

## The elephant seals of Ano Nuevo

By CAROLYN LEAL  
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**A**T FIRST, THEY look like big, brown sand-encrusted rocks reclining in the bright sun. But then, a dog-like head with woeful brown eyes pokes up and the rest of the body follows, undulating like a giant bowl of jello across the sand.

The lumbering elephant seal, reminiscent of some prehistoric creature, is one of the area's premier winter tourist attractions. Some 40,000 people will visit to Ano Nuevo State Reserve this winter toplunk down \$2.50 and make the three-mile trek across the sand to gape at the seals while they sleep, fight, mate and give birth.

Ano Nuevo, just past Davenport heading north on Coast Highway 1, is the only site on the mainland where the elephant seals converge during their breeding season, guide Charley Wheeler, explains.

The bulls weigh between two and three tons. And the lumbering giants move with surprising speed once they rouse themselves. "Stay 20 feet away," Charley warns. "If a seal wants to go from point A to B and you're in the way, watch out."

As he spills the words out, two bulls issue a challenge which sounds like someone trying to start a Model T, and launch into battle. They strike at each other with their teeth, called canines, until the larger bull slowly forces the less powerful one to retreat into the sea. "They're fighting for dominance in the pecking order, to see who mates with the females," explains Charley.

The bulls come in December with romance in mind and they don't eat or drink for roughly three months during the mating season. Dominant bulls, who can be identified by their large snouts and pink chest shields, will control a harem of about 100 females.

The females swim ashore to give birth to pups conceived the previous year and to breed. But the new mothers are hardly concerned with babysitting. They briefly nurse their pups and abandon them when they are about five weeks old. The pups are left to learn to swim on their own in the shallow ocean waters near shore.

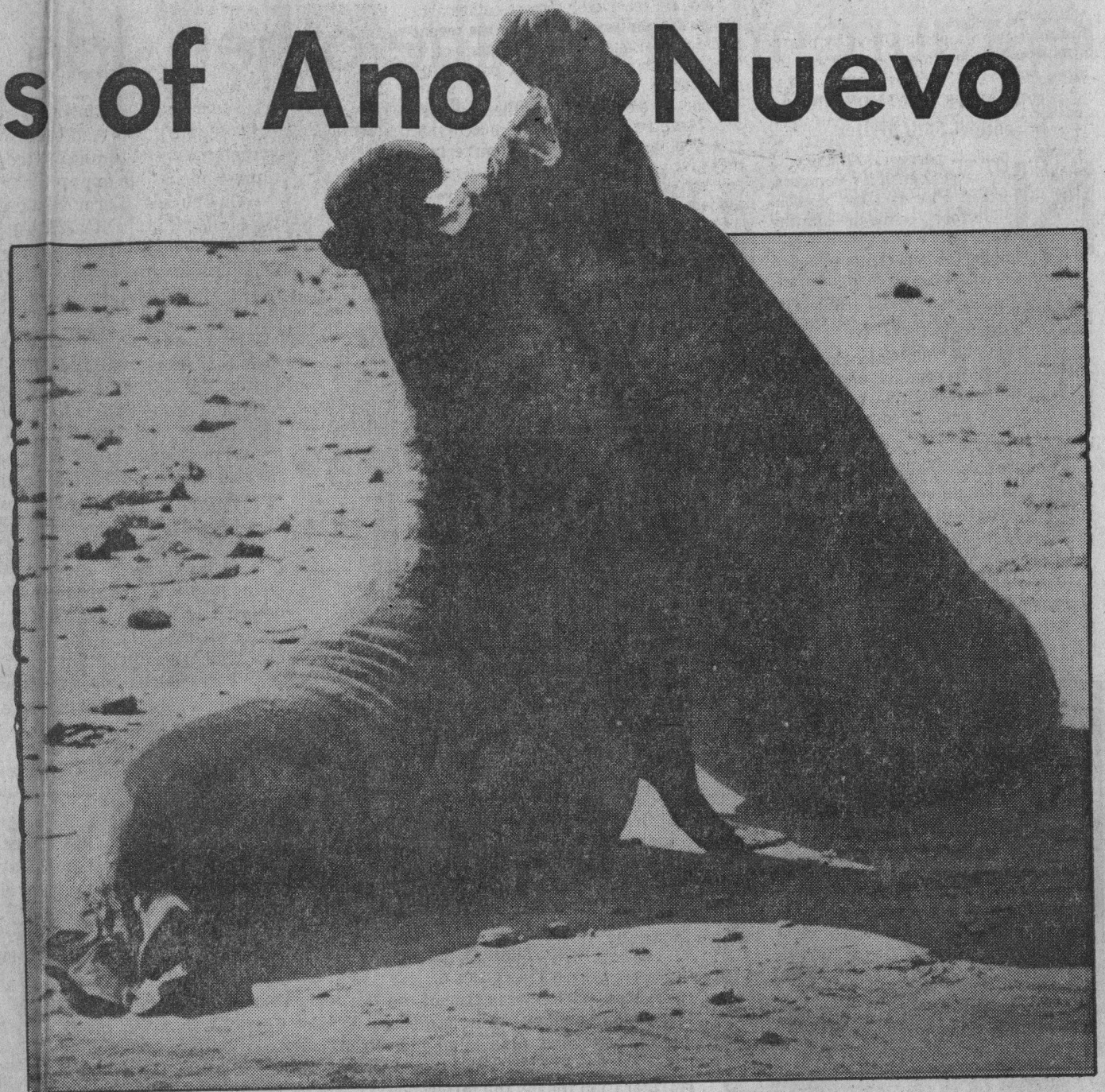
Most of the pups are born on Ano Nuevo Island, which is visible from shore, but because the island is so crowded and the mortality rate is so high (about 40 percent of the newborn don't survive) some of the mothers wisely choose to come ashore to give birth. Here, more survive. But still some of the pups are swept out to sea and others are crushed when one of the giant bulls decides to rumble through, says Charley.

It's just one of the tragedies of nature, explains Ranger Frank Balthis. "We let nature run its course. We don't intrude because then the weaker species would survive."

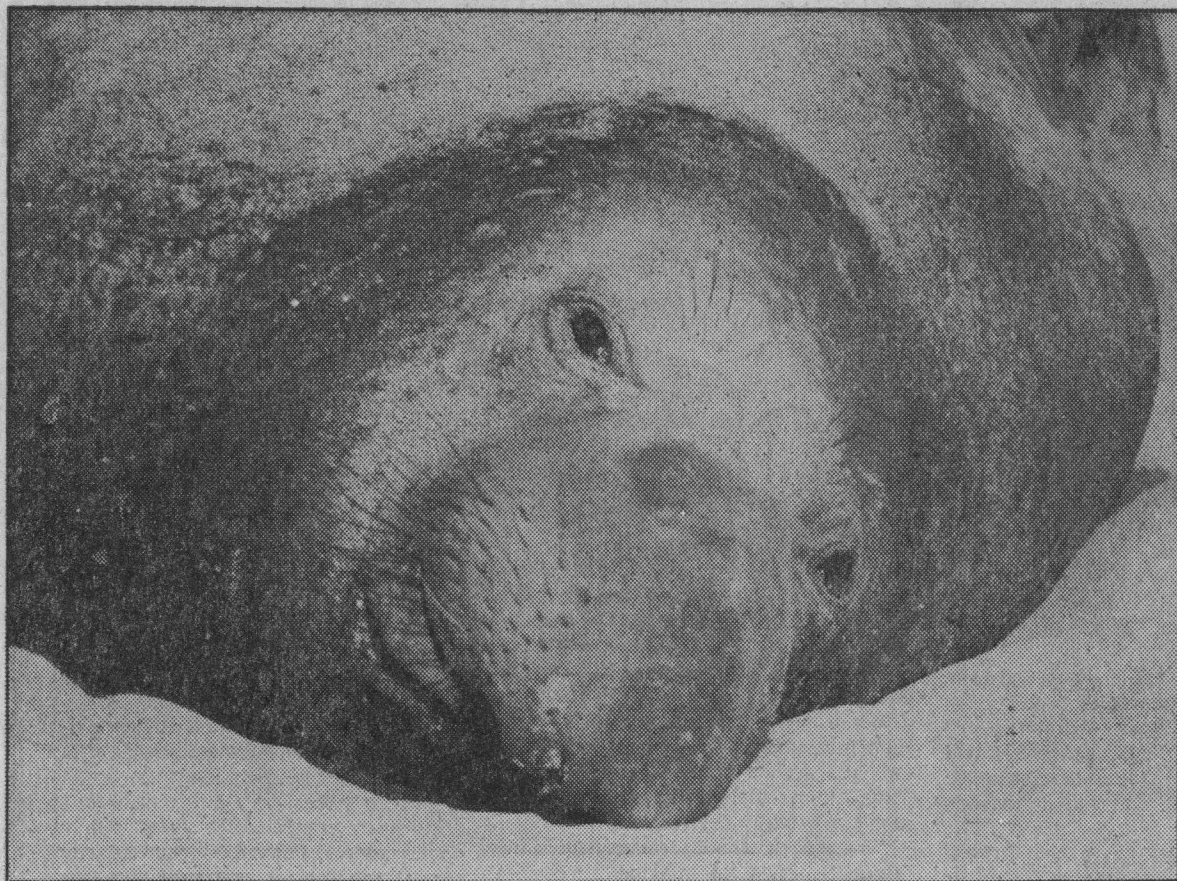
The Elephant Seals have made a comeback from near-extinction. In the 1800s, they were slaughtered wholesale for their oil and only about 50,000 survived, living on the Isle of Guadalupe off the coast of Baja California. In the 1920s, they were protected by the Mexican government and in 1930 the U. S. government followed suit.

Tickets to see the elephant seals may be purchased through Ticketron for \$2.50. Or - even easier - Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District offers bus service and guaranteed tour reservations. The Route 40 Davenport bus leaves the Santa Cruz Transit Center, Pacific and Soquel, daily at 8 a.m., 10 a.m. and noon. The service runs through March 18 on a first come, first served basis. Cost is \$1.50 for the round trip tickets and \$2.50 for the tour.

Is it worth it?  
Definitely.







Photos by Dan Coyro