

*Voices* at the *Seashore*

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Becoming a Naturalist  
*A Beginning*

The Saturday after my five-week PRNSA California Naturalist Course at Point Reyes ended, I couldn't keep away from the park, so I took a solo trip to Kehoe Beach, where I had not been for years. It was on that day at Kehoe that I realized how much I had learned from California Naturalist Course leader Dr. Chris Pincetich--and how much more I wanted and needed to learn.

As I passed and photographed a common gopher snake slithering across the trail to the beach (I double-checked the snake's identity afterwards with iNaturalist), I chatted with some visitors who tipped me off about an unexpected treat that awaited me, if only I could find it where the sandstone and granite intersected on the Kehoe Beach cliffs.

Given both my novice naturalist status and my self-identified difficulty observing, I was not optimistic. But I remembered the crucial thing I had learned from our instructor, Chris: take your time and look patiently and carefully. So, when I saw what looked like sandstone and granite meeting up, I sat, then lay down on the beach for a long while, training my binoculars on the cliff face, scanning back and forth, observing.





The bird poop was the tell-tale giveaway that pointed me to the peregrine falcon chicks in their nest high up the cliff. When I finally spotted them, I felt like standing up and cheering, but instead I continued to look and noticed, soon after, that about 20 yards away, a “sentry” peregrine falcon was keeping watch over the nest. The sentry did not appear concerned when a turkey vulture did a casual fly-by, but a redtail hawk cruising near the nest seemed to catch his interest, and the sentry chased him off.

The whole encounter was thrilling. I knew that, without the hours of Chris’ fundamental and oft-repeated instruction to observe and record what we were seeing, I would not have been able to find or see these chicks. Without his geology lesson, noticing the difference among various rocks would have been a challenge. Without his good-natured and constant—and I mean constant!—encouragement, I would not have made a drawing and carefully noted the time, weather and location in the notes in my field journal. I would certainly not have known how to use iNaturalist.

If the purpose of the California Naturalist Course is to foster “a committed corps of naturalists and community scientists,” Chris Pincetich and guest presenters like Todd Plummer succeeded wildly as they led us through the park, informed and inspired us.

My fellow participants focused on the California Naturalist’s goals of stewardship of the environment, program support, interpretation and education, and community science and presented Capstone projects that represented our wide-ranging interests and enthusiasm, including presentations like:

- A book that presented the California poppy in all its glory and complexity (“Ten Things You Should Know About the California Poppy, California’s State Flower”);
- A plan to encourage large corporations to embrace climate-aware policies;
- An examination of seaweed and kelp (I loved that the anchor that some marine algae have to attach themselves is called, appropriately, the “holdfast”);





- How a “snag”—an apparently dead tree—is in fact pulsing with life, and
- A sample docent talk on delayed implantation in elephant seals (my own particular passion).

None of us participants is an expert—but all of us are passionate and committed naturalists and community scientists.

...which brings me back to my Kehoe Beach hike. For a few weeks in May, blooming mustard carpets the hike from the parking lot to Kehoe beach in a vibrant yellow. I was entranced when a redwing blackbird landed nearby and waited patiently while I employed my California Naturalist observation skills and took a photo.

Each week, each visit, each season, will provide new opportunities for me to reinforce and deepen my understanding and skills. I will continue to re-read my notes and books from the California Naturalist Course, I have been practicing with my new apps, eBird and iNaturalist, and I have already bought more guides.

My 5-week California Naturalist Course seems to be leading to a lifetime of learning. I am delighted to have joined with other community scientists and naturalists who promote stewardship of California’s natural resources through education and service.