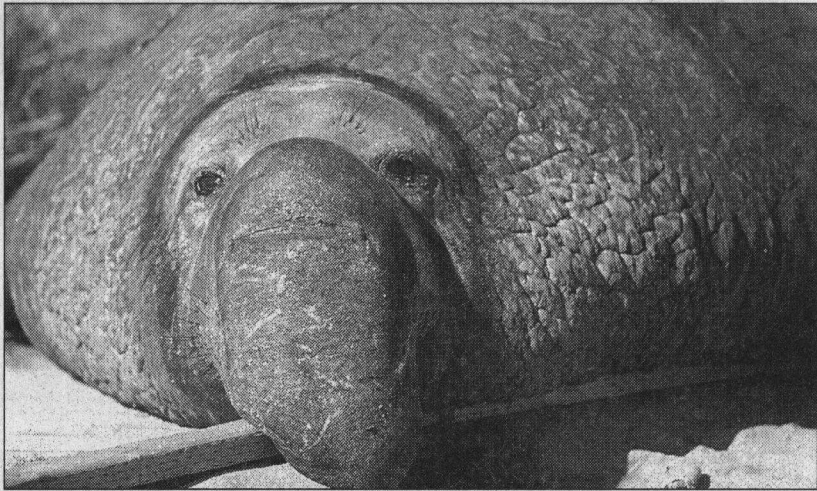
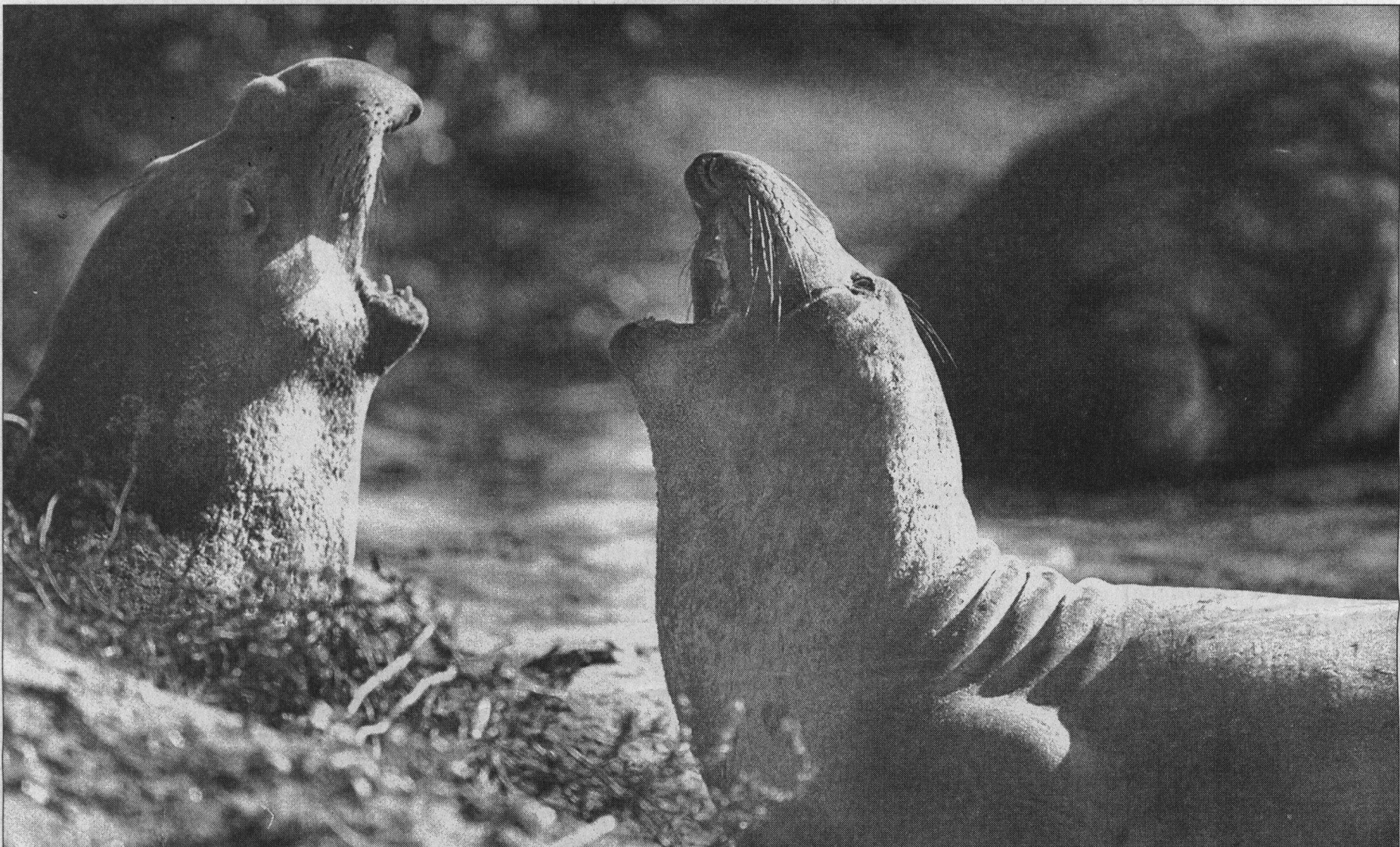


The Season of the Seal



A male elephant seal soaks up some sun at Año Nuevo Friday.

Bill Lovejoy/
Sentinel photos



A pair of young males practice jousting Friday at Año Nuevo. The battle will turn serious in a few years when the two compete for a harem of females. The annual return of elephant seals to Año Nuevo began a couple of weeks ago. Tours opened Friday to allow sightseers to view the ocean-going giants as they gather to mate and bear their young.

Elephant seals return to Año Nuevo to mate, bear young

By **PETER BRAND**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Martin Schwarzer of Frankfurt, Germany was at Año Nuevo State Reserve for the beginning of elephant seal breeding season Friday.

AÑO NUEVO "I read about it in a (travel book)," Schwarzer said.

He is one of 47,000 people who visit the reserve — 20 miles north of Santa Cruz — each winter.

Schwarzer and the other members of his viewing group picked the right day to visit the elephant seals. The first seal pup of the season was born early Friday, and by the mid-afternoon it was nursing from its mother.

"His mother will teach him how to communicate. He'll get used to her sound," park ranger Kevin Williams said.

The seals are not afraid of people, Williams said, which allows close viewing of the animals.

But this is no petting zoo.

During the breeding season the male seals — or bulls — battle one another for access to females. You can see their scars from 30 feet away.

Due to their massive frames (the average male seal weighs close to 2½ tons), the fights usually don't last long. "They tire out quickly," Williams said.

But, Williams added, he once witnessed a brawl that lasted about 45 minutes.

The guided elephant seal tour is the second most popular state park attraction behind Hearst Castle in San Simeon.

What keeps people coming back to see these fierce-looking animals?

"It's just seeing that sort of raw, natural behavior right in front of you," Williams said.

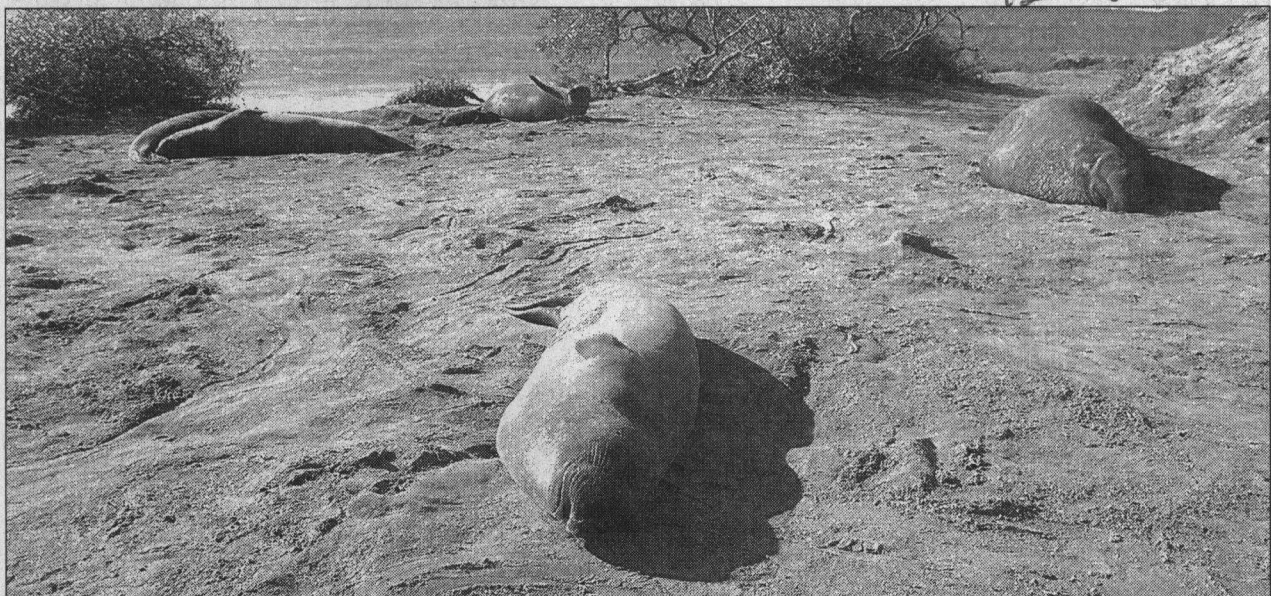
The state began running guided tours of the elephant seal habitat in 1975. Visitors walk a moderate three-mile hike through the sand dunes to reach the elephant seals.

The elephant seals return to Año Nuevo each year to breed along the beach between December and April.

Once a baby seal is born, the mother will nurse it for about 28 days before returning to the sea and leaving the pup to fend for itself.

After their departure around April, the seals will return in the summer to molt.

Contact Peter Brand at pbrand@santa-cruz.com.



Elephant seals spread out in the sand at Año Nuevo.

Elephant seals

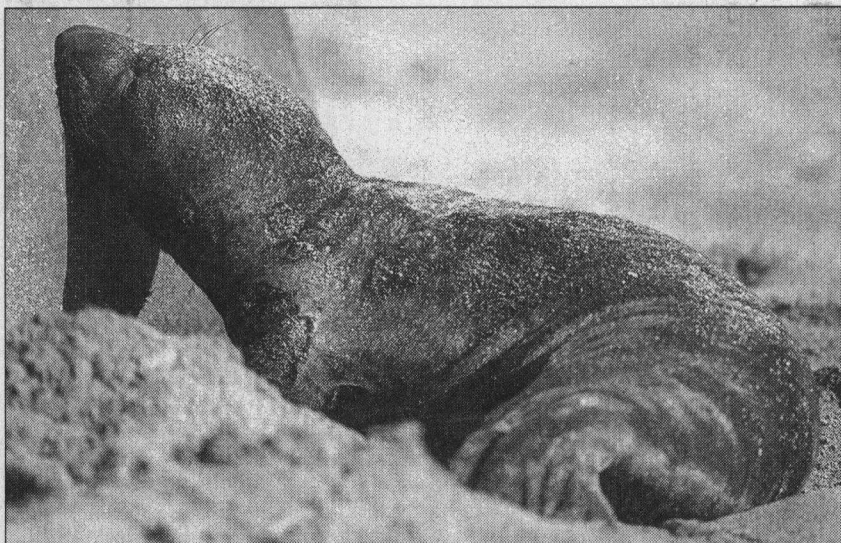
What: Elephant seal pupping season guided walks.

Where: Año Nuevo State Reserve, Highway 1, 20 miles north of Santa Cruz.

When: the season begins mid-December and continues through early February.

Information: (650) 879-0227

or on the Internet at www.anonuevo.org



The first elephant seal pup born at Año Nuevo this season snuggles against its mother.