



# FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL

## E-SEAL NEWS

WINTER  
2011



### Drama on the Beach

The dramatic winter season of the seals has begun. The huge males have arrived on the beaches at the Piedras Blancas viewing site, at the end of their long journey from the Aleutian Islands in Alaska where they have foraged to bulk up for over three months of fasting during the birthing and breeding season. After posturing and fighting to establish their territories, they have settled in (unless larger guys unseat them). The pregnant females are arriving, and the birthing has begun. The season begins slowly at the end of December, and by February as many as 4,000 pups may have been born. Now the beaches are filling up with pregnant females and mothers with pups. One by one, the females come out of the sea, sliding up onto the beach with the help of a surge—probably the same beach where they became pregnant the year before. After a long migration, eating all the way, they have built up their bodies so they can withstand over a month of fasting, childbirth and nursing. The pup is usually born within five days of the mother's arrival.

Those visitors who are fortunate enough to view a birth will see the baby emerge, with the gulls standing by to clean up the afterbirth. The mother will vocalize, bonding her voice with that of her pup, so they can find each other amidst the increasing population on the beach.

The mother nurses her pup for about a month, and the pup, which weighs about 60 pounds when it is born, can gain as much as 10 pounds a day on the rich milk. The mother, not eating during birthing and nursing, can lose almost twice as much weight as the pup gains. As the nursing period ends, she goes into estrus and is ready to mate. That's what the alpha males have been waiting for.

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

### Friends of the Elephant Seal Now a Cooperating Association with California State Parks

As of the end of November, 2011, FES is now a Cooperating Association with the California Department of Parks and Recreation, also known as California State Parks. Oversight of the Piedras Blancas rookery began in 1992, the year of the first elephant seal pup's birth, and was developed in association with the newly formed Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary (MBNMS), under the jurisdiction of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). MBNMS helped train FES volunteers and supported the organization during the early years. In 2006, as part of a conservation agreement with the Hearst Corporation, State Parks took over coastal land, including the rookery, and that land became part of Hearst San Simeon State Park. FES has worked cooperatively with State Parks for many years, even before it became the primary landowner. With the change of ownership, FES was allowed special privileges for a non-profit, educational organization operating in a State Park. The Cooperating Association agreement formalizes that relationship, one that is common throughout the state parks including Montana de Oro State Park and the Morro Bay Natural History Association. FES Board of Directors and staff have already experienced a closer working relationship with State Parks as a result of this agreement.

Operationally, little will change. Docents at the rookery will become State Park volunteers and wear the State Park patch on their jackets. Recruitment, selection, training and scheduling of docents will remain the functions of FES. In the event of an accident, docents will be protected by state-sponsored worker's compensation insurance.

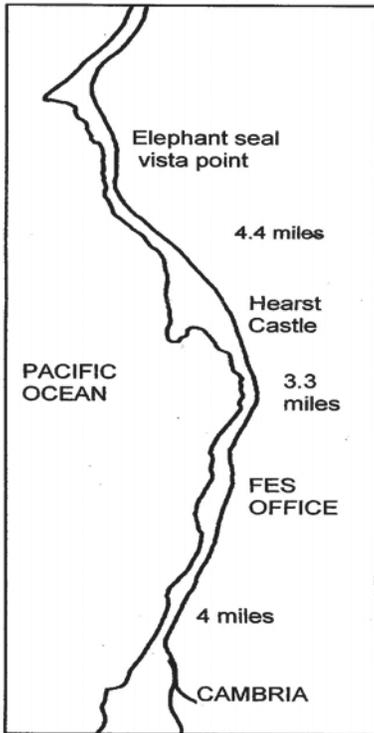
**Docent class of 2011—the jolliest ever**

**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**



Back row: Gil Eastman, Doris Somerville, Jack Morehead, Heather O’Conner, Dave Babcock, Gordon Heinrichs, Jill Haney, Marsha Locatelli

Front Row: Linda Rightmer, Shane VerPlanck, Sharon Witort, Lori Balch, Otis Carter, Sue King, Beverly Norberg, Valerie Eastman

**What’s New**

**Save the date**

The first Grand Ole Soupabration fundraiser was fun and successful, and Charmaine Coimbra and her committee have already set a date for the next one. It will be held on September 9, 2012 at Camp Ocean Pines in Cambria. It’s a beautiful setting.

**Lecture series**

The Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, in cooperation with Friends of the Elephant Seal, will present “Discover Your Central Coast,” a spring lecture series by marine scientists. The talks will be held at 6 p.m. each Friday in April and May in the Rabobank conference room, 1070 Main Street in Cambria. Topics and speakers will be announced in February 2012.

**Seminars and rookery tours**

Friends of the Elephant Seal will offer free seminars focusing on the activities at the elephant seal rookery. Each seminar will be followed by a guided tour of the rookery. Seminars will be held at Cavalier Plaza, 250 San Simeon Avenue in San Simeon. Doors open for coffee at 9:30 and the seminars will begin at 10 and last for about 90 minutes. The tours, conducted in small groups, will begin 30 minutes after each seminar. Birthing and nursing will be the topic January 14; Mating and Weaning February 18; and The Catastrophic Molt May 5. Admission is free. Reservations welcomed, but not required.

**The Webcam is coming**

We have reached our financial goal to place a live camera in the rookery. The equipment has been purchased and shipped to California State Parks personnel for installation. State Parks has informed us that they expect the installation to be completed early in 2012--in time for the peak of the birthing season. When the camera is installed, images of elephant seal behavior can be accessed by any internet-capable computer from anywhere in the world.

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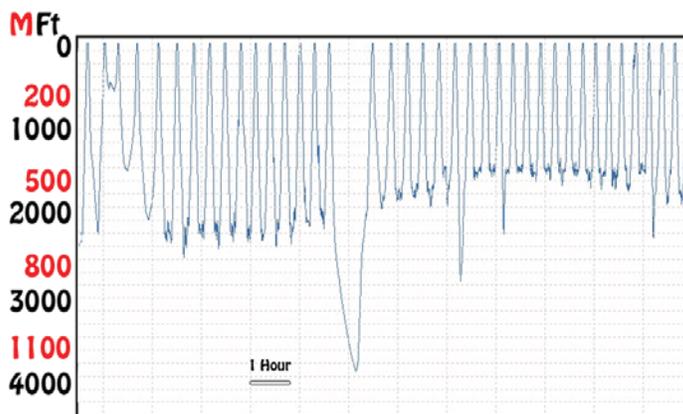
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**Visit our office, gift shop,  
and displays at the  
Cavalier Plaza, Highway 1  
San Simeon**



## A Visitor to Piedras Blancas

Friends of the Elephant Seal has received a report on the data gleaned from equipment on a female elephant seal that visited the Piedras Blancas rookery on May 12. A team from UC Santa Cruz came to the beach and retrieved the time-depth recorder. It turns out that she was quite a remarkable seal, making a dive to 1180 meters (about 3,870 feet) lasting more than 71 minutes. This is a much deeper and longer dive than average. The rest of the time she was diving in the 1,000 to 2,000 foot range. The data also showed that she foraged up off the northern Canada coast and ventured near some seamounts there.



**The graph shows her travels over about 17 hours—the first part during the day, the latter part at night.**

While she was here on the beach, the researchers sedated her and, in addition to removing the GPS unit, about the size of a wallet, glued to her head, took blood, and used ultrasound to determine the depth of her blubber. The blubber depth, which was 5 to 6 inches, indicated how much weight she had gained while foraging successfully on her migration route.

They weighed her by placing her on a tarp, which they winched up on poles, weighing it and deducting the weight of the tarp. She

weighed 900 pounds. A female elephant seal can weigh as much as 1,800 pounds, still much less than a male, which can reach 5,000 pounds. It's easy to understand why most of the studies are done on females, which are much easier to handle, although they do put GPS units on some males. The large males do most of their foraging in the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, a journey they make twice a year.

The studies, reported to Friends of the Elephant seal by Dr. Patrick W. Robinson at UC Santa Cruz, are being done by Dan Costa's laboratory there, which is doing a long-term tracking study of northern elephant seals at Ano Nuevo State Reserve. Some of those seals sometimes visit us at Piedras Blancas. Graduate students and collaborators are investigating topics such as "habitat use, foraging ecology, fine scale behavior, toxin loading, diving physiology, climate change, and ontogeny," according to the lab's website.

Tracking data is available to the public at [www.seaturtle.org](http://www.seaturtle.org). Elephant seal tracking can be seen at [www.seaturtle.org/?project\\_id=573](http://www.seaturtle.org/?project_id=573) and [id=592](http://www.seaturtle.org/?project_id=592).

## Drama on the Beach (Continued)

By mid January the mating season has begun and the males take center stage. Adult male elephant seals are awesome creatures, behemoths from visions of prehistoric eras. By human standards, they are ugly, with their huge, blubbery bodies, their rough, crusty necks and of course, those huge, dangling noses. They lie on the beach like enormous slugs, only to become mobile to chase another male or to pursue a female. Ugliness becomes power when it's time to challenge another male. That calloused neck becomes a protective shield and as it stretches skyward, height makes might. There may be a question as to who is the tallest, but when the great mouth opens and the resonating sound begins, the guy with the deepest voice can send competitors packing. The booming sound is unlike any other, although some say it sounds like someone banging on a pipe or revving up a motor. The hollow holler builds and falls. Often, that's all it takes to prove who's boss. Other males will turn and slink into the sea or hang their heads dejectedly on the sand. But often they choose to fight, banging their necks together and biting into each other's tough chest shield, drawing blood.

There is always plenty of action on the beach as mothers and pups deal with each other and with the winter tides. The pups can't swim, so storm surges toss them about and separate them from their mothers. There is an element of drama every day, between pups and mothers and harem masters and their challengers.

The weather may turn blustery and cold, but the daily saga on the beach is worth braving the winter weather.