

# Walking among the elephant seals

By MICHAEL WARREN  
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ANO NUEVO NATURE PRESERVE  
— I had heard about the elephant seals for years, but never thought I'd get a chance to see them. The sign on California's coastal highway always seems to read "Seal Walks Full."

For three months each year, 50,000 humans and thousands of seals come face to face on the dunes at Ano Nuevo, a spit of land north of Santa Cruz. It is one of only a handful of places where the once-rare species hauls out of the sea.

As it turns out, getting a spot on one of the tours isn't so difficult after all — with a quick Internet search and a phone call, I was able to get reservations the peak of the season, just a month in advance.

The secret, of course, was settling for a weekday — my wife, older son and nephew would have to play hooky with me. But it was more than worth it.

The preserve is a pleasant and very scenic half-hour drive north of Santa Cruz along Highway 1. Since no food is allowed during the 3-mile hike through the dunes, we got sandwiches at San Benito House in Half Moon Bay, one of our favorite haunts, and ate them in the car.

Past fields of artichokes and flowers and stunning cliffside views of the Pacific, we pulled in to a parking lot full of buses on school field trips, briefly panicking that tourists would outnumber the seals.

But this preserve seems quite well managed — thanks to 230 volunteer



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A school group walks past an elephant seal during a guided ranger tour to see the seals along the beach at Ano Nuevo Nature Reserve on Wednesday.

naturalists who carefully lead a dozen people at a time over the dunes and between packs of seals, we humans hardly noticed each other as we joined their awesome pinneped party.

As we learned from our docent, elephant seals are a solitary species, roaming thousands of miles across the Pacific and returning to the same stretch of sand twice a year.

## If You Go

**SEEING THE SEALS:** From Dec. 15-March 31, guided tours leave every 15 minutes, sharp, rain or shine. Plan to arrive early — no substitutions or delays are allowed. For reservations, call (800) 444-4445 and pay \$4 a person by credit card. From April-November, free permits are available at the gate. For more information, call (650) 879-0227 or visit [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov).

**TIPS:** Hiking the dunes with small children can be strenuous, and the weather can be unpredictable, and no strollers are allowed. That's why we left our 3-year-old behind. But for older, high-energy kids, the experience proved well worth the trip.





An elephant seal pup is shown with its mother along the beach at Ano Nuevo Nature Reserve on Wednesday.

## Seals

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At sea, they're bottom feeders, diving for as long as an hour to catch the 100 pounds of fish they need each day. On the beach, the adults spend weeks without eating or drinking.

What they lack in food they make up in drama — a grunting, groaning, roiling mass of seal flesh that thrives in complete indifference to the

human observers walking as close as 25 feet away.

Bull seals weighing up to 2 tons each establish harems, then shove them aside to scare away other males in bloody, chest-biting fights. Females give birth and spend just 28 days giving milk and nurturing their pups, which quadruple in size, growing to as much as 300 pounds. Then they abandon their young and give in to the males before returning to the sea.

We could hear this spectacle

long before we could see it — the guttural call of the bulls and the higher-pitched trilling and yelping of the females carried for more than a mile over the dunes.

Once we got closer, we could see seagulls swarming for afterbirths and bleating newborns meeting their mothers nose-to-nose. Such encounters help females identify their young among all the other seals — a must, since pups that get separated quickly weaken and die.

Elephant seal meat is apparently none too appealing, and their fur feels like cheap AstroTurf. But they were hunted for their blubber in the 19th century until just 50 were left. Since protected, the population has rebounded to more than 200,000, but scientists remain concerned that with such a small gene pool, one disease could wipe them out.

The Ano Nuevo colony has grown to about 6,000 seals, according to the yearly census,

### ELEPHANT SEALS

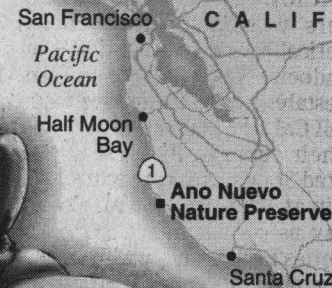
## An awesome pinniped party

For three months each year, 50,000 humans and thousands of elephant seals belonging to the pinniped family — carnivorous aquatic mammals with finlike flippers used for movement — converge on Ano Nuevo Nature Preserve.

► Females nurture pups for 28 days, which quadruple in size, growing to 300 pounds

► Colony has grown to about 6,000 after hitting a low of 50

► Only location in California where people can walk among elephant seals



SOURCES: California Department of Parks and Recreation; ESRI

M. Murray, J. Sebastian/Al

and it's the only place along the California coast where people can walk among them in naturalist-guided tours. Another colony near San Luis Obispo, which can be viewed from a blufftop ridge, has grown from several seals in 1990 to more than 7,000 today.

Demand for the tours at Ano Nuevo is so great from Dec. 15-March 31 that weekend slots sell out eight weeks in advance, hours after they become available, and many unhappy visitors get turned away.

But amazing seal encounters can be had year round. From April through November, visitors can hike out on their own after picking up a free permit at the entrance to the preserve.

From late March to May, hundreds of weaned pups remain behind, learning to

swim in the tide pools before dashing past hungry sharks to the open ocean. In May and June, females return to molt, followed by the males in July and August. September through November is when the juvenile bulls hit the beach to see who's boss.

The preserve's natural history museum also is worth lingering in — there are seal skulls, stuffed animals and birds, historical photos and detailed information about local wildlife and history. There's also a monitor showing real-time television images of seals lounging on Ano Nuevo island, a former lighthouse station just offshore that is part of the preserve. Thanks to the solar-powered SealCam, anyone with a computer can get the same seal fix online, at [www.anonuevo.org](http://www.anonuevo.org).

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