

*'You'd have to go to Africa to see wild animals on that parallel'*

GARY STRACHAN, AÑO NUEVO STATE RESERVE SUPERVISING RANGER



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Dan Coyro/  
Sentinel file

# Año Nuevo: Nature in its purest form

*Año Nuevo*  
By BRIAN SEALS

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Normally, fighting and breeding in public isn't a reason for so much adulation.

But when about 4,000 elephant seals arrive at Año Nuevo State Reserve every winter, the gawking is commonplace.

From mid-December through March, throngs of people are drawn to the park, 20 miles north of Santa Cruz, to see nature at its purest — fights for dominance, quests for mates and birthing a new generation of marine mammals.

The reserve ranks as the largest mainland breeding colony in the world for northern elephant seals, according to California State Parks.

"You'd have to go to Africa to see wild animals on that parallel," said Supervising Ranger Gary Strachan.

Elephant seals were first sighted on Año Nuevo Island in 1955. By the mid-1960s, the first males began to show up on the mainland and the first pup was born there in 1975, according to California State Parks.

Males weighing up to 2.5 tons start coming ashore in December, when epic clashes commence for them to establish dominance.

Their female dates show up later in the month and give birth to pups conceived the previous year. They also form harems on the beach to begin breeding anew. Each of those harems hosts an alpha male who protects the mother and their pups.

The mainland shore attracts the animals because it is remote and free of on-land predators, Strachan said. And in turn the seals draw people.

About 50,000 people come each year for the three-mile guided tours that run through March 31 (a number so voluminous reservations are usually needed, especially on weekends). Some 230 volunteer guides lead the tours, keeping a healthy distance from the animals to keep from distressing them.

"We leave it alone out there and just take people through to see what the seals are doing," Strachan said.

For the past 10 years, the California State Parks Foundation has hosted a fund-raiser centered around the breeding season, called "Sealabration," which for the past few years has raised money for a marine

education center at the reserve.

The plan is to refurbish three dairy barns at the reserve to house interpretive exhibits on the natural and cultural features there.

"The whole idea will be to give people interpretations not only of the natural environment but to the dairy buildings as well," said Elizabeth Goldstein of the California State Parks Foundation.

Eventually, a camera focused on Año Nuevo Island that currently transmits video of the seals to the reserve's visitors center will be able to export visuals to classrooms around the state, Goldstein said.

Tickets to that \$75 event on Jan. 22 are sold out, but there is a waiting list and tickets are often available as the date nears, Goldstein said.

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To get on the waiting list for the fund-raiser, call the California State Parks Foundation at (415) 258-9975. For reservations for guided tours at Año Nuevo Reserve, call (800) 444-4445.

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