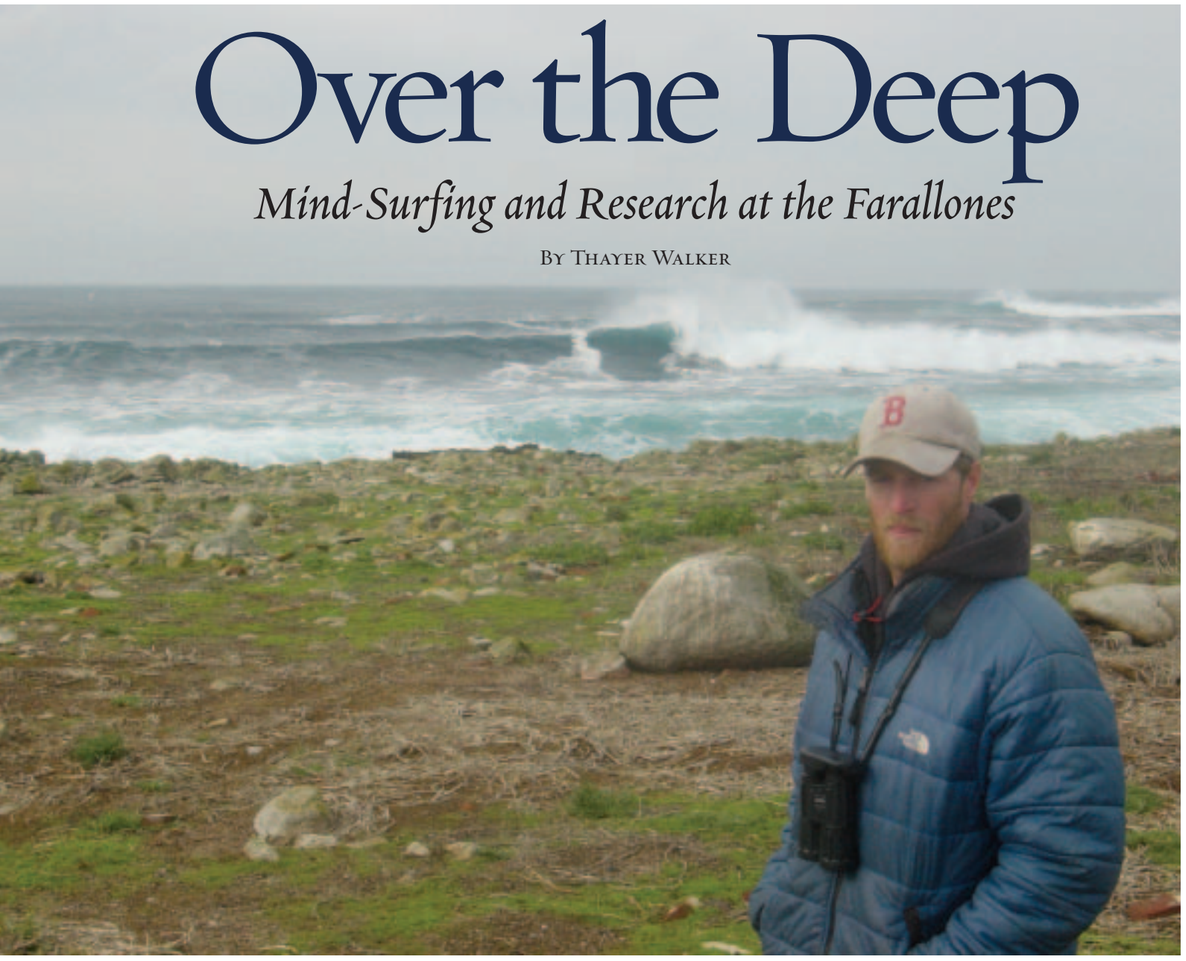
Over the Deep

Mind-Surfing and Research at the Farallones

By Thayer Walker



Surfer/shark researcher Adam Brown at "House Break," by far the most consistent spot at the island. Though it faces southwest, it apicks up northerly swells. This is a typical fall day with a buoy that's 6 to 8 feet out of the northwest. On south swells, the wave is a left that starts near the left edge of this photo.

LIKE MANY NORTHERN CALIFORNIA SURFERS, Graham Groneman and Jesse Rudnick had heard rumors of good surf on the Farallon Islands, but they'd never seen waves there and they had certainly never heard of anyone surfing them. The archipelago sits just 27 miles west of San Francisco, but it's separated by treacherous seas, often battered by violent weather, and usually surrounded by great white sharks. Sailors call the Farallones the "Devil's Teeth," thanks in part to the islands' proclivity for eating boats, and biologists have called it a researcher's paradise, thanks in part to the sharks' proclivity for eating seals. The jagged, eight-mile underwater granite ridge punctuated by seven main islands comes as close to a DO NOT ENTER sign as nature could paint, but on a sunny Saturday in November of 2000, with a slight offshore wind and a long-period swell running, the Farallones almost looked inviting.

Rudnick, Groneman, and Groneman's father, Eric, joined Captain John Rauh on his 21-foot Boston Whaler, *Voracious*, for a day of fishing, but with the perfect fall conditions, Groneman and Rudnick stowed their surfboards on board too—just in case. Though close enough to San Francisco to fall within county lines, the islands feel like the edge of the earth, which in a sense they are. Five miles offshore, the sea floor plunges over the continental shelf from roughly three hundred feet to more than two miles deep; Hawaii is the closest westward neighbor, some 2,000 miles away. This remoteness offers a refuge to the largest population of nesting seabirds in the continental U.S.—up to 300,000 roost here—and after an hour-long chug to Southeast Farallon, the chain's largest island, the men were greeted by the ripe stench of 120 acres of fresh droppings frosting the rock. Circling the island, they found a more appealing welcome in the form of an overhead right reef break.

While it's difficult to prove a negative, evidence (or lack thereof) suggests that neither this wave nor any of the others around the Farallones had ever been surfed. Scientists with PRBO Conservation Science, a Petaluma, California-based scientific and conservation organization, have been on the Farallones every day since 1968, and according to staff marine biologist and surfer Adam Brown, "No one has seen or heard of anyone surfing out there."

"That in itself is scary," says Rudnick, now a 31-year-old Marin County firefighter. But it was also alluring, which is why he and Groneman brought their boards along in the first place. Maybe, just maybe, they could sneak in a wave or two and surf a break that has eluded surfers for decades. Another boat floated in the bay and Groneman, now 28 and also a Marin firefighter, grabbed his surfboard and began waving it over his head with glee. "How are the waves?" Rudnick yelled. Then they noticed the shark cage hanging off the back. A few divers had just climbed out of the cage, their eyes silver-dollar-huge and someone admonished, "Do not go in the water." Three great white sharks were swimming below. "If you don't believe us," the warning continued, "throw your board in the water and see what happens."

The crew of the *Voracious* tied a rope to Groneman's 6′6″ pintail and paid out 20 feet of line. Minutes earlier the guys had been ready to catch rockfish; now they were trying to raise a great white shark. While the board floated in the water, waves continued to roll across the rock reef. Rudnick stared intensely at the Al Merrick-shaped lure, engrossed by the concept that a fishing trip could so quickly take on new meaning. Groneman watched the surf. "I bet you that right gets so good," he pined.

As if punctuating the sentence, a 15-foot white shark erupted out of the water and nailed the board, sending it spinning through the air. It was the kind of spectacular and unexpected event that causes normally well-spoken men to revert to expletives, and a chorus of manic laughter and "holy shits!" poured from the boat. They pulled in the Merrick, which had been floating for less than ten minutes, to find that the shark had targeted what would have been its victim's heart, leaving a fist-sized gash on the bottom of the board.

Meanwhile, across the bay the waves continued to wrap in. "There's the right," Groneman pointed out, clinging to the last sinewy strand of hope of catching a wave. "You'd be nuts to surf out there," Rudnick countered. Now that it was blatantly obvious that this was not a surf spot, the crew cast their lures while the board floated off the back. Trolling for fish at both ends of the food chain, they caught a pair of 45-pound sea bass minutes after the attack—"Trophies," Groneman called them. They gutted the fish and threw the entrails overboard as parting gifts for the sharks. With beautiful empty waves cracking across the reef, the *Voracious* sped back to Marin, leaving an even greater trophy behind.

California sea lions hauled out at North Landing. Population peaks in late summer at around 5,000 when they are breeding, while numbers during shark season are around 3,000. During the fall, you see large groups of these guys hauling ass once they get close to the island to get past the shark zone.

In most photos it looks like the eye of the shark is one big pupil. Not true. When the sharks swim past our boat, you can see their eyes—iris and all—looking up at you.

PHOTOS: ADAM BROWN

A white shark (top) coming up for bite number two on an elephant seal just outside the House wave. It nailed the seal with a head bite, assuring a quick kill.

Another attack on a seal in Mirounga Bay (above). The blood is highly oxygenated bright pink. It makes identifying the prey as an elephant seal pretty easy. The shark is towing its prey to another location, giving it a few moments to dine alone before other sharks find the attack.

A calm day on the island with Pt. Reyes in the background (below). The highest point is Lighthouse Hill, the location of our daily shark-watches.

PHOTOS: BROWN

THE FARALLON ARCHIPELAGO IS THE WESTERN point of the Red Triangle, a swath of ocean where more humans have been attacked by great white sharks than anywhere else in the world. Feasting on elephant seals, which can top 5,000 pounds, the white sharks here are massive: a 15-footer, five feet across is average sized in these waters. They commonly weigh more than 3,000 pounds. One 20-footer has earned the nickname Cadillac. "There are no small ones out there," says biologist Scot Anderson. In 1987, Anderson climbed 344 feet to the top of the Farallon lighthouse to scan for blood slicks and flocking birds, turning a casual observational program into a project that has since recorded more than 1,000 attacks on pinnipeds.

No one really knows how many white sharks patrol the water during the peak season of September through November (when they feast on young elephant seals, 400-pound nibblets of blubber), but in October 2006, the scientific group Tagging of Pelagic Predators (TOPP) photographed more than 40 different white sharks around Southeast Farallon. The following year TOPP detected 14 distinct acoustically-tagged individuals in a single day at the island. While surfers can train to ride Pipeline or take a Maverick's beating, there's no way to prepare for the risks the Farallones pose. It's impossible to calculate the odds of a surfer getting hit out there, but they certainly aren't favorable. "This is the white sharks' area and we're the visitors," said Peter Pyle, a surfer and biologist who studied Farallon white sharks for 24 years, "If we're going to visit their area, we're going to be at risk." Brown, a Humboldt surfer and PRBO biologist, puts it more bluntly: "There might be incredible waves, but you'll get bitten. It would be horrible. I do not encourage people to try to surf here." Six divers have been attacked at the Farallones, and prospective surfers should note that the frequency of shark attacks at the Farallones increases with rising swell.

The sharks come for the five species of pinnipeds living here—as many as 10,000 of them crowd the island. As apex predators, white sharks serve an invaluable role in the food chain, feeding on seals and sea lions, which if left unchecked, could wipe out commercially valuable fisheries like salmon. Twenty-eight species of cetaceans also ply these waters, drawn by the cold, nutrient-rich California Current flowing from British Columbia to Baja and the deep-water upwellings created by the northwest winds that blast the coast during the spring and stir up a soup of fecund water. A bane to surfers, the onshore wind is a boon to the marine ecosystem. "For a biologist," says Pyle, "the Farallones are as close to nirvana as you can get."

According to Brown, who began studying the Farallon sharks in 1999, the island hosts four main breaks. Mirounga Bay, the wave Groneman and Rudnick were watching when the surfboard was attacked, is the most consistent. It flashes different faces, ranging from a mellow, everyday peeler to a steep, fast barrel. "It's committing," Brown explained. "There are these hot little barrels you have to pull into. If you go straight, there are rocks. There's not a lot of room for error." Still, this wave most frequently torments the surfer/scientists. Brown has spent months sitting in the lighthouse on shark watch, mind surfing wave after empty wave: "Just when you've convinced yourself that it's totally doable, the blood in the water shakes you back to reality. I've seen like 50 attacks right there." When the swell builds, Mirounga Bay becomes Indian Head, a sweeping reef point that can peel for more than 30 seconds. Brown calls it the easiest wave to surf, but you have to be comfortable in 12-foot-plus heavy surf. "I've never seen it close out." The wave breaks in front of the two-story Victorian house that the

The House wave on a 6- to 8-foot northwest swell in the fall. It's been mind-surfed a million times by the many surfers involved in the research on the island. Depending on the swell direction, this wave can break right on the reef and be super heavy or swing wide and peel across the cove right in front of the house. Our house is so close to this wave that it shakes as each set piles into the reef. Why don't we surf? We see an attack a day during the fall just outside of this wave.

Don't Hold Your Breath

A film by Roger Teich

Ron Elliott started commercial diving in 1978. From 1989 to 2004, through natural attrition, he became the only sea urchin diver who worked around the Farallon Islands, off the coast of Northern California. Since 2003, Ron Elliott has shot over 35 hours of underwater DV footage, both hand-held and remote, at the Farallones and Tomales Point. Ron films his solo dives in these rich underwater habitats during the seasonal visitations of the great white shark, typically from August to February.

Ron gets upset when he doesn't see a shark during a dive.

Elliott has appeared in the films *Beyond the Jaws* (Granada Films 2002) and my *Devil's Teeth* (2005), and in the books *Devil's Teeth* (Susan Casey) and *Bluewater Gold Rush* (Tom Kendrick).

I see what Ron does as incredibly liberating, but there is also, clearly, an element of compulsion. Perhaps he is like Max, the boy in *Where the Wild Things Are*, who had the same "magic trick" of staring into the monster's yellow eyes and becoming the "most wild thing of all."

Devil's Teeth won the best short program award at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival 2005 and a special jury award at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival 2005 for its story about an individual "finding transcendence in an unlikely place." The film had a dark vibe from Ron's past shooting downers and dealing with hepatitis C, but the mood was enlivened by his surrealistic dreams of 20-foot ling cods and waking up just before the shark got him.

The Man in the Grey Suit comes out this May on Wholpin No. 6, which is a McSweeney's publication. It's four minutes of mayhem followed by four minutes of bliss. In Part One, we see the unedited results of Scot Anderson's experiments in the 1980s to put a Hi8 camera in a surfboard off the Farallones, the feeding grounds of the great white shark. In part two, we see why Ron's *raison d'être* is to film himself as he swims these same waters.

Mr. White checks the rails at East Landing.

Which brings me to *Don't Hold Your Breath*, the feature film coming to theaters in Spring 2010, I hope. Truly, I believe this will be our finest hour—a symbol of our being free. What is it, I've asked myself, about swimming with the Great Devourer that makes life worth living? On one level, this is the story of Ron Elliott, "shark whisperer," and his complex friendship with Pt. Reyes legend Scot Anderson. I call Scot the shark "harpooner" because he's aces with a satellite tagger, but in truth Scot's a gentle man, a naturalist, a savant. They're both fiercely self-reliant. Scot knows the sharks as they act on the surface; Ron sees them in their depths. On another level, this is my story too, my adventure in making the film.

The Act III climax is the big pitch: a UK game show we've entered for the funds; whether Ron needs to sell his boat to survive; whether I swim with a shark (a red herring); or Ron gets eaten (unlikely). Along the way, we run afoul of Werner Herzog, our wives and ex-wives, a gay winery owner I asked to invest who wants in my pants instead (yikes), and other pursuers, both human and fish. We aim to blow the nature film genre out of the water. Even if we fail in this pomposity, the home-movie footage from Ron and Scot is so intense, so pure, it will drive the audience crazy—hopefully, the same unshaven bodhisattvas who are holding this Journal up to the light right now.

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biologists call home, and a big swell can shake the building and knock books off the shelves. "I've gotten really good at thinking about sharks and not surfing," says Brown. "As a surfer it's hard, but as a biologist I don't have a problem with it. We have surfboards on the island. We use them as decoys."

Around the corner from Mirounga Bay lies West End Reef, a break Brown likens to Maverick's. The wave comes out of the deep, detonating in about 15 feet of water. "It scares me to be in a boat within 150 feet of it," says Brown. The bathymetry is also ideal for sharks because the drop-off allows for plenty of room for the predators to ambush their prey from below. White sharks also commonly patrol points and headlands—high traffic areas for pinnipeds—and West End breaks directly in front of a large promontory. "You'd never want to be paddling around out there," says Pyle. A fourth wave, Hearst Shoal, is a giant A-frame off of the island's southern tip. Paddle surfing this open-ocean spot is not feasible and, like everywhere else in the 1,255 square-mile Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, personal water craft are banned. Also, boats are prohibited from traveling faster than five knots within 1,000 feet of the islands, eliminating the possibility of boat tows and quick pick-ups. In addition, private craft are prohibited to approach the islands within 300 feet between March 15 and August 15 in deference to the nesting seabirds. The only way to surf the Farallones is to paddle and pray. Though summer is the least sharky time, scientists have recorded attacks every month of the year. "I love my legs and arms so much," Rudnick says, "it's not worth it to me."

IT'S NOT JUST THE SHARKS THAT MAKE SURFING these islands a difficult proposition; Farallon weather is notoriously cantankerous and good surfing conditions are rare. In the early 1920s, a storm washed the island's radio station out to sea. These rugged islands sink ships indiscriminately from small fishing boats to 441-foot Navy troop carriers like the *Henry Burgh*, which carried 1,400 people and hit the rocks in thick fog in 1944. (The passengers survived, but the ship cracked in two.) During the tempestuous winter of 1983, the research station on Southeast Farallon went two-and-a-half months before weather cleared enough for a supply boat to offload goods, leaving the scientists to ration food by the lentil. The combination of hungry sharks, uncooperative weather, and strict regulations have made the Farallones a surfer's *terra incognita*, but one evening when I joined the crew of *Voracious* for beers at the Pelican Inn, an English-country guesthouse in Muir Beach, Groneman cooked up a way the Farallones might be safely surfed. "Wait for the orcas to show up," he laughed mostly in jest, "then paddle out."

In 1997 a pair of transient orcas, rare in the Farallones, killed a sea lion, which drew the interest of a white shark. The larger of the orcas, a 20-footer, rammed the 12-foot shark, flipped it on its back, held it by the nose for 15 minutes, and then took a victory lap alongside a whale-watching boat with the shark in its mouth. "We were thinking this was the first time it had ever happened, but that whale knew exactly what to do," Pyle recalls. The islands' white shark population disappeared

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Hearst Shoal on a 15- to 20-foot northwest long-interval day with the swell line reaching the island, which only happens with the biggest surf. The peak is a good half-mile out, and one of the sharks' most popular feeding spots. It's also great for catching rockfish for dinner.

immediately despite the fact that this was the height of shark season. Pyle believed that the two events were related, a theory that found support three years later when a pod of orcas again appeared at the Farallones, this time in November, and fed on an unidentified carcass. One of the resident white sharks carried a transmitter on its back and within an hour of the orca attack it sped west, dove over the continental shelf, and disappeared into the wild blue. The other sharks followed and didn't return for the rest of the season. Even great white sharks get scared.

So that's all it takes to surf the Farallones: a nexus of lined-up swell matched with favorable weather, preceded by the *rara avis* of battle royals—a clash between killer whales and a white shark. Either that, or a death wish. Unsurprisingly, the islands, a morning commute away from San Francisco, remain unridden. Perhaps, says Brown, it's best that way: "The Farallones are one of those places where it's great to watch waves and not surf," he explains. "It's nice to have places like that sometimes." ✣

PRBO CONSERVATION SCIENCE

This is what happens when a 15-foot shark mistakes a surfboard for a seal. We no longer use boards as decoys.