work threaten the endemic Channel Island foxes, tiny gray creatures that made a swift recovery from the endangered species list after thousands of feral pigs were killed on Santa Cruz Island in the early 2000s. The species has persisted through the legacy of ranching on the Channel Islands, invasive species, drought and other threats, but on San Nicolas Island, they’re dying from a new hazard.

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The launch of a conventionally configured ground-launched cruise missile on San Nicolas Island off the coast of California on Aug. 18, 2019.

Scott Howe/AP

Vehicle strikes are the leading cause of fox mortality on San Nicolas Island, where the fox's lifespan is just seven to eight years, compared to 10 to 12 years on larger islands. Car strikes killed a total of 15 foxes on San Nicolas Island last year, according to nonprofit Friends of the Island Fox. Keri Dearborn, the education director for the nonprofit, said the group has focused on educating U.S. Navy staff about the island fox and, in recent years, has seen "a dramatic reduction in car strikes on the two Navy islands." In 2023, car fatalities ticked up a bit again, which Dearborn attributes to higher levels of fog on the island reducing visibility, adding that it is "just another way that climate change is impacting the foxes that we didn't expect."

In addition to driver education efforts, other programs have included adding road signs that warn people to watch for foxes and cutting back vegetation on the side of the road to increase visibility. And after years of Friends of the Island Fox calling for speed bumps along the main roads of San Clemente and San Nicolas islands, Dearborn says speed bumps are finally in the works for San Clemente Island.

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“I wish we could get it down to zero, but automobile strikes are one of the major killers of wildlife across the country that doesn’t get very much attention,” said Dearborn.

The U.S. Navy islands aren’t the only Channel Islands where car strikes are killing foxes. Catalina Island, which is open to the public but mostly privately owned by the Catalina Island Conservancy, sees throngs of tourists each year and also houses a population of over 4,000 people. A total of 14 island foxes were killed by cars on Catalina last year, with others killed by dogs, drowned in tubs used for washing scuba gear or killed due to human impacts on the island. Over 62% of fox fatalities on Catalina last year were human-caused, according to Friends of the Island Fox.

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A pair of foxes rest on Santa Cruz Island.  
mlharing/Getty Images

## 'Every time I go, I sing her song'

Zavalla is one of a small and exclusive number of people who have visited San Nicolas Island through limited access provided to the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians.

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“Seeing the island and being able to walk on the island after hearing about how the island is very special is just very emotional. It’s an island that most people don’t have access to, an island that we have stories connected there, and knowing that some of our people likely lived there through intermarriages, it just felt familiar in so many ways,” said Zavalla.

She also always pays tribute to the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island: “Every time I go, I sing her song.”

Nov 14, 2024



**Erin Rode**

CONTRIBUTING LA OUTDOORS EDITOR

Erin Rode is SFGATE’s Contributing Los Angeles Outdoors Editor. Erin grew up in Los Angeles County and has hiked area trails for over a decade. She previously covered the environment for The Desert Sun in Palm Springs.

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