

Seagull Murder/Death Island

A Brief Intro to the Anacapa Experience



I took this photo. I think it is quite beautiful, but it is certainly only one dimension of the experience of visiting Anacapa Island in July of 2020.

It all sounds like an incredibly romantic adventure: Ari books a camping trip on an island where birds are known to breed which is a great idea because, as you may know, I love birds.

As a couple, Ari and I spent Mid-March 2020–June 2020 mostly drinking and depression spiraling in either my 1 bedroom or his 1 bedroom. This trip was going to fling open new doors for us. Surely they were going to be doors to adventure and wonder.

Camping on an island was new for me. You have to bring your tent on a boat. Cool!

It's about an hour, even with no traffic, to get from Ari's apartment to the dock. The boat boards at 8:30 but leaves at 9:30; you have to check in your supplies, they have to make sure you have the right kinda shit, it's a process. So we can't be late for boarding.

I realize on the 101, just as we are approaching the valley and leaving Los Angeles proper, that I have forgotten my sleeping pad. I didn't want it to be a bad omen. After some frantic searching to see if any REI stores on our route open before 10AM (no), I make peace with this fact. I am still excited for the experience.

Cut to the boat ride over. The sea air whips our hair! We see a pod of dolphins! We watch them ride in the slipstream of the boat! The world is open, ours to explore, and further excitement awaits us on the island.

Joy Through the Squawking

I see my son, hesitant, hovering behind the bear proof lockers that keep our food safe. Not from bears, oh no. From seagulls. The seagulls rule this island, did I mention that? It's an absolute monarchy.

A few squawked at us as we arrived. I assumed they were doing that in reaction to our presence, but they did not stop. More seagulls became apparent: nestled in the shrubbery, indignant; guarding the trails, one after another after another; antagonistically swooping on and off the cliffs that form the periphery of the island. All of them, squawking. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. I thought, *certainly they will stop once the sun goes down. Birds must rest, too, right?* Wrong.

So my son has a badly broken wing. And some scalp missing. I am referring to him as my son because one of the many times his predatory peers dove in for a headshot, I screamed "Leave my son alone!" but I otherwise had the shred of foresight required to refrain from naming this wounded baby bird that hovered around our campsite. I think Ari may have even said to me, "Don't name it." Regardless, I am convinced he sensed my loving, pro-bird presence and sought

me out. I told him, psychically and in the voice of Randy Newman, that he had a friend in me.

In the beginning, the drama with my son is happening in the background. My main focus is trying to find joy through the squawking and take in the views.



See that charming lighthouse overlooking the kelp forest? Yeah, it blaris a deafening fog horn every fifteen seconds, night and day. No exceptions.

But Alegria, my therapist, tells me that I focus too much on the negative, so in her honor I will take this opportunity to point out the dazzling and robust kelp forest that is visible through the crystal clear waters of the Pacific that surround the island. Also, we learned that this is the last major lighthouse built on the west coast. It was first lit in 1912. Wow, history! That was so long ago! More than one person from the east coast pointed out to me that *that's actually not really that old*. Do you hear this, Alegria? This is what I'm working with.

There are so many seagulls on Anacapa in July, it's hard to talk about anything other than how many seagulls there are while you're there. They are truly all-encompassing. July is towards the end of the breeding season, so most of the chicks are starting to mature.

The island of Anacapa is an ideal breeding ground for seagulls for the following reasons:

1. The only endemic mammal to the island is an adorable and nonthreatening deer mouse; no predators
2. The steep cliffs surrounding the island provide great opportunities for learning how to fly
3. Minimal human activity on the island allows for them to do their seagull stuff with few interruptions

All of these reasons explain the fact that Anacapa island is the largest seagull breeding ground in the world. [1]

Here are some related facts I learned about seagulls, against my will. First of all, they are territorial breeders. Territories are defended from other gulls through (apparently constant) squawking and aerial attacks. Chicks that unknowingly wander into other gull's territory are often killed. Parents will fish for their chicks and barf up their food (sometimes *onto the ground what the fuck*) for them to eat it.

Also apparently 50%-70% of chicks just straight up fall off the island to their death. [2]

The [government propaganda](#) will tell you that most seagulls are happy lesbians [3], but I got a more nuanced picture from Sam.

Enter Sam

Sam is the only soul living on Anacapa island. He is the Channel Islands National Park Ranger stationed there. He switches out with some other rangers on a rotation, but he lives on the island totally alone, save the transient visitors, for some 10 weeks at a time.

Sam is a brief man. When one arrives at Anacapa, one does so via a dock built in Landing Cove. Sam is there to greet you and tell you to walk up the stairs, scaling 930 feet, to the top of the island. The whole island is basically a cliff; there is the dock at sea level, and then there is everything else at 930 feet.

That was it for Sam for the day! He retired to his chambers, surely to avoid people's questions about seagulls.

I determined one of two things must be true about Sam: He either absolutely loves seagulls or he absolutely hates seagulls. That first day on Anacapa, I wondered about Sam. What does he think about?

Anyway, I'll get back to the more nuanced view from Sam later. In the meantime...

Let's Get Back to My Son

The sun is setting. Ari is making dinner on the tiny backpacking stove he bought for this trip and popping open a bottle of wine because he is a Good Man. My son returns.

I am relieved to see that he is okay, and in the absence of basically anything to do on this island other than walk around and see a few cool views, I wholeheartedly enter the bird drama. It's almost impossible not to! Do you understand that they, the seagulls, are everywhere? THEY ARE EVERYWHERE. You see and hear seagulls all day and then at night, you close your eyes and continue to see and hear seagulls.

The adults begin to circle my son, aiming for his head. They are going in for the kill. They want this baby to die. I stand up to shoo them in between bites of black bean burger, but they edge their way back time and time again. Ari, in his gentle way, points out the Sisyphean nature of my work, but we both know my bird-heart cannot quit.

But then! Just as the light is fading and the sky turns from pink to blue, a hero emerges! He is strong, fast, and fresh from the fight! An adult seagull swoops in to defend my son.

I am convinced it's his father. It must be! Dad went out for a pack of cigarettes *and came back!* I was wowed at the Shakespearian timing of this event. I couldn't believe it. This adult bird came back and fought off all the 'nerdowells. Who woulda thunk that getting emotionally attached to a dying bird wouldn't be so bad.

I retired to my tent, earplugs in tow. Do you know how discouraging it is to hear fog horn and seagull-squawking through earplugs as you try to sleep? Oh yeah, and no sleeping pad.

Darkness After the Dawn

The next morning, through hot stinging tears, I watched my son's murder.

I can't remember what Ari made for breakfast (if he is Good, then I am Trying My Best) but do you know that sensation of crying while eating? The food sorta just becomes an object in your mouth, but it's making you feel better so you don't spit it out?

I remember thinking *Why couldn't they wait for me to leave before they killed him? And on top of that, while I'm eating my breakfast? Fate is truly cruel. This is a sad day.* Et cetera.

But before the group of adult seagulls, stronger chicks, and quite possibly his own deadbeat dad surrounded him, pecked his brains out, pulled his wings, and clawed his body, my son did lash out on an innocent bystanding chick. Totally uncalled for, bro. Don't make yourself even more of an enemy. They want to kill you, dude! And it was that moment that allowed me to detach slightly from this macabre scene. Because my son was kind of being a little shit. *Ok, this is why they are still birds and I evolved into a human. These are animals, this is what they do.*

Yes, I wept at my son's death for maybe like ten minutes, but of course I saw it coming. And I surprised myself because when I was done crying, I was totally over it. I even felt a little elevated. In a strange way, it felt necessary to have an experience with death that was both close and visceral, and simultaneously no-strings-attached.

When we left, we saw Sam again. We asked him if he likes seagulls.

"This is their home," he said.

Conclusion

Sam said a few other things that were necessary for both Ari and me to feel closure.

The first is that seagull murder and seagull-on-seagull violence in general is common. In fact, most if not all mating seagull pairs have 2-3 chicks, and only the strongest one is fed and protected. Often, the Star Chick will kill and eat their weaker sibling(s). Okay! Appalling, but okay!

The second is that those Star Chicks had actually already left the nest before we got there. They were out at sea, in Sam's words, "learning new skills" like swimming, flying, fishing. In my words, bird college.

What was left on the island after all the Star Chicks went to bird college was kind of like all the people who stay in a small town after graduating from high school, never travelling or "learning new skills." If my son wasn't murdered, he'd probably end up messaging me on Facebook about an amazing business opportunity selling vitamin powder or some shit.

In researching this frustrated essay, I learned that the name *Anacapa* comes from the Chumash word for "illusion." Is this a metaphor about the illusion of comfort we experience in our everyday lives in which we aren't exposed to the horrors of gull breeding? Maybe. Is the illusion actually that we humans are somehow separate from the birds, with our "civilization" and "society?" Whoa now, don't get too deep! Perhaps the Chumash just weren't sure if Anacapa was actually there or not because they had seven other way better islands to go in the

Channel Islands archipelago, and when they were in charge 700 years ago, you didn't have to make campsite reservations on recreation.gov.

Anyway I'm not saying "don't go to Anacapa." Just don't spend the night. Just don't go during seagull breeding season.

Footnotes

[1] [Source.](#)

[2] [Source.](#)

[3] The National Park Service website says: "In colonies with many more females than males present, two females may establish a pair bond. Each lays eggs, and then takes care of the double-sized brood." Of course the female birds end up doing more work.