



# FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL

## E-SEAL NEWS

SPRING  
2008



### Spring Roll Call

Youngsters populate the beaches at the Piedras Blancas elephant seal rookery in the spring, when this year's pups, now called weaners, are joined by young seals coming in to molt. Some of the silvery, wide-eyed weaners, the pups born from December into February, are still on the beaches in April. Their mothers have mated and headed out to sea, leaving their weaned pups behind, to teach themselves how to swim, and eventually, eat.

When all of the mothers were gone, the adult and subadult males had no reason to stay – and an important reason to leave. They hadn't eaten for nearly four months.

The weaners on the beach don't eat either. Until they teach themselves to swim, they live off the fat they gained while nursing. They remain on the beach for eight to ten weeks after their mothers leave, losing 30 to 50 percent of their weaned weight by the time they learn to swim and dive. They snooze and snuggle, lose weight and change color, molting off their black birthday suits to turn silvery gray. They roll around in the pools among the rocks, and it takes a lot of practice before they become seaworthy enough to take the plunge and head out for their first real meal, taking their chances with the sharks and orcas, their two main predators. Only about 50 percent will make it through their first year at sea.

In April, older seals begin returning to the beach to molt. Molting is a round-robin process that lasts through the summer, as different ages and genders return to the beach to shed a layer of skin.

The first molters to arrive include young females who were not participants in the breeding season and juvenile males, who can be identified

*(Continued on page 3)*

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

### The 2008 Birthing Season

By Brian Hatfield, Marine Biologist

The preliminary estimate for the number of births this year at the Piedras Blancas rookery, based on adult female counts during the breeding season, rounds to 4,000 - down slightly from last year (~2%). Pup production (the number of live pups and "weaners" counted at or near the end of the season) is another story. Anyone who spent time at the rookery at either the main viewing site or at the next large sandy cove northwest of the viewing site is aware that there were significantly more dead pups/weaners this year compared to previous years. The number of live pups and weaners counted at the end of the season was ~3,100. Therefore, the number that died before or shortly after weaning was just over 20% of the number estimated to have been born. Although this is high mortality for Piedras Blancas (last year estimated pup/weaner mortality was about 5%), it is well within the range of mortality experienced by other rookeries.

High tides concurrent with large swells that occurred on more than one occasion this year is certainly the cause of some of the mortality (by drowning or separating young seals from their mothers). Heavy rainfall and run-off also caused additional sand erosion which likely influenced pup survival in certain areas. But given the number of "normal" weight dead animals seen late in the season, it is also quite possible that one or more large subadult males may have been killing weaners while attempting to mate with them. The areas where mortality was estimated to be the highest were at the main viewing area and the cove northwest of that location. Compared with last year, pup production was lower in each area with some areas down more than others and overall it is down about 20% as well.

The Piedras Blancas rookery breeding range along the coast was unchanged. Time will tell whether this year is just a blip in the otherwise increasing trend in the size of "our" colony or whether it may be stabilizing. For comparison, the Ano Nuevo colony has remained essentially unchanged in size for many years now.

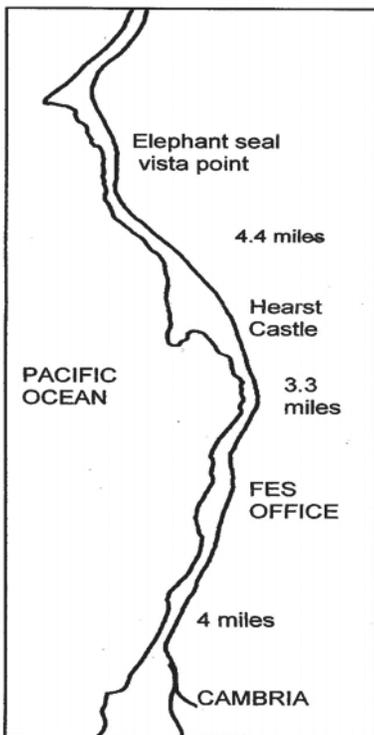
## What's New at Friends

### 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**  
[www.elephantseal.org](http://www.elephantseal.org)

#### Mailing Address

P.O. Box 490  
Cambria, CA 93428

Email: [fes@elephantseal.org](mailto: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**

### FUN AND FUNDS

The annual Sunset at San Simeon fundraiser for Friends of the Elephant Seal on March 8 was a great success once again, and made about \$15,000. Barbara Jo Carlson, chairperson this year, thanks everyone who helped with this great evening of wine tasting, music and dance, awesome food and fun, raffles and silent auctions. Special thanks go to the Hearst Ranch Corporation, all the vineyards that donated wine, Martin Testa Catering, The Mighty Croon Dogs, North Coast Brewing Co. and all the FES docents who volunteer their time every year to make this event happen. Thanks also to the many merchants, artists and others who donated items for the auction and raffle.

### GOOD GRANT NEWS

In January, Friends of the Elephant Seal received a grant of \$40,000 from the State Coastal Conservancy to be used over two years to help continue providing docents to answer questions and ensure the safety of both visitors and seals to the elephant seal viewing area. The funds will be used to maintain the current program and assist with the recruitment and training of new volunteers. One of the stipulations of the grant is that FES continue its own fundraising efforts.

### VISITOR COUNT IS UP

Docent Bob Grosse has compiled the figures for 2007, and he thanks all the guides for reporting the visitor counts. The total for the year from the logbooks and now posted in the office was 101,838, which is a record year and is nearly 20% over the 85,350 previous record set in 2006. We have been busy!

### DOCENT GETS A NEW HONOR

Phil Adams, elephant seal docent extraordinaire, received the National Marine Sanctuary's Outstanding Volunteer award for 2007. Phil has been involved with Sanctuary and partner groups in the southern region of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary for over 11 years. He has done everything from preventing harassment

*(Continued on page 3)*



## Docent Spotlight: Joe Golowka



Joe Golowka, a docent for Friends of the Elephant Seal for nine years, celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in March. Joe, a long-time outdoorsman, gardener, golfer and photographer, has come in out of the cold on the bluff and volunteers in the FES office. Thanks, Joe.

### Spring Roll Call (Continued)

by their pointy noses. A young male, three or four years old, will have just a little rat nose, but each year the proboscis will get longer and thicker until he lives up to the title, elephant seal. Females have sweet, dog-like faces throughout their lives.

The juveniles look pretty scruffy, as if they're wearing tattered sweaters or worn-out blankets. During their annual catastrophic molt they shed an entire layer of tan-colored hair and skin, bit by bit, to reveal a sleek new dark gray coat beneath.

Most of the seals on the beach in spring are 1-to-5 years old. These juveniles were at sea during the winter birthing, fighting and mating activities and now it's their turn to rest on the beach and shed their skin. They don't eat while they're molting, but they do go into the water now and then for a swim. The young males can be identified by both their looks and their typical male adolescent behavior, testing their changing voices in squawks and bellows (only a hint of the booming sound they will one day make). They also spar and playfight in and out of the water. The adult females begin returning to molt in late spring. They have been feeding at sea for a couple of months to renourish their bodies after fasting during the winter season. Now they rest and molt before heading to sea again.

The molting musical chair game will continue through the summer, with older, subadult males in the next phase, and the adult males returning from their Alaska journey later in the summer.

The molt takes three-to-four weeks, then the seals head out to sea again, one by one, in their sleek new coats.

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

of elephant seals, sea lions, harbor seals and nesting birds to beach and water quality monitoring. No matter if he's in his blue Friends of the Elephant Seal jacket or a Team OCEAN kayak – Phil is dedicated to wildlife harassment prevention. Phil and his wife Carole also volunteer for the sea otter monitoring program and gray whale project at Piedras Blancas Light Station. They wrote the book on elephant seals that is used in docent training and donate the proceeds from the book to FES. Congratulations, Phil—it's an award well earned.

### SPRING TRAINING

Kathy Hurrle, chairman of the docent training committee, reports that spring training was held on April 6. Bette Bardeen and James Siler are the enthusiastic trainees who will go through three mentoring sessions on the bluff before going solo. And, of course, they will be attending the fall training in October.

### MOMENT OF FAME

The Piedras Blancas rookery made the national news in March when a CBS film crew visited. It started out as an ordinary look at the seals, but it turned into a news story as an errant young bull made it up to the trail above the bluff at the site south of the rookery and had to be "rescued." People from State Parks and the Marine Mammal Rescue Center guided him down to the beach, as the TV cameras rolled. The web site set a new record of over 1000 new visitors in one day.

### From the Gift Shop

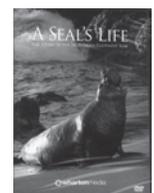
The following items are available for purchase from our Gift Shop. Prices include tax and shipping. Send checks payable to FES, PO Box 490. Cambria, CA 93428.



**Book**  
Price: \$9.90



**DVD**  
Price: \$26.90



**DVD**  
Price \$23.00