



FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL

E-SEAL NEWS

SUMMER
2009



BEACH VACATIONS

The final round in the round robin process of molting brings adult and subadult males to the rookery at Piedras Blancas in July and August. They have been foraging for months, building up a layer of blubber to sustain them while they fast during the molt. The huge males make the long journey from their feeding grounds in Alaska to rest in the sun on the beaches and shed their skin. It's an annual process, and they were preceded by females and juveniles earlier in the summer. Although the seals travel alone in the sea, each one knows when it's time to join its peers on the beach to molt. They shed a layer of tattered brown or tan skin and hair, which comes off in bits and pieces to reveal a new sleek, gray coat.

The adult males are impressive and can weigh up to 5,000 pounds. But they are in a more mellow mood than they will be during the breeding season in the winter, when they are vying for status and mating rights. In the summer, they are here just to rest and molt. They may announce their presence with their booming voices, and they often spar briefly with one another, but they are more likely to use their big, soft companions as pillows as they snooze.

In August, the males begin to leave, one by one, to head to Alaska again to put on weight

(Continued on page 3)

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

ELEPHANT SEAL VISION

Those big eyes occasionally staring at you from the beach may not look extraordinary but they certainly are among the most remarkable features of this remarkable animal.

- To better see on land as well as in the water, the seal's cornea is flatter than that of land mammals, reducing the importance of focusing at the cornea surface which differs significantly in air and water environments, with its interior lens accomplishing almost all the focusing.
- Like those of cats and nocturnal animals on land, the elephant seal retina is highly reflective, increasing the light sensitivity of the eye.
- The elephant seal pupil can vary in area 400 fold as compared to approximately 20 fold for humans, facilitating adjustment to a wider range of light intensity.
- The elephant seal has relatively few cones, and hence limited color vision, but a very large number of the more sensitive rods resulting in a sensitivity ten times as great as that of humans and three times as great as that of the California sea lion.
- For the northern elephant seal the color of maximum visual sensitivity is farther into the blue than for all but a few deep diving whales, reflecting the fact that blue light penetrates the ocean water better than other colors. That color of maximum sensitivity is also close to the color of bioluminescence of many (yummy!) creatures living at the foraging depths of the elephant seal.
- Northern elephant seals eyes adapt from bright daylight as experienced on the surface of the ocean to light at the limit of their sensitivity in 4-6 minutes while our eyes adapt to only ten percent of that range of sensitivity in about 25 minutes. Clearly, rapid accommodation is necessary if the elephant seal is to forage at maximum effectiveness.

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.

Message from the President

The Friends of the Elephant Seal Board of Directors wishes to thank you our members for your support of our group's mission to educate an ever growing number of visitors in regard to respect and protection of the seals, habitat and people. As a California non profit in this difficult economic period, we encourage you to renew your membership each year. This monetary support is always needed to ensure the future financial sustainability of our volunteer docent organization. Visitors tell us every day how appreciative they are of our informative presence at the bluff, and we are grateful to all of you for helping to ensure it will continue.

Gratefully,
Mary Lee Becwar
President, Board of Directors
Friends of the Elephant Seal

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

WHAT'S NEW AT FRIENDS

Welcome new docents Eight new docents are working on the bluff after training and mentoring. Peter Freeman, Terrel Porter-Smith and Jim Voge trained in the winter, and Ramona Voge, Bruce and Kandy Inlow, Rhoda Paysnick and Daniel Szlukier trained in spring. They will go through fall sessions as well. Fall training dates are October 3 and 17 and November 7. Details will be announced.

VIP visitors On June 12, State Senator Abel Maldonado and a group of about 40 state agency managers visited the viewing site, where they were greeted by eight docents who spoke to them about the seals and answered questions.

Docent potluck A get-together and presentation will be held on August 29 at the Vet's Hall in Cambria. Docents will be asked to bring an appetizer or a dessert. Kathryn Karako will speak.

Board of Directors George Larson is now a member of the FES board, invited to become a director after Richard Lee's term expired. Welcome, George.

Join the parade Plans are in the works for FES to participate in Cambria's Pinedorado Parade on Labor Day weekend. The theme of the September 5th event is tourism, and we are mulling some good ideas and welcome more. We'll keep you posted.

Coastal Cleanup EcoSlo, the Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo County, has asked FES to volunteer in the 25th Annual Coastal Cleanup Day from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, September 19. Beaches are assigned to different groups. Please let the FES office know if you are interested in picking up trash.

Outreach figures The outreach program of Friends of the Elephant Seal provides docents for school groups of all ages who visit the viewing site, and docents present Power Point and slide programs to groups and organizations. Docents spoke to 1,740 students in 2008. They talked to 268 people on bus tours and made Power Point presentations to 275 people. This is in addition to the hundreds of visitors they speak to on the bluff. They recorded 110,751 visitor contacts at the viewing site in 2008.

SEA LION STRANDINGS

The Marine Mammal Center has responded to a record number of California sea lion strandings this year. Most of the animals are emaciated yearlings. More than 300 were admitted in May and June. July shows no sign that the rate is slowing, with some larger sea lions stranding with seizures. While an El Niño condition has been identified by NOAA, it is unknown what exactly is causing the unusual number of strandings.

For further information:

www.marinemammalcenter.org

www.nmfs.noaa.gov:80/strandings.htm

Beach Vacations (Continued)

in anticipation of the winter birthing and breeding season, when they will fast from late November until March. After they leave, the beaches are nearly empty for about six weeks before young seals begin returning to rest. In early fall the rookery is populated with juveniles up to about four years old, including some of this year's pups.

In the fall while the young seals are resting on the beach, the adults are at sea, bulking up for the birthing and breeding season. The males have to put on enough blubber to fast for three months while they are holding forth in their harems, fighting and mating, and the females must nourish their bodies for the stresses of giving birth and nursing.

Because they rarely go ashore during the months of diving and feeding, the seals' migrations were something of a mystery, but developing technology, using time-depth recorders and observing seals that have been tagged, it's now known that most of the older males make the 5,000-mile round trip to and from the Aleutian Islands twice a year. They travel along the continental shelf and feed on bottom fish at about 2,000 feet, although dives to 5,000 feet have been recorded. Females and juveniles also go north, although not usually as far, foraging for squid and fish. The seals spend most of their time deep under water. They can stay down for over an hour and spend less than 15 percent of their time at the surface.

As November approaches, the subadult males will begin to return to the beach to haul out and rest until the huge adult males begin to arrive again, a sign that the excitement of the birthing and breeding season is right around the corner.



This harbor seal pup was rescued from the rookery by the Marine Mammal Center, treated and released.

DOCENT SPOTLIGHT: CAROLE & PHIL ADAMS



Carole and Phil Adams, honored as outstanding docents in 2008, are invaluable to Friends of the Elephant Seal. They wrote the book, *Elephant Seals*, which is a basic teaching tool for docents. They also designed and mounted the exhibits and photos in our visitor center, and Carole set up the docent library with books about many facets of marine life. In addition, they volunteer on the bluff and guide school and college groups. They also received the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary's Citizens of the Year award for 2004, and Carole received the Bureau of Land Management "Making a Difference" National Volunteer award for her work at the Piedras Blancas light station.

From the Gift Shop

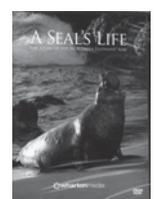
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