

Fort Ross State Historic Park



Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



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Fort Ross State Historic Park

19005 Coast Highway One

Jenner, CA 95450

(707) 847-3286

In 1812, Russian and Alaskan explorers and traders established Fort Ross at Metini, a centuries-old Kashaya Pomo coastal village.





Fort Ross State Historic Park, one of the oldest parks in the California State Park System, was established in 1906. Located on the Sonoma coast 11 miles northwest of Jenner on Highway One, the 3,386-acre park preserves North America's southernmost Russian settlement. The Fort Ross Colony was founded in 1812 by members of the Russian-American Company, who built it with the help of Alaskan Alutiiq natives. North of the fort, the old Call Ranch house and buildings represent the American ranch era, which followed the Russian settlement. Park facilities include a visitor center with interpretive exhibits, a museum bookstore, gardens, the Russian Cemetery, the Old Russian Orchard, and a research library. The fort and its buildings have a sweeping view of the Pacific Ocean, coastal terraces and densely forested ridges.

Winter storms frequently batter the coastline with gale-force winds. Normal annual rainfall averages 44 inches, with 35 inches falling between November and April. Spring can be windy, and summer often brings a thick layer of fog. Visitors are advised to dress warmly in layers and to wear sturdy shoes.

PARK HISTORY

Native People

Metini was a village between the Gualala River and the Russian River that had been occupied for centuries by the Kashaya band of Pomo people. The Kashaya Pomo would

seasonally move their village from the ridges where they lived in winter, to their summer home at the seashore, hunting and gathering food from the ocean and the land. Along the shore, they found plentiful supplies of abalone, mussels, fish and a rich variety of sea plants. The Kashaya harvested sea salt for domestic use and trading. Plants, acorns, deer and smaller mammals provided an abundance of foods inland. The natives used resources only as needed, ensuring that plants and wildlife would be conserved for future generations.

The Kashaya excelled in the art of basket making. Using wooly sedge grass and bulrush roots, redwood bark, willow and redbud branches, they wove intricate containers used for cooking and storing food, trapping fish or animals, toys, cradles, gifts and ceremonies. The baskets were colored with wild walnut juice and berries and decorated with feathers. One prized feather came from the red spot on a red-winged blackbird.

The Kashaya bartered with the neighboring Coast Miwok, who lived south of the Russian River near Bodega Bay. Kashaya first encountered non-natives when Russians settled at Metini.

Russians in North America

Beginning in 1742, Russian "promyshlenniki" (frontiersmen) began to leave the Siberian mainland to seek fur-bearing marine mammals on and near the many islands to the east. In 1784 Gregor Shelikov built the

first permanent Russian settlement on Kodiak Island, in what is now Alaska. The organization he led became the Russian-American Company in 1799, when Tsar Paul granted the company a charter giving it monopoly over all Russian enterprises in North America. The Russian-American Company established colonies from Kodiak Island to Sitka in present-day Alaska, as well as in Hawaii. The operation expanded when American ship captains contracted with the Russian-American Company for joint ventures, using native Alaskans to hunt sea otters along the coast of Alta and Baja California. Otter pelts were highly valued in trade with China, and large profits flowed to company shareholders, including members of the Russian nobility.



Artifacts of settlement life

The Russia-American Company's Alexander Baranov sent his manager Ivan Kuskov to locate a California site that could serve as a trading base. Kuskov arrived in Bodega Bay on the ship *Kodiak* in January of 1809 and remained until late August. He and his party of 40 Russians and 150 Alaskans explored the entire region, taking more than 2,000 sea otter pelts back to Alaska.

Kuskov returned to California to establish a Russian outpost at Metini, 18 miles north of Bodega. The site had plentiful water, good soil, forage and pasture, and a nearby supply of redwood for construction. The village's relative inaccessibility from the Spanish-occupied territory to the south also gave the settlers a defensive advantage.



*Ivan Kuskov,
first manager of Fort Ross*



In 1812 Kuskov brought 25 Russians and 80 Alaskans to build houses and a stockade, establishing a colony to grow wheat and other crops for Russians living in Alaska, hunt marine mammals, and trade with Spanish California. On August 13, 1812, the colony was formally dedicated and renamed "Ross" to honor its connection with Imperial Russia—or "Rossiia." The colonists called their new home Fortress Ross or settlement Ross.

Life at the Ross Colony

The newcomers built redwood structures and a wooden palisade with two cannon-fortified blockhouses on the north and south corners. A well in the center of the fort provided emergency water. The bell tower stood in the east corner; the interior contained the manager's two-story house, the clerks' quarters, artisans' workshops, and Russian officials' barracks.

In the mid-1820s, the chapel was built. Outside the stockade to the northwest, lower-ranking employees and people of mixed ancestry gradually established a



Russian flag over the Rotchev House

village, and to the southwest the native Alaskans lived in another village on a bluff above the ocean.

The only surviving original structure at

Fort Ross is the Rotchev House, an existing building renovated for Alexander Rotchev, the last manager of Ross. Several other buildings have been reconstructed: the first Russian Orthodox chapel south of Alaska, the stockade, and four other buildings—the first manager's home (Kuskov House), the Officials' Barracks, and two corner blockhouses.

Only a small number of Russians lived at Ross; few were women. Ross was a successfully functioning multicultural settlement for at least thirty years. Settlers included Russians, Native Alaskans and Californians, and Creoles (individuals of mixed European and native ancestry).

In addition to agriculture and hunting sea mammals, Ross colony industries included blacksmithing, tanning, brickmaking and shipbuilding. The first ship built in California, *Rumiantsev*, was completed

in 1818. Gophers, coastal fog and lack of farming experience eventually thwarted the Russians' agricultural efforts.

By 1820 the marine mammal population was depleted from over-hunting by the Americans, Spanish, and Russians. The Russian-American Company subsequently introduced hunting moratoriums on seals and otters, establishing the first marine-mammal conservation laws in the Pacific. Russians had contributed to California's scientific knowledge through voyages that studied geography, cartography, ethnography, geology, meteorology, hydrography, botany and biology. Russian voyages brought about many early charts of California's north coast. In 1840 Russian naturalist and artist Ilya Voznesenskii spent a year at Ross, gathering specimens of California's flora and fauna, as well as an invaluable ethnographic collection of such native California artifacts as the acclaimed Kashaya Pomo baskets. Many of these specimens are displayed today in the Peter the Great Kunskamera Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Post-Russian Period

In December 1841, the Russian-American Company sold Fort Ross holdings to John Sutter, who sent his trusted assistant John Bidwell to gather up the Ross hardware, cattle, sheep and other animals and transport them to Sacramento Valley, where Sutter had built his own fort. In 1843 William Otto Benitz arrived to manage Fort Ross for

Sutter; later he acquired the adjacent land and lived there with his family until 1867. He sold the property to James Dixon and Lord Fairfax, who ran a lumber operation until 1872. George W. Call purchased the land in 1873, establishing the 15,000-acre Call Ranch, which exported cordwood, railroad ties, fence posts, tanbark, apples and dairy products well into the 20th century. They loaded their cargo onto vessels anchored at the wharf in the sheltered cove below by use of a chute that carried bulk cargo directly onto the ships. The Calls owned the ranch property until 1973.

In 1903 the California Historical Landmarks Committee purchased the Ross stockade area from the Call family, and the State of California acquired the site in 1906. California State Parks has done extensive restoration and reconstruction, and more acreage has been added to preserve the surrounding environment. The Rotchev House has been designated a National Historic Landmark.

NATURAL HISTORY

Fort Ross is located on a wave-cut marine terrace between the ocean to the southwest and high, forested hills to the northeast. Steep bluffs drop several hundred feet into the sea to the southeast. Below the fort, sheltered Sandy Cove features a serene beach

and still waters. Fort Ross Creek flows over two miles northwesterly to Sandy Cove.

Redwood and coniferous forests, grasslands, scrub, and coastal strand make up the park's four distinct vegetation types. The upland slopes are covered in bishop pine and Douglas fir, while the coastal shelf is open grassland. Protected hollows and ravines shelter stands of old- and second-growth redwoods.

Diverse wildlife species live at Fort Ross. Visitors may encounter grey foxes and black-tailed hares. Mountain lions and bobcats live in the area. Marine mammals include harbor seals, sea lions and migrating grey whales. Birdwatchers may find osprey, red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks, kestrels, herons or other shore birds.

INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS

Interpretive presentations and educational programs are offered on most days. For more information or a schedule, please call (707) 847-4777 or visit www.parks.ca.gov

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Camping—Open from April through November, the Reef Campground has 21 primitive campsites in a wind-protected canyon. Tables, stoves, and food lockers are available, with flush toilets and drinking water spigots nearby. No showers are available. Reef Campground is two miles south of Fort Ross on Highway One.



Great blue heron



Russian cemetery

Picnicking—Tables are located near the Visitor Center, the Call Ranch House, in the historic compound, and at Sandy Cove beach.

Trails—Pedestrian trails lead to Sandy Cove Beach from the Reef Campground, the fort stockade and from the Russian Cemetery. A marked trail leads from the orchard to the Stanley Spyra Memorial Grove.

Fishing—Abalone and rockfish abound in the coastal waters in season. Anglers aged 16 and over must possess a valid California fishing license. All abalone divers must adhere to current legal limits and carry a current Abalone Report Card.

Diving—Certified scuba divers can explore the wreck of the S.S. Pomona, a ship that sank over 100 years ago off Fort Ross Cove.

Dive and swim at your own risk. Always dive with a buddy and exercise caution in the ocean. Hazardous rip currents and large waves can appear out of nowhere and sweep unsuspecting visitors out to sea. Never turn your back to the waves. No lifeguards are on duty.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Parking and the visitor center are fully accessible. The fort compound has limited accessibility. For updated information, call the park at (707) 847-3286 or see

<http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Salt Point State Park/Kruse Rhododendron State Reserve—8 miles north on Highway One (707) 847-3221
- Sonoma Coast State Park—14 miles south on Highway One (707) 875-3483

PLEASE REMEMBER

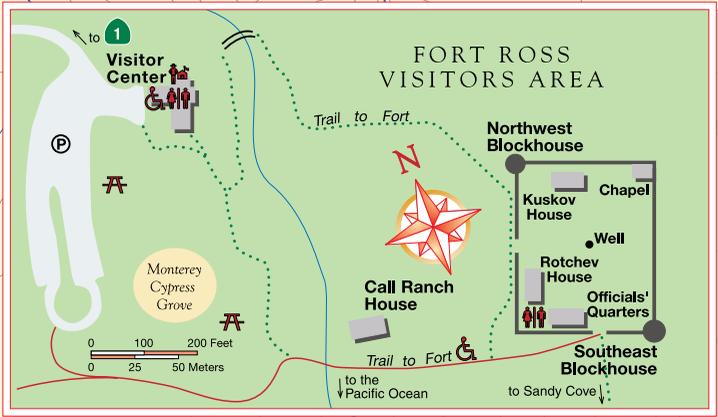
- Park grounds open 1/2 hour before sun rise and close 1/2 hour after sunset. The Fort and Visitor Center are open from 10 - 4.
- Stay on designated trails to protect plants, prevent erosion and avoid poison oak.
- Dogs are allowed only in the main parking area and in the campground. They must be on a six-foot leash at all times and remain in a tent or vehicle at night.
- Alcoholic beverages are not allowed in the park, and fires and glass containers are not allowed on the beach.
- All park natural and cultural resources are protected and must not be disturbed or removed.

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit association. For more information, contact:
Fort Ross Interpretive Association, Inc.
19005 Coast Highway One, Jenner, CA 95450
(707) 847-3437
www.fortrossinterpretive.org



Settlement Ross, 1841 by I.G. Voznesenskii

Fort Ross State Historic Park



- ### Legend
- Major Road
 - Paved road
 - Unpaved Trail
 - Underwater Park Boundary
 - Accessible Feature
 - Diving
 - Fishing
 - Parking
 - Picnic Area
 - Primitive Campground
 - Restrooms
 - Visitors Center

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