



# PLANET CALIFORNIA



Written by **Kate Youndahl-Stauss**  
Directed by **Rick Rosenthal**  
Executive producers: **Birgit Peters, Sabine Holzer**

**2 x 50 min.**  
**4K, 5.1 and Stereo**



**‘Planet California’ is a 2 × one-hour celebration of California’s wildlife and wild places, and their coexistence with the 40 million people who call it home. Best known for its beaches, Hollywood and the Golden Gate bridge, California is actually a wellspring 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 Death Valley, but also to the unexplored wilderness and the miles of uninhabited coastline of Baja California, Mexico.**

### **Episode 1 – “Rivers of Gold”**

It is a land of extremes – tallest, deepest, highest, hottest – and home to the richest concentration of biodiversity in the Americas: California. Famous for its sun, surf, and Hollywood stars, the real treasure of the Golden State lies in its most precious resource – water. In this episode, we explore extraordinary wildlife bound together by rivers of life on land, air and sea.

In the California Current – the river in the sea – we meet a herd of gray whales. Once hunted to near extinction, they are now rebounding and traveling south on one of the longest migrations on earth where they will calve and mate. Hot on their heels are California Sea Lions who pursue king salmon right into the freshwater of the Klamath River, their ancient breeding grounds.

Once, the salmon runs numbered in the millions but their dramatic decline precipitates mayhem on the beach. California sea lions battle each other, gulls, and marauding Steller sea lions for a share of the prize. Traveling upriver, we encounter a Yurok activist whose people’s identity depends on the salmon. Fiery and compelling, she is leading her nation in a campaign to tear down the dams and restore the river to its native state.

We follow the river through the wild north into the realm of giants – the redwoods. The world’s tallest trees, redwoods have adapted to California’s dry season by harvesting water right out of the air borne from the sea on an atmospheric river. Essentially making its own weather, the forest fosters a shadowy understory with an wondrously cooperative ecosystem: fungi provide a communication system and nutrient exchange, while in a nearby rivulet, baby salmon hide in the very same roots where they will one day return to mate, die, and fertilize the trees that shelter them. In an intimate moment, the California newt climbs into the water to mate as well; her appealing eyes and almost human fingers bely the deadliness of her bright orange skin.

High in the peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains, the river of air delivers the vital snowpack, the source of 40% of California’s water. But there is trouble afoot. A mountain lion stalks one of the last of California’s iconic Sierra bighorn sheep. Once hailed as “the symbol” of the Sierras, the sheep’s numbers have dwindled to just 600. We follow two men, as different as the animals they care about – a lion tracker and a biologist – as they try to preserve balance between predator and prey. The situation’s complexity

mounts as the lion’s litter of charismatic kittens and the sheeps’ pregnancy are revealed.

Along with the birds of the Pacific flyway, we travel ever southwards, over some of the world’s most fertile farmland, watching the water dry up and the land become saltier. In some places, like Mono Lake with its mysterious tufa towers or Death Valley and its ethereal Eureka Dunes, these extremes can be beautiful. But today fire and drought, triggered by climate change and exponential human use, are taking their toll with alarming consequences. Still, there is reason to hope.

In Baja, we rejoin the great sojourners of the California Current, the gray whales. In landmark footage, we witness two males courting and mating with a female. Their union reminds us that – with our help – life can find a way even when things have reached their darkest point. And when a friendly mother whale pushes her calf forward to meet a boat load of tourists, we recognize our connection with the natural world, for water knows no boundaries.

### **Episode 2 – “Close Encounters”**

In the world’s imagination, California glamor is manufactured in Hollywood, but – often within a stone’s throw of the forty million humans who live here – amazing stars still await our discovery. Ringed by jagged mountain ranges and the Pacific Ocean, this dramatic landscape shelters the most biodiverse place in the Americas. In this episode, we travel through sun and surf, into eerie deep-sea canyons, across to the secretive high desert and charming oak woodlands, and all the way to Baja’s glorious ocean preserve for close encounters with engaging and surprising wildlife.

A short distance from the famous beaches, the California Current – a rich conveyor belt of food – draws an incredible array of ocean life. None is more magnificent than the blue whale, the largest animal to ever roam the Earth. Rebounding after a century of devastating decline, a pod of the seldom seen behemoths cruises the current, feeding on krill. Below them lie other wonders: an abyss only recently explored by remote vehicles. Piercing through the pitch, light emanates from the weird creatures themselves. Under a full moon, they wash ashore in glimmering bioluminescent waves. Riding in on the same waves: a comic spectacle, the annual grunion run. Silver fish, no bigger than a finger, wriggle and wiggle along the wet sand in search of a mate.



Each stop along the 1800 miles of California coast reveals magic as the ever-shifting underwater terrain collides with prevailing northwesterly winds. Near storied San Francisco and the Silicon Valley, such an interaction produces one of the most dangerous waves in the world, Mavericks. As athletes risk their lives for the big drop, a veteran surfer explains the rush of a close encounter with a natural force. To the south, in the California Current, the phenomenon causes a massive upwelling of anchovies, triggering a raucous hunt featuring thousands of dolphins, California sea lions, gulls and even humpback whales. The few surviving bait fish from the melee head for cover in a vast kelp forest, home to billions of animals. California's state fish, the brilliantly colored Garibaldi, tends his eggs with fussy precision, while sea lions chase enormous Black Sea Bass just for the sport of it.

The proximity of some of California's most desirable real estate with this ocean wilderness means that humans often rub elbows with their wild neighbors. Elephant seals, once hunted to near extinction, now raise their pups in the shadow of California's iconic Highway 101, to the delight of tourists. But as surfers glide over the hunting grounds of leopard sharks and a Great White nursery, we contemplate who's still at risk. Certainly, the delicate snowy plover, who hatches her tiny chicks right on the beach, has suffered for the proximity.

The coyote is one animal that has done well as humans encroach on paradise. Its range has expanded far beyond its original home in the dry grasslands. Home of the San Andreas Fault, the mother of many of California's notorious earthquakes, this super-heated, parched landscape

seems barren, but a keen eye catches a community that's gone underground: a nervous ground squirrel, whimsical burrowing owls and a family of kit foxes. When night falls, the world comes alive, and – with groundbreaking technology – we witness an epic battle between the ingenious kangaroo rat and a deadly rattlesnake.

In the oak woodlands, a dominant landscape of Planet California, acorn woodpeckers and black bears vie for nuts. When the bears decide to climb the trees, there's little doubt who will win. As they sway in the treetops, a new wind blows through, bearing torrential rain. El Niño, the weather pattern that rocks California every few years, has arrived spawning blooms of wildflowers so vast that they can be seen from space.

Travelling down the California Current, we catch up with the Great White shark, on the hunt for elephant seals. We enter a watery Eden that only a generation ago was on the brink of collapse. Allowed to regenerate, it now explodes with vibrant life, drawing huge colonies of pelicans and frigate birds. Graceful cormorants dive through swarms of glittering fish. Striped marlins flush from neon blue to black with excitement. Sea lions chase each other through the schools, and in the midst of them all, the lithe shape of a free diving marine biologist. She is a symbol that if we can make space for them, then coexistence with the wild world may still be possible – and more than that – joyful.

A Terra Mater Factual Studios / Wild Logic production in  
co-production with PBS and Doclights / NDR Naturfilm in  
association with ARTE France

