

# E-SEAL NEWS

Friends of the Elephant Seal  
Newsletter  
Spring 2001



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## It's spring! Watch for weaners!

It's often remarked that elephant seals lying on the beach resemble giant sausages. Well if that's true it only makes sense to call the young pups "weaners." Actually they're not of the Oscar Mayer variety but rather it's just the affectionate name for a weaned pup.

The first weaners emerge from the harems after 26 to 28 days of nursing sometime in mid to late January, signaling the beginning of the end to the breeding season. As each successive mom leaves, more and more pups are left behind, most likely in bewilderment as they initially seem shocked that mom could just up and leave like that without telling them.

By the end of February the beach looks like a giant weaner yard sale as they are scattered all over the place; in the dunes, on the grass, even in the parking lot if

## Seals on the move

So where do the seals go when they leave the beach? This is a frequently asked question. The answer is simple; the seals are making their way north to their main feeding areas. As elephant seals usually fast while on land, they leave to replenish their resources. The seals make two round trips per year from Central Coast beaches to their feeding areas. For adults, the migration occurs after the breeding season and then again after the molt. Juveniles migrate after their spring molt and the fall haul-out. The seals leave the beach individually and do not travel in families or groups.

As technology has improved, so has our knowledge of how elephant seals spend their time at sea. By using devices such as a time depth recorder, information about the depth and dive duration is obtained. While at sea, elephant seals are continuously diving – averaging less than 3 minutes at the surface between dives. A typical dive (**Please see Page 3**)

we're not careful with the gates. (Please see next page)

**Weaners, from Page 1**

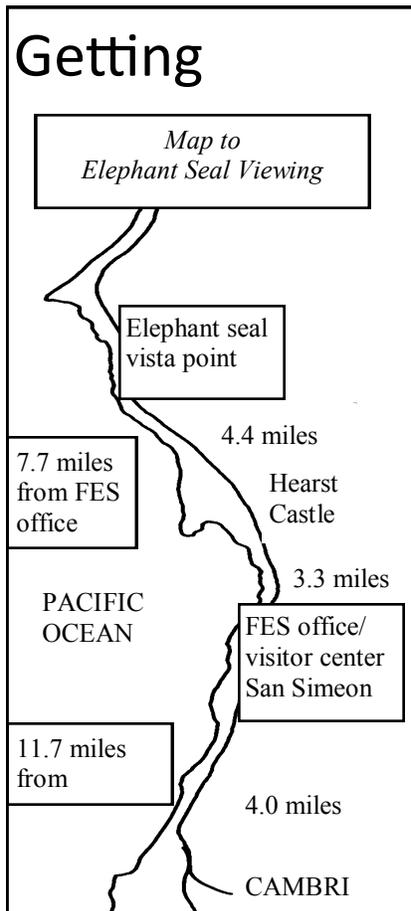
Under ideal nursing conditions a pup will reach a weight of about 250 to 300 pounds by the time it's weaned. If you see different sizes of weaners it is not an indication of age but merely of nursing success. The critical weight is reported to be about 150 pounds for a weaner to have a chance of survival. If storms separate pups from their mothers or a mother adopts additional pups, the weaners can easily be

undersized once mom leaves. often nearly the same size. This is not a good situation. On the other hand, aggressive pups occasionally find new moms and can attain weights of up to 600 pounds. These tan or brown, indicating an older coat of fur.

Size is important because the weaners will live entirely on the beach for their first migration at swimming skills must be about 3 1/2 months. By then they've lost 20 to 30% of their baby fat must convert to muscle before their first

The first two to three weeks of migration. Soon after their weaner activity consists of adult coats are in weaners sleeping, snorting, jostling and will make their first playing with their cohorts in tentative trips to the groups called "weaner pods". water's edge. Within a few days they are swimming shed their fuzzy black baby fur, comfortably and by the revealing a shiny silver adult end of their stay they will coat underneath. Once all the mature females have left and time in the water.

the immature animals begin Once the weaners leave arriving for the molting season around the end of April, there can be some confusion they won't be back until as to which animals are pups August or September, and which are yearlings or two although at this age their -year-olds. This yearling/pup schedules can vary greatly. confusion is compounded by And their time at Club Med the fact that for at least this is truly over. On an first year elephant seals gain average year, although very little, if any, mass. Thus 99% of weaners make it to yearlings and weaners are departure time for their first migration, only about



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## Calendar

**March** - Last adults leave. Weaned pups teach themselves how to swim.

**April** - Females and juveniles return to molt.

**May** - Females & juveniles molt.

**June** - Subadult males return to molt.

**July** - Subadult and adult males molt.

**August** - Last of male molt.

**September and October** - Young-of-the-year and juveniles haul out to rest.

**November** - Subadult males haul out. Mature males begin arriving at the end of the month.

**December** - Bulls continue to return.

Females begin arriving. The first birth is usually mid-month.

**January** - Females continue to arrive. Peak of births usually last half of month.

**February** - Births continue. The peak of mating is around

Valentine's Day. More

### Tips for Safe Viewing:

**Make** your observation from a safe distance.

**Elephant seals** carry diseases that are contagious to people and dogs,

**An Elephant seal** may interpret an approach by a person or a dog as a threat, and do its best to defend itself. As a result, serious injury may occur.

### Migration from Page 1

is 1000–2000 feet in depth and lasts approx. 20 minutes. By the coupling older technology with newer, researchers were able to come up with a clearer picture of where and what the seals feed on. For example, until recently, it was believed that all elephant seals feed predominantly on squid. Now they have revised this because male dive patterns suggest that they feed on bottom-dwelling animals like skates, rays and ratfish. The female dive patterns suggest they feed on squid. Adult males leave the beaches and travel along the continental shelf toward the Gulf of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. Males concentrate mainly on transit until they reach their primary feeding area. Once there, the males remain in a fixed spot for up to 2 months. This allows them to regain their massive size that was lost during their time ashore. After leaving the beach following the breeding season, the males will travel an astounding 4000 miles, moving at the rate of 56 miles a day before coming ashore again to molt in the summer.

The migration patterns of the adult female elephant seal differ from that of the male. Females head northwest to the open ocean of the North Pacific, some traveling half way to Hawaii. Females vary their migration routes from year to year, but always start out in the same northerly direction. In contrast to the males, the females feed more along the way to their primary feeding area. Once they reach the feeding area, the females follow their prey, not staying exclusively at one site. The adult females travel at a rate of 48 miles a day, traveling over 3000 miles in their post breeding season migration. Juveniles migrate to the waters off Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. They tend to move at a slower rate than the adults, averaging 37 miles per day. Young elephant seals dive continuously like the adults, spending 88% of their time underwater. The first migration of an elephant seal is very difficult, with a high mortality rate due to the seal's lack of experience in foraging and avoiding predators, such as the Great White shark. Some young seals even get lost and end up in unlikely places like the Sea of Cortez. Young elephant seals' diving skills continue to improve with age and experience. At two years old their dive patterns are not significantly different than that of the adults. By then, the juveniles have already begun to show sex differences in feeding like the adult, with the males preferring the continental shelf and the females preferring the open ocean.



