



# FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL

## E-SEAL NEWS

SPRING  
2010



### A Month in the Sun

Visitors to the elephant seal viewing site during the spring and summer sometimes appear shocked at the seals' ragged appearance and ask if they are sick or dying. Their colors vary. Some are pale beige, others are tan or brown, and some are smooth and gray. Most of their coats appear tattered. Some look like their sunburn is peeling, others appear to be wearing shabby sweaters or blankets. But it's not a catastrophe, just a catastrophic molt, a period of growing new skin and shedding old skin and hair to reveal a smooth new coat. It's called catastrophic because, whereas other animals (and humans) grow skin bit by bit over the year, the elephant seals come out of the water once a year, lie in the sun, and grow it all at once. A better strategy than circulating their very warm blood next to very cold water as would be necessary to grow the new skin at sea.

In early spring, the beaches are shared by swimmers and shedders. There are still a few of this year's weaned pups teaching themselves to swim before launching themselves into the sea and heading north for their first foraging adventure. These weaners are joined in large numbers by juveniles, up to about six years old, coming in to molt. The juveniles were at sea during the winter birthing and breeding season. It's not easy to determine the gender of these young seals because the males haven't developed the proboscis that gives them their elephant seal name. But males can be identified by the way they play, sparring and banging their necks together and, if five years or older, by their noses. Females are quieter, and they keep their sweet, dog-like faces.

While some juveniles are still on the beach, adult females begin to return to molt. Although the female mated in January or February, the fetus has not yet

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For Up-to-date information, visit our web site at [www.elephantseal.org](http://www.elephantseal.org)

### Reflections on the 2010 Pupping Season

By Brian Hatfield, Marine Biologist

Approximately 3,900 pups were produced during the 2007 breeding season at the Piedras Blancas northern elephant seal rookery. This was followed by two consecutive years of fewer pups being produced (pup production is the number of live pups, weaned seals, and orphans counted at the end of the season). I was wondering if the colony here was perhaps going to slow down or stop increasing – as it apparently has at the Ano Nuevo rookery. In 2008 about the same number of adult females showed up to give birth as had in 2007, but pup mortality was very high that year, likely due to large waves with high tides and possibly the presence of one (or more) subadult male that was killing pups (this was the season when there were record numbers of dead pups along the boardwalk and at the north end of Vista Point 3, or VP-3, the main elephant seal viewing area). The estimated number of adult females in 2009 actually dropped by a couple hundred to around 3,900, but pup survival was up (it was a very mild winter) and pup production was actually up a little over 2008.

My first colony-wide count of adult females this season (which I do on the same day each year) was up over 40% from the previous high. This probably meant that either the season was starting early, that it was going to be a big year, or both. The peak season adult female count this season yielded over 4,000 for the first time, which confirmed that it was both early and big. The big unanswered question at this point was how many pups would survive in good shape until weaning. It was of particular interest because we were experiencing perhaps the strongest storms to hit the coast since the winter of 1997-98. The seal pups at the north end of VP-3 are very susceptible to being washed away during large wave events that coincide with high tides and it was obvious there was high pup loss in this area by mid-January. Visually the "wash out" that occurred here was dramatic. Most of

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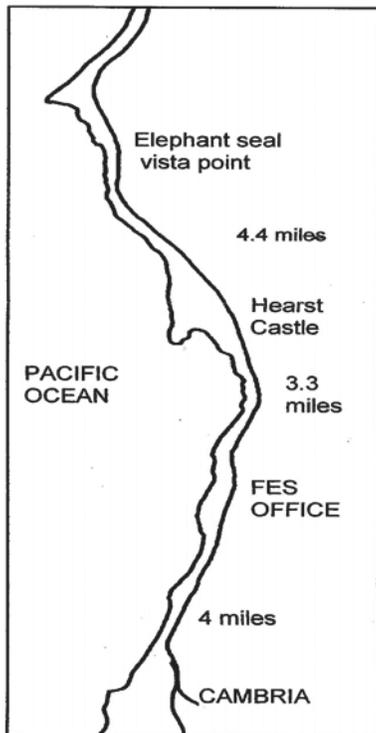
## What's New at Friends

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

### Sunset at San Simeon, 2010—the good news

We want to thank everyone who attended, volunteered for, donated items and participated in this year's annual fundraiser held on March 20, 2010. And a success it was, netting \$14,000, slightly exceeding last year. This year we added several new features to our event. We sponsored a Poster Contest, partnering with Cambria's Coast Union High School, and the winning poster advertised our event. Four local artists and their work, Will Scroggins, Nehemiah Persoff, Jeanette Wolff and Lucie Ryan, were showcased. And a book-signing by the author of "Shelby, the Brave Little Pup," Julia Stanert, rounded out our new activities.

A huge thank you goes to Charmaine Coimbra, Christel Chesney, and Diana Teetzel, event organizers, for their creative and boundless energy. Without them this could not have happened.

### Welcome new trainees

Seven trainees have completed spring training and mentoring and will be joining other docents on the bluff. Please say Hi and welcome Kathy Cherrie, Cindy Corrigan, Earline Ferrell, Bill Goodger, Virginia Jensen, Babs Mondschein and Bruce Inlow. They will complete their training in the fall. Fall training dates are October 9 and 23 and November 6.

### The bad news—Judy's retiring

Judy Burley, the person who holds everything together for FES, has announced her retirement. She became a docent in 2000 and took over her office duties the following year. Her duties are so varied that she wears many hats, being called docent coordinator, office manager, and recording secretary. It will definitely be difficult to find someone with her amazing organizational skills—and such a sunny personality as well—to fill her job. The office is accepting applications.

### Money down the tubes—and that's a good thing

Donation tubes are now being mounted on the fences during each docent shift at the viewing site, and they have been quite successful. A donation table is also taken out now and then, where a docent accepts donations and gives the donor a gift—a hat, a T-shirt, book, video, magnet, or mug. This has been a great success as well.

### New signs at the site

California State Parks has placed new information signs at both ends of the viewing site. They are colorful and educational. The interpretive material translated to different languages is now in the kiosk near the parking lot.

### Store update

We have a popular new friend in the store at the visitor center. He's a small plush toy—a male elephant seal, much cuter and cuddlier than the real thing. We also have new picture T-shirts, sweatshirts and mugs and logo wine glasses.

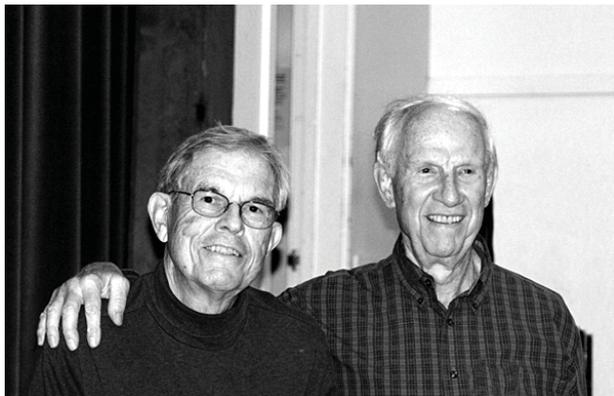
### Grants and awards

- The California State Parks Foundation has awarded FES a "Grass Roots

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## Docent Spotlight: Ray Hopkins & Ken Eberle



Docents honored during the 2009 docent appreciation event were Ken Eberle and Ray Hopkins. Both have been docents for over 10 years and have helped FES in many ways. In addition to being volunteer guides at the viewing site, Ken has been on the board of directors and worked in the office, and Ray has taken it upon himself to pick up trash around the site regularly. Both men have worked diligently on the annual fundraisers. Thank you, Ken and Ray for all you do.

### Reflections (Continued)

the other pupping beaches in our colony fared much better. However, the ensuing chaos that occurs when adult females and their pups are forced into very high density situations, especially on narrow beaches that are backed by vertical bluffs or very steep dunes, apparently resulted in higher than usual numbers of orphaned pups. Almost 450 orphan seal pups (alive, but of very small size and low weight) were counted at the end of the season. This compares to an average of 110 very small seals each year over the previous 5 years. If we assume these orphan seals will not survive, the pup production this year is about the same as the 2007 season (approx. 3,800).

So, the number of adult females increased this year and so did pup production (especially if you include orphans, which is standard). 2010 saw a return to increasing numbers at the Piedras Blancas colony of northern elephant seals. Numbers, in general, increased in existing pupping areas even though the pupping range along the coast has not expanded for several years. Now we can anticipate and wonder what will happen during the 2011 season!

### What's New (Continued from opposite page)

Champion Award" for the support of State Parks during the fiscal crisis.

- The California Coastal Conservancy has extended funding on its grant to FES.
- The Monterey Bay Sanctuary Foundation has awarded a \$4,000 grant to FES to convey to visitors the meaning and importance of the Marine Protected Areas.

### Outreach in 2009

The outreach program of Friends of the Elephant Seal provides docents for school groups of all ages who visit the viewing site, as well as for bus tours from around the state and the country. Docents also present Power Point and slide programs to groups and organizations.

In 2009, school groups ranged from first graders to college students. Among the many elementary school classes were special needs students and ESL and bilingual learners. The Grizzly Academy, a high school for at risk teens, visits the viewing site several times a year, and scout troops also schedule tours.

Classes came from San Luis Obispo County, but also from Solvang, Bakersfield, Clovis, Santa Barbara and Newbury Park. One group was visiting from Kansas.

College visitors included students from Cal Poly and Cuesta College as well as from Oxnard College, Camarillo and Ventura. Some were from classes in ecology and marine biology. Docents spoke to more than 2,037 students on these school tours.

Docents also met bus tours including groups from California State Parks, VIPs from state government, the Hearst Preservation Foundation and the Motion Picture and Television Hospital. Senior citizens and special interest groups scheduled tours. More than 700 people were in these groups.

The outreach program that takes docents into the community made presentations to groups including Audubon, Elderhostel, Kiwanis and the YMCA. Docents gave Power Point or slide presentations to 620 people. FES also has docents in the San Francisco Bay Area and in Florida, where they present outreach programs.

### A Month in the Sun (Continued)

started to grow. But she is nourished from feeding at sea for a couple of months and after her molt, it is believed that hormones kick in that cause the fetus to begin to develop.

The round robin molting season continues, with sub-adult males next in the rotation. They play-fight even more than younger males, practicing for future combat. The huge adult males that can weigh more than two tons return from their Alaska migration in late June and July. Although they were warriors during the winter season, in the summer they just hang out together, even using each other as pillows. They may spar and bellow a bit, but this time of year it's just a game.

Although a few seals get mixed up with the wrong crowd during molting, the rotation of sexes and ages appears well programmed. They all seem to know when it's their turn to hit the beach.