

ELEPHANT SEAL BIRTHS AND HOW TO SPOT THEM

The high point of a rookery visit is witnessing a birth. Births occur between the middle of December and the middle of February with most occurring in January. While you will often know that a birth has occurred, courtesy of the gulls, most visitors would love to see the event itself and frequently ask "How can I know when a mother is about to give birth?". This article, based upon a study* carried out at the Ano Nuevo rookery, may help you do so.

The moms are somewhat restless during early stages of labor shifting their weight from their abdomen to one side or the other. The labor time varies from approximately 15-25 minutes in the older adult moms to 30-60 minutes in the very young moms. During the final phase of labor, the mom lies on her belly and may elevate her lower abdomen 1-2 feet above the ground and swing it slowly from side to side. The mom may begin flipping sand or root in the sand as a sign of anxiety. At the same time, her fore flippers may be extended and her head and neck raised giving a U shaped appearance. This posture is usually assumed during contractions from the time the pup is visible to the moment of expulsion and is a reliable signal that birth is imminent. Moms move very little during this period, although a few will circle as the pup is being expelled. The laboring mom may look straight ahead and may close her eyes and there may be tearing from time to time. The mom may emit a low vocalization similar to low intensity encounters with other moms. While the blubber thickness makes it difficult to observe contractions, there may be a bulge near the lower abdomen. In some instances either before or during labor you may be able to see the pup move.

At first appearance the pup is surrounded by amniotic membranes which usually rupture by the time the head or rear flippers are visible. The mom usually turns immediately to face her pup, breaking the umbilical cord. As she turns she usually begins emitting a warbling sound in the pup's direction and touches his body with her nose. She does not lick or clean the newborn. The pup usually responds to the mother's warble with a vocalization of its own. All pups make this sound within an hour after birth and some vocalize almost immediately. The placenta is delivered with the pup or within an hour after birth, typically attracting the gulls, the broadcasters of the birth. The arrival of the pup increases the aggression of females in the vicinity. They may approach the pup and sniff it, bite it, threaten it or, in a few cases, attempt to take the pup as their own.

Now you know what to look for, but the study also found that by far, most births occur at night. Of the day births, most occurred between 9 and 10 A.M. and between 4 and 5 P.M.. Of births observed in the study, 60% were head first and 40% were rear flippers first with the process, in either case, taking between 1 and 30 minutes, with an average of 8 minutes. Still births and premature births are very uncommon.