

# No place like home



Photos by Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Two male elephant seals struggle to assert their dominance Friday at Año Nuevo State Reserve.

## Elephant seals begin their return to area by the thousands

By MICHAEL SEVILLE

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

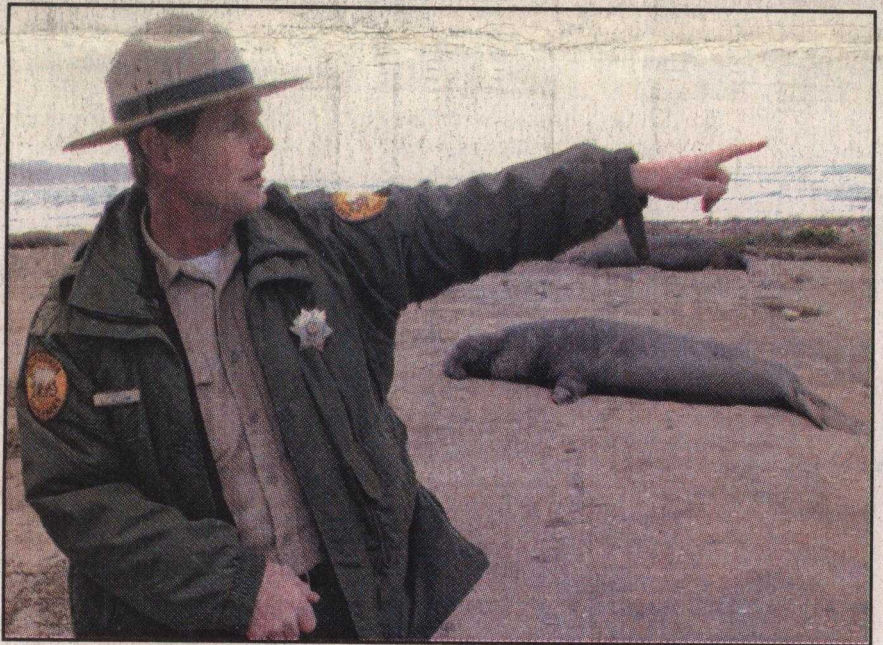
PESCADERO — About 40 minutes north of Watsonville on Highway 1, a relatively small stretch of beach has once again sprung to life with behemoth masses inching their way across the barren sands.

Every year at this time, pacific northern elephant seals come to the Central Coast to rest and mate in an annual pilgrimage that will bring nearly 5,000 bulls, females and pups to the beaches at Año Nuevo State Reserve.

"They are here through most of the winter months, but I always believe that coming early in the season is best because that's when the bulls are most active and still have all their girth," said Kevin Williams, state park ranger at Año Nuevo.

Elephant seals, which exist only in the Pacific Ocean, spend most of their lives at sea either in the Alaskan north or straight out in the Pacific Ocean, feeding on squid and other marine animals. These large animals, whose alpha males can reach weights between 4,000 and 5,000 pounds and lengths of 12 to 14 feet, only come to shore to molt, give birth and mate.

During the winter months, the males arrive first and spend weeks locked in battle fighting for prime real estate to welcome the incoming females. Perched stoically in standoffs and producing a deep, gargled grunt that resembles a Harley Davidson motorcycle revving up its engine, they engage each



ABOVE: Park Ranger Kevin Williams talks about the life of elephant seals Friday at Año Nuevo State Reserve. LEFT: These young elephant seals keep a wary eye on visitors to Año Nuevo State Reserve.



# SEALS

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other in pushing matches and biting contests to establish dominance.

Many males have already arrived and are in full engagement on the beach, awaiting the females, which begin to arrive after Christmas. As the females arrive, they form harems, which are large groups that typically stay together. The females will give birth to new pups, of which there are already several on the Año Nuevo Point, and will nurse and wean them in one month's time.

"Most of what the elephant seals do is genetically instinctual — from the pups learning to fend for themselves at such a young age to the astonishing fact that these animals return to mate and molt at the same beaches where they were born every year of their lives," Williams said.

The state reserve is also a prime birding site, as the Pacific Flyway runs directly over this stretch of coast. Birds migrating either north

or south will often stop over in the reserve to feed and rest.

"To see this type of wildlife, with such large animals, in their natural setting, you almost would have to go to Africa," Williams proudly stated, gazing down the beach as two young adults squared off for rights to a small corner of beach.

By the end of February, most adult seals have returned to the sea to feed, leaving behind hundreds of weaned pups that play in the dunes and learn to swim in the shallow water before departing for the open sea in late March.

Daily tours are offered through the reserve, led by volunteer docents who are trained as naturalists for the reserve.

Jeanette Guthart, an elderly woman from the San Jose area, has been leading tours for five years.

"You really get as much out of this experience as you put into it," she said. "It is refreshing and recharging to come out and see these magnificent animals in their natural settings."

The seals were hunted to near extinction in the late 1800s for their blubber, which was turned into oil for lanterns. It was once thought

that only 200 were left in the world until both the Mexican and U.S. government protected the animals in the 1920s. Since then, the population has recovered, with approximately 175,000 now living along the Pacific coast from Alaska to Baja Mexico.

The reserve offers guided walks from Dec. 15 through March 31. This is the only way the public can get close to the animals as authorities try to limit human interference with the animals' life cycles. The walks, which are about three to four miles, last several hours and will bring guests within close proximity of the elephant seals.

"The biggest challenge we face is to protect the animals in their native habitat, while also allowing the public to see them in the natural settings," Williams said. "It's a fine line to not intrude, but we do a good job at giving the elephant seals the room they must have to thrive."

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*For reservations, which are highly suggested since tours fill quickly, call (800) 444-4445. Guided walks take place rain or shine and cost \$4 per person.*