

NATURE

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4K PLANET
CALIFORNIA

2 x 50 min. Written and directed by Rick Rosenthal

4K, 5.1 and Stereo Executive producers: Birgit Peters, Sabine Holzer



TERRA MATER
Factual Studios

'Planet California' is a series about California's wildlife and wild places, and the extreme forces which are now pushing them to a tipping point. Catastrophic wildfires, devastating droughts, extreme storms, more people and ocean warming all are threatening. How will California's spectacular wilderness survive?

Best-known for its beaches and Disneyland, California is also an island of biodiversity—the greatest in the Americas. Bounded by mountains, deserts and the Pacific Ocean, it is home to iconic wild places like Yosemite, and the Giant Redwood forests, but also to the endless dunes and uninhabited shores of Baja California.

'Planet California' looks at natural history in a new way. We employ new science, combined with stunning images and storytelling to look at the future for California's wildlife in the face of growing threats. With the increasing intensity of the extreme forces it is facing—wildfires, drought, ocean warming and human encroachment—what is happening to California's wildlife now, has implications to wildlife worldwide. That's why it is 'Planet California'.

EPISODE 01: BEYOND THE BEACH— 'BAY WATCH' MEETS 'BLUE PLANET'

Our story structure follows the flow of the California Current north to south for 2,000 miles to the seas off the tip of Baja California.

The ocean just beyond California's beaches hides a world exploding with life. Sharks, whales, dolphins, elephant seals and others move along with the current, at times converging in massive numbers and becoming a kind of 3-dimensional 'Serengeti' in the sea.

Killer whales wait in ambush for a gray whale calf. The calf is migrating north from Baja with its mother. It's an extreme El Niño year, when ocean systems turn upside down. The California current has slowed and the plankton the whales feed on has disappeared. Without food, the gray whale mother cannot properly nurse. Her calf is starving and vulnerable. The killer whales are waiting for their moment to strike.

Deep-sea mountains and canyons offshore host a world of alien inhabitants. Exploring the crushing depths with ROVs operated by MBARI scientists, we find bizarre-looking animals, and a species of coral unaffected by ocean warming or acidification.

Massive oil rigs scar the view offshore southern California. But beneath the surface, these symbols of environmental blight are a wellspring of life. Underwater, the rigs have become massive steel reefs, attracting a marine food chain from plankton to giant shoals of baitfish and sea lions. These artificial reefs now harbor as much life as the kelp forests closer to shore and are a special refuge for sea lions which jump onto the rigs to rest and escape predators.

Slashing through the water, changing color from silver, to electric blue, to black, dozens of striped marlin coordinate a high-speed chase after a giant swirling mass of sardines. They're trailed by sea lions, tunas and exploding through the middle of them all—a whale. But there are also dozens of sardine boats in the chase. Racing to set nets around the whole sardine bounty, the boats are a metaphor for the over-fishing that threatens California's oceanic eco-systems.

Episode One closes as we head off the southern tip of Baja California. Here, 400 miles from the mainland, the California Current merges with other currents around the Revillagigedo marine preserve, the largest in North America. In marine protected areas such as this and the others along its shores, we still find reasons for hope for the future of California's ocean inhabitants.

EPISODE 02: RIVERS IN THE SKY

Episode 2 adds the impacts of atmospheric rivers to the other powerful forces which California's wildlife and humans must contend with. These rivers in the sky carry 25 times more water than the Mississippi and are responsible for half of California's rainfall. Now, the storms they produce are getting much more extreme. Mountain-sized storm waves come crashing along the shore in northern California and open this episode.

Fog swirls around sky-scraper high stands of Coastal Redwoods, among the world's tallest trees. The inhabitants of these forest canopies, 100 metres above the ground, look strangely out of place. Carried in with the fog, the endangered marbled

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murrelet, a small seabird, nests here. It is joined by bizarre-looking salamanders and blue-bonsai versions of rhododendron and blueberries all thriving without ever touching the forest floor. But in addition to logging, ravens and jays, attracted by hikers and campers, are threatening this connection between forest and ocean ecosystems.

Most of California's 40 million people have never seen a mountain lion, even though more than half of California is mountain lion country! We work with University of California scientists tracking lions throughout the state and reveal just how closely together people and mountain lions live. In the process, we see the impact of increasingly intense wildfires on the lives of these iconic animals.

Years of drought and intensive draw-down of water by farmers transform an inland lake. With evaporation, the former fresh-water lake is re-born as a rich, briny ecosystem. Brine flies now breed here in the billions, while the algae bounty of its salty waters produce billions of brine shrimp. Together, they sustain huge flocks of migrating water-fowl, gulls and waders, which visit the lake in their tens of thousands. Wildfires regularly attack California's scrub and oak woodlands, but some Coastal

Oak woodlands will always survive. In autumn, they yield millions of acorns. The calorie-rich bonanza draws a crowd. Black bears climb the trees to gorge themselves, while acorns blanketing the ground below draw mule deer in great numbers, and their primary predator, mountain lions.

Only in California do wildflowers stop traffic! Once every seven to nine years, Southern California's deserts and low mountains explode with the color of millions of wildflowers. The rains of an El Niño year germinate the seeds of dozens of species of wildflowers creating a 'super-bloom'. Freeway traffic is often backed up for miles as crowds of visitors throng wilderness areas and even stop on the highway, enjoying to see flowers.

Not all happy endings begin with good intentions. Coyotes are now more numerous than ever throughout California despite, and even because of, more than a century of attacks on them by humans. We film hunting packs of coyotes in Baja as they yip and howl chasing down jack rabbits through desert dunes and catching stranded fish along the beach. But we show that California's coyotes are also city dwellers, with pets a favorite menu item.



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