



# AMONG FRIENDS

Friends of the Elephant Seal Member Newsletter

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Summer



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2015



## Route for Rookery Trail Is Marked and Open

The route of the northward extension of the California Coastal Trail from the parking lot of Elephant Seal Vista Point 4 has been identified and a temporary dirt path that follows the route is open to the public. This path will be replaced by the construction of two miles of permanent trail. The route was selected by a task-force that included representatives from Friends of the Elephant Seal, Trails Unlimited, Piedras Blancas Light Station Association, Bureau of Land Management and California Department of Parks and Recreation.

The temporary path has been marked with a stake-and-cable system that guides visitors away from areas where foot traffic would damage sensitive habitat or is dangerous to hikers and leads them to view points where sweeping coastal vistas, the famous white rocks, and abundant plant, animal and marine life can be enjoyed. (The views to the east are also spectacular.) The interim path includes interpretive signage.

FES president, David Bauer, a member of the task force, also reports that a complicated process is required to obtain the trail construction permits. The process, which must comply with the California Environmental Quality Act, is made up of three project segments. The Outstanding Natural Area Coastal Trail, described above is the southern section, and will connect to the Piedras Blancas Cabin and Camping segment. The third segment will extend north to Arroyo de la Cruz Creek. The three segments together total roughly four miles of new California Coastal trail. They must be permitted as a single project and much of the funding is expected as part of the Highway 1 realignment project.



*Sleeping elephant seal and snowy egrets seen from the path of the new trail.*

Construction of the permanent trail will replace the existing dirt path with

a combination of decomposed granite, boardwalks and bridges. These surfaces will give wheelchair access to view-points overlooking broad beaches used by elephant seals and other marine mammals as well as the migration route of the cow-calf pairs of the California gray whale.

Your donations paid for a substantial part of the stake and cable system and your support will be important as the project moves forward. On your next visit to Piedras Blancas, bring your walking shoes to get a preview of the natural wonders that will become fully accessible when these new sections of the California Coastal Trail are completed.

# Why This Beach?

Experienced visitors who know our elephant seals have historic haul-out sites on the Channel Islands and the islands off of Baja California, as well as the completely uninitiated, often ask "Why did the seals choose this beach?" Obviously no one has gotten a direct answer from an elephant seal, but perhaps with some background a credible answer can be surmised. Historically, elephant seals have chosen islands as their preferred haul-out sites, presumably due to the lack of large predators on the islands off the west coast. We know that elephant seal mothers that are unsuccessful in raising a pup often move to a different beach for their next delivery, so beaches with predators that could steal pups would not be attractive alternate sites. These days, large predators are not seen along our beaches, although historically they were present, causing us to wonder if Piedras Blancas might have other similarities to the island beaches besides the absence of land predators that would make it attractive to the seals.

The most populated northern elephant seal sites are all on the Channel Islands with San Miguel, San Nicolas and Santa Rosa, respectively, having the largest numbers. When we compare the topography of these island beaches to Piedras Blancas, we find some similarities.

On San Miguel Island, the beaches around Point Bennett are very popular with the seals. Google Earth gives us an aerial view of the area which shows many off shore rocks and points projecting into the ocean. The depth feature of Google Earth shows that the sea is quite shallow to distances of 1,000 feet or more from the seal populated beaches. The predators of elephant seals, great white sharks and orcas, prefer to attack at high speed from depths that hide their approach. The shallow water is a deterrent to these attacks. Finally, the photo shows many intertidal rocks, and the scale indicates that the beaches are over a thousand feet long and several hundred feet wide. The wide beaches give more room to escape from storm surges and high tides, the greatest cause of pup mortality.



A closer look allows us to see seals using the beach. While the resolution does not allow us to identify these specifically as elephant seals, scientists have determined that large numbers of elephant seals use the beach as well as sea lions and fur seals. The photo date stamp is April 8, 2013, a time when we would expect the elephant seal population to be weaned pups preparing for their first trip to sea, and maybe a few adult females and juveniles beginning their molt.

Viewing the beaches at Piedras Blancas (below), we discover similarities to the Channel Island haul-out sites. Many of the beaches are long and wide. It is harder to note the near shore and intertidal rocks in this view, but if you have visited the rookery, you have seen that there are lots of them. Although the

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average depth within 1,000 feet of shore is slightly deeper than at Point Bennett, it is still too shallow for near shore attacks. Weaners learning to swim and juvenile sparring are two of the obvious activities that take place in and around the inner tidal rocks and shallows, along with a lot of activity that just seems social. Because of all this activity we assume that these features make the beaches attractive.



Google Earth shows that San Nicolas and Santa Rosa Island also have large south facing beaches. “South facing” is often cited as a preference for northern elephant seals, and the Piedras Blancas beaches that are the most popular year-round, do face south or southwest. Just how important the orientation of the beach is to the seals has not been definitively studied, and we know beaches with other orientations are also used.

All in all, the similarities of our beaches to the island beaches - the frequently wide beaches, the shallow near shore waters, the intertidal rocks, and the orientation - make us think that the seals, if pressured by over-population or other factors that make their beaches less attractive, might give our beaches a try. Once they try a beach, pup-rearing success is paramount, and pup mortality at Piedras Blancas has been low. Not only that, hauling out at Piedras Blancas means the distance to foraging areas in the north is a little shorter. Pups born at Piedras Blancas and returning as adults, along with many seals born elsewhere that have adopted it as home, have made Piedras Blancas the largest of all the mainland rookeries. The simple answer to the opening question: our beaches have many important similarities to the elephant seals’ traditional island haul-out sites.

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## Green Tie Returns



The “ring” you see around Green Tie’s neck is a scar from the green plastic packing strap that was deeply embedded in his neck. A rescue team from The Marine Mammal Center removed the packing strap in November 2011 while Green Tie was sedated on the beach. If someone had simply cut the strap in half and disposed of it properly, this never would have happened. The last time the Center’s veterinary team examined Green Tie was in February 2013. They determined that his neck wound was continuing to heal. His scar will forever be a reminder of how our actions can impact these animals.