

THE NATURAL MOMENT

A PARENT CONFLICT

Photograph by Chuck Graham





◀ See preceding two pages



The largest protected rookery of Western gulls, *Larus occidentalis*, lies eleven miles off the coast of central California on Anacapa Island, part of the Channel Islands National Park. Every March, more than 10,000 gulls build nests and lay their eggs on this five-mile-long island, where they benefit from the absence of large predators. Parents incubate the eggs for about a month, taking turns sitting on the nest. Normally, this duty is shared without conflict. However, in this case, as shown on the previous pages, one parent wasn't so willing. Leaving the nest, it attempted to drag its mate by the wing to take over incubation.

Photographer Chuck Graham says he's never seen such behavior in the twenty-five years he's been visiting the island. He watched for about five minutes before moving on, as the pair continued their tug of war.

Western gulls are found along much of the North American west

coast, from Washington in the north to Baja in the south. They have a wide and opportunistic diet that includes marine life such as fish, crabs, squid, clams, and sea urchins, as well as carrion, eggs, and other birds. Western gull chicks can usually fly six to seven weeks after hatching. Until then, they may face serious threats from other gulls if they stray from their parents. Juveniles typically become independent after about ten weeks.

A variety of birds call Anacapa Island home, including California brown pelicans, black oystercatchers, blue-footed boobies, Nazca boobies, and peregrine falcons. Visitors may also spot harbor seals, southern alligator lizards, side-blotched lizards, and the endemic Anacapa deer mice. The treeless landscape is highlighted in the spring by yellow coreopsis flowers, so bright that they are sometimes visible from the mainland.

Chuck Graham is a freelance writer and photographer based in Carpinteria, CA. He also works as a guide for Channel Islands Outfitters, leading kayak tours and backpacking trips at the Channel Islands National Park. His stories and photos have appeared in *Backpacker*, *Trail Runner*, *Men's Journal*, *Outdoor Photographer*, *National Geographic for Kids*, and more. Commercial clients include Patagonia, Willow Creek Press, Channel Islands National Park, and others. Learn more at chuckgrahamphoto.com.

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Natural History (ISSN 0028-0712) is published monthly, except for combined issues in July/August and December/January, by Natural History Magazine, Inc., P.O. Box 110623, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-5623. Copyright © 2018 by Natural History Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without written consent of Natural History. E-mail: nhmag@naturalhistorymag.com. Subscriptions: US \$33.00 a year for US and Canada; for all other countries: US \$45.00 a year. Periodicals postage paid at Durham, NC, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Publications Mail No. 40030827. If you would like to contact us regarding your subscription or to enter a new subscription, please write to us at Natural History, P.O. Box 5000, Harlan, IA 51593-0257. Postmaster: Send address changes to Natural History, P.O. Box 5000, Harlan, IA 51537-5000. Printed in the U.S.A.