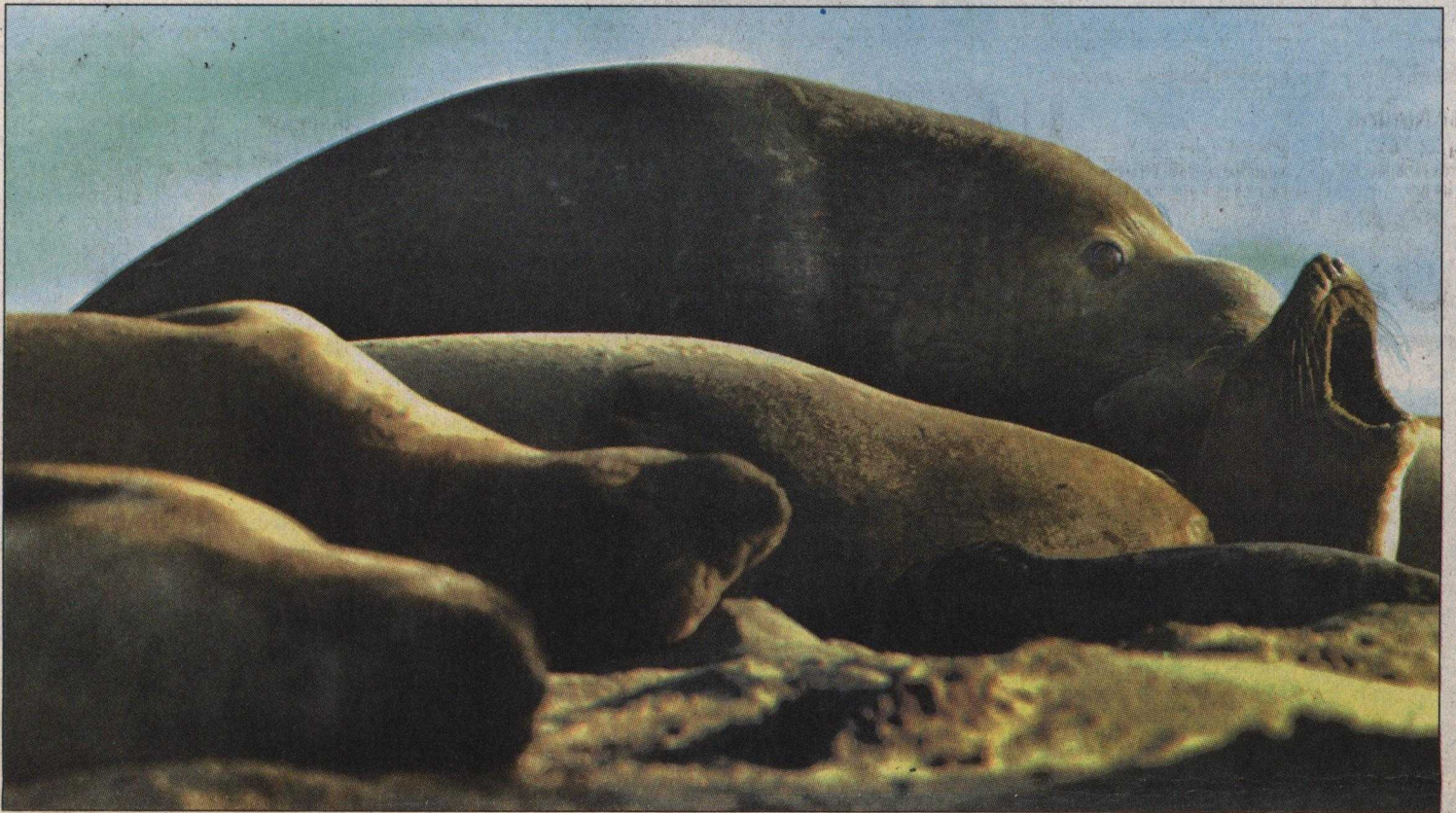


# Bit of a ... Yawner



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

A female elephant seal spurns the advances of a male Saturday at Año Nuevo State Reserve.

## Gawkers gather to watch bulls seal the deal

By **NANCY PASTERNAK**

Sentinel staff writer

### AÑO NUEVO STATE RESERVE

**F**or permission to mount a female, size matters.

The dimensions of a Northern elephant seal bull — especially his schnoz — is one of the things that determines pecking order within a harem, attendees of the “Sealabration” fund-raising event learned Saturday.

**‘Less than 10 percent of the males ever get to mate. Males live in eternal hope.’**

FAY LEVINSON,  
DOCENT

The annual gathering at Año Nuevo State Reserve showcased a couple thousand of the blubbery sea mammals and allowed small groups of visitors to witness the spectacle of bellowing, grunting and sand flipping — characteristic of the creatures’ three-and-a-half month breeding season.

“Hear that?” said docent Fay Levinson, after noting the distinctions between the males’ deep vocal thrumming and a pup’s high trill. “That’s a protest sound.”

From mid-December through March, throngs of people are drawn to the park, 20 miles north of Santa Cruz, to gawk at the seals. This year, participants were charged a \$75 park donation for extra-long tours and access to vantage points beyond the regular tourist paths.

The proceeds will benefit the construction



Fay Levinson of Santa Cruz has been leading tours as a docent at Año Nuevo for 20 years.

of a new \$1.3 million Marine Education Center at the park. Ground breaking is tentatively scheduled for September.

At about 11 a.m. Saturday, donors and docents on one of the tours witnessed the birth of a seal.

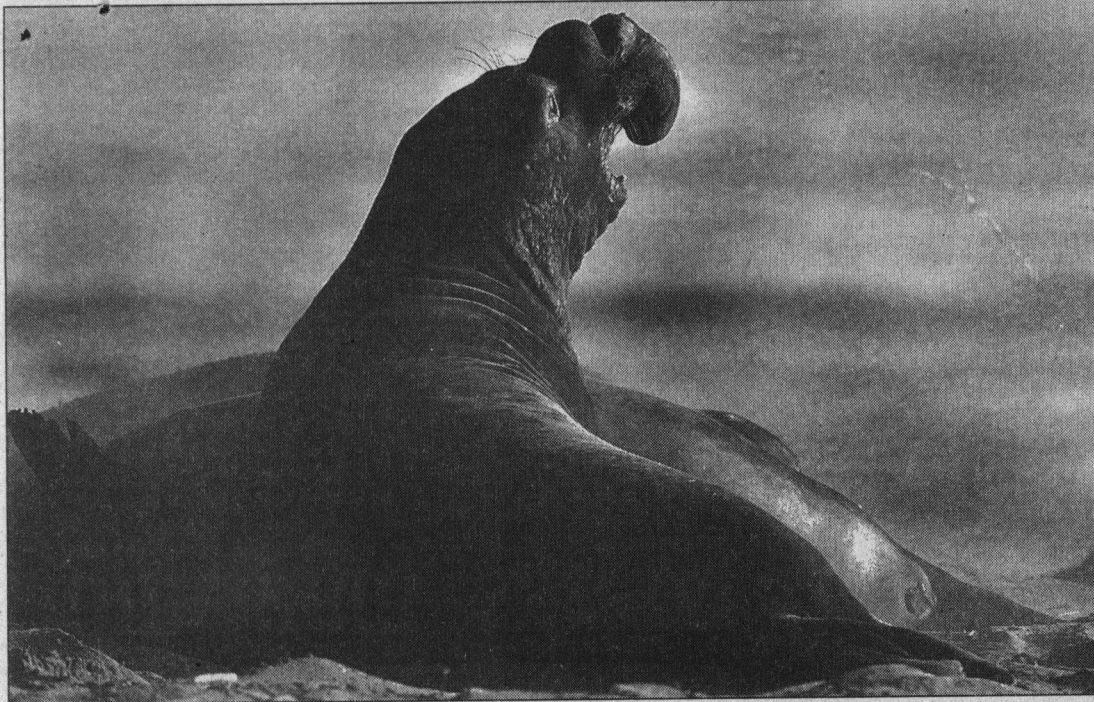
“You could see the contractions,” said docent

Sue Towle. “The view was very good.”

Levinson, a 20-year veteran of the park’s volunteer staff, rattled off some facts about the animals, their habits and tribulations.

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A male elephant seal sounds off at Año Nuevo on Saturday. Less than 10 percent of males ever have the opportunity to mate during their lifetime. Also, they can weigh up to 5,000 pounds.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

# Seals

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Females weigh 1,200 to 2,000 pounds. Males can come in as heavy as 5,000 pounds. The only three breeding grounds visible to humans on the U.S. coast are Point Reyes, Piedras Blancas and Año Nuevo, which is the largest rookery in the world.

By modern human standards, elephant seal reproduction is a tough gig.

First, there's the near-constant state of pregnancy for adult females.

"They come in pregnant, they go out pregnant. This is the joyous life of a female elephant seal," Levinson said.

Then there's the hunger.

At the end of the breeding season, the bulls head north toward Alaska to feed, and the females head west toward Hawaii and Japan for the same reason.

But during the breeding season, which runs from mid-December until the end of March, they birth and mate entirely without nourishment.

Last but not least, there are the lousy odds for male elephant seals looking to mate.

The dunes surrounding the harem are strewn with what Levinson glibly referred to as "losers."

These bachelors wallow in small tidepools or simply lay on an isolated patch of sand, many of them completely out of sight of the female seals they traveled so far to see.

"Less than 10 percent of the males ever get to mate," said Levinson. "Males live in eternal hope."

The alpha bull is the only one in the several-hundred-member colony with full access to any and all female seals in the group, Levinson explained.

During one tour Saturday, the harem's alpha bull wasn't visible

from the spot on High Willow Overlook where the tour group had stopped.

Suddenly, the head of another well-endowed bull appeared above the brown hills of seal bodies.

"He's got a good nose," Levinson commented, "but he's thin."

The intrepid seal makes his big move, but is soundly rebuffed.

"They'll try to mate anyone," Levinson said.

Though Año Nuevo's 4,000 acres of protected coastal land feature dozens of rare and threatened animal species, park staff members say the elephant seal is the greatest draw, by far.

Reservations for tours to see them are limited, and must be made in advance.

*For information or reservations call Reserve America 1-800-444-4445 or 916-638-5883.*

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