

**E-SEAL NEWS****The Seals' Winter Show**

In late November and early December, the stage is being set for Mother Nature's winter spectacle on the beaches at the Piedras Blancas elephant seal rookery. Things were quiet in the fall as juvenile seals snoozed in the sun. As they returned to the sea, subadult males came in. They are a livelier group, adolescents practicing for the time when they will begin to compete for mating rights. They spar in mock battles and test their changing voices, acting tough one moment, acting like buddies the next. But as the huge adult males begin to approach the beaches in December, announcing their arrival in booming, echoing bellows, the younger ones slink off to another part of the beach or return to the sea.

The adult males are not competing for females yet, but just for a spot of territory. Each one wants to be established when the pregnant females start arriving. When a male gets here, he is at peak weight. He's been foraging in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, building bulk to live on while he fasts for almost three months during the birthing and breeding season. Timing is important. If he arrives too early, he may not have enough reserves for the long fast, but if he gets here too late, the prime spots on the beach may be filled by other alpha males.

The competition for real estate on the beach is usually not as physically aggressive as the competition for females during the mating season in January and February. In establishing the hierarchy on the beach, size matters. These huge monsters, up to 16-feet long and weighing as much as 5,000 pounds, stretch their great, crusty necks upward and show off the long proboscis that gives them their elephant seal name. It's all about intimidation, and often just posturing and bellowing are enough to make another male back off.

The pregnant females begin arriving in December, each one choosing a harem master –or more likely, a safe spot

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For Up-to-date information, visit our web site at www.elephantseal.org

Seal Skull

On September 16, 2006, FES docent Dave Dabritz heard that the body of a large male elephant seal, about eight years old, had been on the beach in Cayucos for about three weeks. Dabritz, who is also a Marine Mammal Rescue Service volunteer, made a stranding report to National Marine Fisheries Services and obtained permission to harvest the skull for the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary office in San Simeon.

He and fellow FES docents Manuela and Jerome Passman harvested the head of the seal on the beach.

Ron Ruppert, who teaches natural history courses at Cuesta College, prepared the skull and it was presented to Michelle Roest of the MBNMS office. It will be on display in the new Coastal Discovery Center in San Simeon.

Welcome New Docents

Back: Jim Corley, Lynda Eads, Charles Eads, Garrett Kaida
Front: Michael Cox, Jim Brownell, Judy Thompson, Judy Chevront, Suzanne Jordan, Megg McNamee, Dan Piper

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on the beach to give birth to her pup three to six days after she arrives. The black pup, weighing about 60 to 80 pounds, is born either head first or tail first, and the Western Gulls clean up the after-birth.

The beaches are noisy and crowded in January, wall-to-wall with mothers, pups and adult males. There's always squabbling and confusion among mothers and pups, and the alpha males posture and chase other males that approach their harems. The males bellow at each other, the mothers squawk, and the babies cry for their mothers to roll over so they can nurse. A mother, who is fasting, nurses her pup for about a month, and for every pound the pup gains, she loses two pounds. By the end of the nursing period, the milk is 65 percent fat, and a healthy pup can weigh as much as 300 pounds. It needs that reserve, because it doesn't know how to swim or forage for food, and its mother abruptly mates and leaves her pup—weaned, whether it likes it or not, and seeming a bit bewildered at first.

These fat, winsome weaners usually huddle together against the bluff or in the dunes to stay out of the way of the action of the mating season, which escalates into February. The males are serious about their battles during this time, and blood is often shed, but injuries are usually puncture wounds from the big canine teeth and are rarely threatening. The peak of the mating season is around Valentine's Day, but the coupling is not a romantic sight. And it's not G-rated, so children watching the action may ask some frank questions.

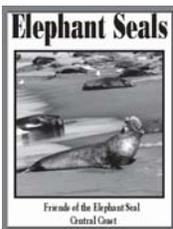
After a female has mated, she heads for the sea, but she must often run a gauntlet through a group of huge males that have been lurking outside of the harem for a chance to assault her as she attempts to leave.

Life isn't easy for any of them –the tired, malnourished mothers, the fighting, chasing males, and especially the weaners, who are left on the beach to teach themselves to swim, and eventually, to launch themselves into life at sea. But for the human onlookers, this is an opportunity to see nature up close. One boy asked, "Is this like a zoo, or is it real?"

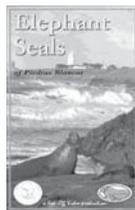
IT'S VERY REAL.

From the Gift Shop

The following items are available for purchase from our Gift Shop. Prices include tax and shipping. Send checks payable to FES, PO Box 490. Cambria, CA 93428



Book
Price: \$9.90



DVD
Price: \$26.90

Seal Rescue

A young, but large male elephant seal was observed by FES docents with a packing strap wrapped around his belly. It had tightened as he grew, and would become even more constricting if it was not removed. Volunteers from the Marine Mammal Rescue Center were called, and after receiving permission to approach the seal, managed to cut the strap off and send him on his way.



Farewell, Friends

Kelly Hillenberg Kelly, class of 2003, was quiet and soft-spoken and loved being out there on the bluff just talking to the visitors. He was always inquisitive and wanted to learn more about the Eseals. He would call the longer-term docents aside and ask for answers to questions that someone had asked him on the bluff and he wanted to be prepared for the next time out there. He was just a truly super nice guy!

Marcia Phillips Marcia was in the docent class of 1998 and spent many hours on the bluff, continuing until she was well into her 80s. She died at 90, and is remembered for her many activities in the community, especially with children and youth.

Docent Spotlight; Carol Stave



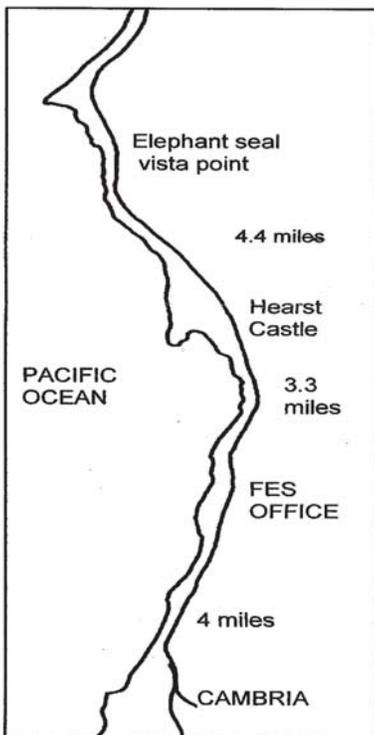
Carol Stave has been a docent for five years. She still finds the seals fascinating and loves to talk to visitors from all over the world. Carol drives from her home in Nipomo for her weekly bluff duty.

Tips for Safe Viewing

- View from a safe and respectful distance.
- NEVER get between a seal and the water.
- Dogs and seals don't mix. Keep dogs away from the seals
- Please stay off sand dunes which are fragile areas for plants and animals.

Elephant seals are protected by law. It is illegal to harass any marine mammal. If you witness harassment, call 1-800-853-1964.

**Map to
Elephant Seal Viewing
Piedras Blancas**



Friends of the Elephant Seal
www.elephantseal.org

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**Visit our office, gift shop,
and displays at the
Cavalier Plaza, Highway 1
San Simeon**

What's New at Friends

New website: The FES web site at www.elephantseal.org has been redone and should be available on your browser by the time you receive this newsletter. Some pages will still be under construction so please have patience. Your comments can be sent via the Webmaster link found at the bottom of each page.

Save the date: Sunset at San Simeon V, the fifth annual fundraising party for Friends of the Elephant Seal, will have a surprise theme. It will be held from 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday, March 24, 2007, at the Hearst Ranch Warehouse on the bluff above San Simeon Cove and will include a catered dinner, dancing to The Mighty Croon Dogs, wine tasting with wines from area wineries, a silent auction, a live auction and a raffle. Tickets are \$75. For tickets or more information, call the office at 924-1628.

New officers: The FES Board of Directors will change in January, as the terms of Ann Grossman, president, and Ken Eberle, vice president, end as officers but they will remain on the board until July, 2007. The board has selected Mary Lee Becwar as president and Ken Dunn as vice president. Other officers are Jerome Passman, treasurer, and Judy Burley, secretary.

Looking ahead: The dates for new docent training have been set. Sessions will be held Oct. 6 and 20 and Nov. 3, 2007.

Meet the neighbors: The new **Coastal Discovery Center** is located in W.R. Hearst State Park across Highway 1 from the entrance to Hearst Castle. The theme of the center is "Connecting Land and Sea," and it emphasizes the role of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and California State Parks in protecting natural and cultural resources. Exhibits include "Partners in Protection," "Watersheds," Tide Pools, "Wildlife Viewing," "The Deep Sea," "Elephant Seals," and the "History of San Simeon Bay." The public can learn about the Davidson Seamount and the sinking of the tanker "Montebello" off our coast in 1941. The center is very "kid-friendly" with rainbow trout swimming in a large fish tank and displays with buttons to push to activate lights, voices and movies. It is very interesting and educational for young and adults alike.

The historic **Piedras Blancas Light Station**, north of San Simeon and the elephant seal viewing site, was opened to the public in 2003 for the first time since 1875. The Light Station was then re-opened for limited public tours in 2004 and may be visited by reservation only by calling toll-free (888) 804-8608. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management became the site manager since the station was officially returned to the public domain by the U.S. Coast Guard in May 2002. A master plan has been developed for protecting and restoring the buildings and grounds to the natural, scenic, cultural and historic resources to reflect the period when the station was under the U.S. Lighthouse Service.

Holiday shopping: There are new supplies of T-shirts in the office, as well as caps and novelty aprons. There are mugs, note cards, and coloring books, and Terri Tucker has donated charming tiles with seal photos on them. Thank you, Terri.

