

✓ Ano Nuevo Breaking down barriers

Trail enables handicapped to view seals

By TRACIE WHITE
Sentinel staff writer

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FOR THE first time in its 14-year history, the seasonal walking tours at the Ano Nuevo State Reserve will be open to the handicapped when the reserve opens Saturday.

A wooden walkway which enables the disabled to tour the reserve stretches down to the site of one of the only two mainland breeding colonies in the world for the northern elephant seal.

"It's a special trail built just for the disabled," said Ranger Gary Strachan. "It enables the non-ambulatory people to see the seals. It's a wonderful thing."

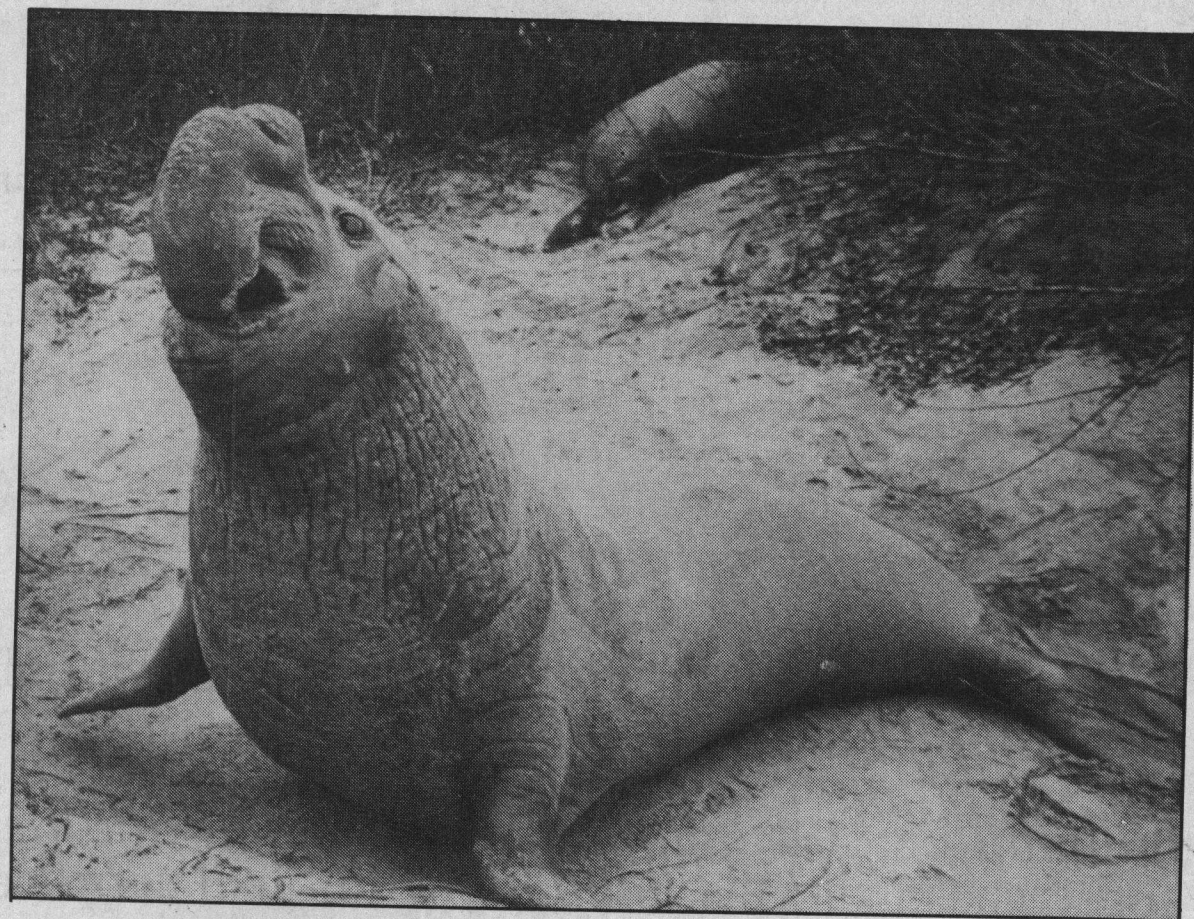
Built with \$20,000 in supplies from the state and the volunteer labor of the Telephone Pioneers — a community service organization — the majority of the walkway was completed over the weekend of Oct. 28-29.

"It was amazing," said Wanda Harris, coordinator of the Sam Champion Council, the local branch of the nationwide Telephone Pioneers. The group is composed of volunteers from AT&T and Pacific Bell who have worked for their companies more than 15 years.

"When we got there Saturday morning, it was just sand. By the time we left, it looked like a boardwalk," said Harris.

The 75 volunteers saved the park several thousand dollars worth of labor by working through the weekend, said Strachan, who added that "volunteerism" is the driving force behind the well-known guided walks that are held each year during the elephant seals breeding season from December through March.

Volunteer docents from the surrounding community and from UC Santa Cruz take an in-



An elephant seal at Año Nuevo State Reserve.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

tensive 65-hour training course, given by the California State Park System, prior to the breeding season. During the guided walks, they lead visitors among the huge marine mammals in their natural habitat and explain both the story of the elephant seals and the other natural and cultural history of the area.

State parks staff have taken over the facilitation of the docent training program since the Ano Nuevo Interpretive Association voted in August to cancel a contract with the state and to dissolve their relationship with Ano Nuevo State Park. The association had been organizing the guided walks at the park since 1979.

The association withdrew following a two-year dispute with park rangers over who controlled

the docent program, the bookshop and souvenir concessions at the park.

"Things are going real smoothly in terms of the training," said Carol Nelson, district superintendent for state parks. "We really want to put that all behind us now." There are currently about 175 volunteers participating in the program.

As part of the changes this year due to the withdrawal of the Interpretive Association, Ticketron is no longer accepting reservations for the guided walks. Mistixs, a statewide computerized system, has replaced Ticketron. For reservations call 1-800-444-7275 (1-800-444-PARK). The reservation fee is \$2 per person. The entrance fee to the reserve is \$3 per vehicle.

Reservations for disabled

groups may be made by phoning the reserve office at (415) 879-0595.

Guided walks will continue every day through March 31 except Christmas day.

Reservations must be made at least 10 days in advance and are strongly recommended.

The first walk of each day will begin at 9 a.m. and the last in mid-afternoon. The walk takes about 2½ hours to complete and covers 3 miles over sandy, rolling dunes.

The San Mateo Transit also offers Saturday and Sunday tour packages. Advance reservations are required. For information: (415) 348-SEAL.

For more information on the elephant seals, the guided walk program, and other features of the reserve, phone (415) 879-0595.