

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Anacapa Island Journal — When the Killing's Done

Witnessing up close the nesting, hatching and quarreling of Western gulls



Anacapa Island is beautiful, but a closer look reveals it's neither quiet nor peaceful this time of year. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

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Murder and mayhem. [T.C. Boyle's](#) latest book, *When the Killing's Done*, is a gripping novel set on the [Channel Islands](#). But gull-hatching time on [Anacapa Island](#) has enough intrigue for a nonfiction tell-all.

In early June, I served as a volunteer naturalist on Anacapa in the exclusive company of thousands of nesting, hatching and quarreling Western gulls. Some journal bits:

Friday

Anacapa is beautiful, but it's neither quiet nor peaceful this time of year. Under overcast skies, the foghorn sounds every 12 seconds from its lighthouse perch. Western gulls squawk constantly for some real or imagined offense.

The tiny island has gull pox. The muted colors of the dry grasses, giant coreopsis and iceplant are spotted entirely with bright gray and white gull dots. After 28 days of incubation, the hatchlings are "sitting ducks" for another month while developing flight feathers. Two weeks of flight practice and then they'll be off. The 40 percent who survive their first year will return to this island in four to five years, find a life mate and lay two or three eggs.

Ship-borne rats, an issue in Boyle's book, have been removed. But it's still a hard life in a gull nursery. On one of my guided hikes, a visitor pointed to a gull swallowing something rather large. We realized with horror it was a dead chick — probably an errant chick wandering into a neighboring territory.

I doubted my eyes, but a quick check of Joan Lentz's *Introduction to Birds of the Southern California Coast* confirmed that the Western gull is a "bold, skillful hunter and scavenger ... of everything from live fish to dead clams to the eggs and young of other seabirds."

On another pass through, I found a freshly killed chick stabbed in the neck. Ten feet further on, I stared down a gull dribbling blood down its neck. It's a brutal life.

Saturday

It's overcast and cool, with low gray clouds over the western islands. I walk toward the lighthouse, past more gull communities. The elegant eggs are about 3 inches across, gray and black like gray-scale leopard skin. Chicks emerge in the

same color scheme. They're quickly adept at scrambling for cover at the shrieks of their parents.

The Westerns are more resilient to human disturbance than most seabirds, but they shout a low honk on my approach, followed by a high scream when I'm near a nest, which might abut the trail. I end up exercising mostly in the Visitors Center to avoid disturbing the birds.



Western gull chicks emerge in the same color scheme as their eggs — gray and black like gray-scale leopard skin. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

Reading at the picnic tables, I listen to the noise droning in a “sound circle” around the island, as if there’s a gull speaker on a rotating pole. A trespassing over-flight excites one gull neighborhood, sounding the alarm section by section until it circles the island, and repeats.

At sunset I stroll around “my” island in flannel PJs, a jacket, pink gloves, a ski hat and a bulky two-way radio balanced on my head to avoid dive-bombing gulls. There are a few sprinkles of rain: I know it’s not droppings because they’d be a lot bigger.

Suddenly, one gull locks eyes with me from a good 50 feet away, flying at me like a heat-seeking missile then veering off at the last moment. I realize if he were willing to ram me and knock me down, the others could move in and polish me off [Alfred Hitchcock](#) style, and no one would know until the next boat came in. Guess I've been alone too long!

Sunday

Out in the sprinkling rain, gulls screaming. I cover my head with the statistics clipboard to open the Visitors Center, check the temperature and rain gauges, and descend the new aluminum staircase to assess wind and waves at the landing cove.

Tuning into the Morning Report, I learn that 36 day hikers come today, after just a few private boaters yesterday. I quickly finish the dishes, pack my dry bag and start the cleanup routine.

Waiting at the stairs, I finish the last pages of the book. I feel attached to the islands not in a rancher sort of way but as a ranger charged with protecting dwarf flying bears. I'm ready to greet my group from Ventura, Michigan, China and France, ages 4 months to 80-something. I discuss the impact of isolation on islands, including endemic species and ground-nesting gulls. I don't extol the tranquility of island life.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*