



FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL

E-SEAL NEWS

WINTER
2010



NEW LIFE ON THE BEACH

Winter is the elephant seals' dramatic season of birthing and breeding – Mother Nature's big show of the year at the Piedras Blancas viewing site. The first act begins in late November or early December with the arrival of the huge adult males, returning from their long journey to Alaska and back, where they have been foraging to bulk up for several months of fasting. As they come in, one by one, the dominance hierarchy on the beach changes often as they try to set up their territories. A massive male that can weigh two tons or more is impressive, with his long, dangling nose – the proboscis that gives elephant seals their name. He will settle in his chosen spot on the beach, appearing entrenched and snoozing comfortably. But another male may arrive, announcing his presence with a great bellow as he emerges from the surf, and the two will size each other up, first with vocalizing and posturing.

The hollow holler of an adult male is hard to describe. It's been said it sounds like a Harley revving up in a gym. Sometimes the big voice is all it takes to make one guy decide to back off. If not, they might fight, banging their chests together and biting necks with their sharp canine

(Continued on page 3)

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

Clicking a million visitors

A milestone was reached this fall as Friends of the Elephant Seal documented speaking to more than a million visitors. Each docent carries a clicker in a pocket and clicks for everyone actually spoken to about the seals. Each day the number of contacts is recorded in a journal, where the docent also notes the experiences of the shift. In October, the millionth click was counted, so we are now into recording our second million visitors. This does not include the many people who come to see the seals but don't actually speak to us. This summer we had hundreds of foreign visitors, and some of them didn't speak English. However our website has links to the information in other languages.

FES Anniversary

On November 25, 1990 the first spotting of our elephant seals was made by Brian Hatfield and the count on that date was 19 e-seals. The following day in 1990 that number had grown to 26 and Piedras Blancas Elephant Seal Rookery was born. So this November 25th (Thanksgiving) was the rookery's 20th anniversary.

Marcella Boteilho, new office manager

Marcella came to us from the Joslyn Adult Recreation Center and before that, Stonemith Garden Vessels where she was office manager and bookkeeper. Her earlier experience includes 23 years as owner of several businesses, before coming to Cambria from the central Sierra to semi-retire. She brings wonderful skills and a love of our organization. While she will not be doing regular docent duty on the bluff, she went through the fall docent training and is a member of the Class of 2010. We hope that you will take the opportunity to drop by and introduce yourself to Marcella. She is at the top right in the new docent picture on page 3.

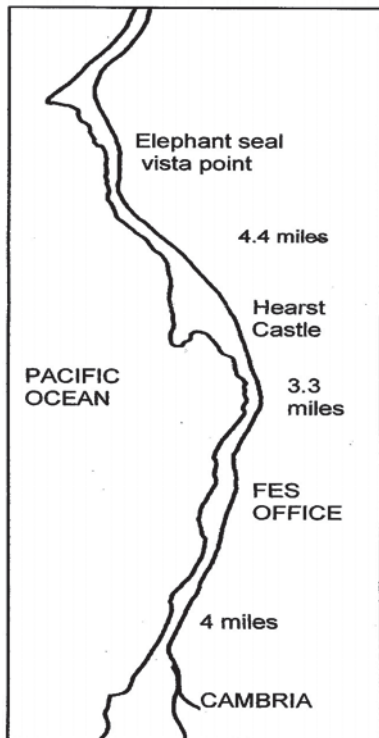
(Continued on page 2)

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

Mailing Address

P.O. Box 490
 Cambria, CA 93428

Email: fes@elephantseal.org

Phone: 805-924-1628

FAX: 805-924-1629

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

(Continued from page 1)

Walk this way

The viewing site at Piedras Blancas has a brand new walkway, just in time for the birthing and breeding season. It extends from the north end of the large parking lot at the main site to the smaller, paved parking lot north of it. The trail is accessible from both parking lots. With railings, the wheel-chair-accessible walkway replaces a rough trail that ran along a rapidly eroding bluff.

California State Parks, The Coastal Conservancy and the California Conservation Corps worked together on the project, beginning at the end of May. The trail opened with a ribbon cutting ceremony on December 4.



The walkway was funded by the California Coastal Trail grant program of the State Coastal Conservancy and money from the National Park Service Land and Water Conservation Fund. These funds were combined with a statewide agreement with the California Conservation Corps through the California State Parks Statewide Trails Section.

FES thanks them all, and appreciates the excellent work of the Conservation Corps crew who built the walkway.

New fundraiser will be a fundraiser

Save the date--Saturday, Sept. 10, 2011, for a brand new kind of FES fundraiser--A Grand Ole Soup-abration. It will be a jubilee of Central Coast restaurants competing for the best soups around.

So dust off your boots, and freshen up your hats and jeans, because this will be a daytime event at a new location, The Cayucos Creek Barn in Cayucos-- and the ticket price will be \$40. Local wineries will also pour samples of their season's best during this country-themed jamboree. Stay tuned for details.

Watch any time

FES is actively working to bring a live-view camera—a webcam—to the rookery, making a view of the beach and surrounding ocean available over our web site. The on-line live views of the seals will allow visitors who typically have a one-time snapshot of the beach scene to broaden their understanding with views throughout the year and allow them to share their experience more effectively with others when they return to their homes. In addition it will provide a view of the seals to others who have not been visitors and, in many cases, encourage them to come to the rookery. We expect to have the camera operational in time for the birthing and breeding season beginning in December, 2011.

New membership benefits

Membership benefits have been increased for you and everyone in your home. We are beginning an annual series of "Members Only" seminars followed by tours of the rookery led by some of our most experienced guides. The 2011 seminars include Birthing & Nursing on January 29, Mating & Weaning on February 19 and The Catastrophic Molt on May 14. Your new membership discount of 20% is now available to you at our store and on-line.



WELCOME NEW DOCENTS

This year's class of 21 new docents is one of the largest classes in several years. Graduates are David Bauer, Marcella Boteilho, Kathy Cherrie, Cindy Corrigan, Skip Crunelle, Linda Curry, Earline Ferrell, Bill Goodger, Melanie Gruber, Paul Heller, Charles and Pam Hutchins, Bruce Inlow, Virginia Jensen, Babs Mondschein, Dale Moody, Kat Morrison, Lela Mulligan, Maggie Nichols, Lorienne Schwenk and Janice Van Bever. Congratulations!

A Month in the Sun (Continued)

teeth. The thick, crusty callus on a male's neck is called a chest shield because it is so tough. Although it bleeds, the opponent's teeth seldom go deep enough to do serious damage.

The pregnant females begin arriving in December and each one selects a comfortable location to give birth. Eventually, each alpha male will have as many as 40 females in his harem, and he expects to mate with each of them when she weans her pup, about a month after it is born. Our first pup was born December 9, and births continue through January.

After long migrations, the females have nourished their bodies to withstand a couple of months of fasting, birthing and nursing. Usually, in less than a week after arriving, a female gives birth to one pup, which weighs from 60 to 80 pounds. The birth usually takes less than half an hour. The first thing the mother does is vocalize with her pup, bonding so that they can find each other if they become separated on the crowded beach.

The pups nurse for four weeks and can gain as much as 10 pounds a day on the rich milk, averaging 55% and reaching 65% fat by the end of the nursing period. For every pound the pup gains, the mother loses two pounds. By the end of the nursing period the pup can weigh over 300 pounds.

The female goes into estrus about four weeks after birthing, abruptly weans her pup, mates, and heads out to sea. It's important that the pup, now called a weaner, is fat enough to survive after its mother leaves because it will take eight to ten weeks for the youngster to teach itself to swim well enough to head north to forage for food.

The mating season begins about a month after the first births, and there is plenty of action as the alpha males chase other males lurking around the harem and fight for mating rights. At the same time, females are squabbling over pups and space, and winter storms are threatening to separate pups from their mothers. It's not always a pretty picture, but it's a noisy, exciting time and a rare opportunity for human visitors to observe the seals' birthing and mating season without disturbing them.