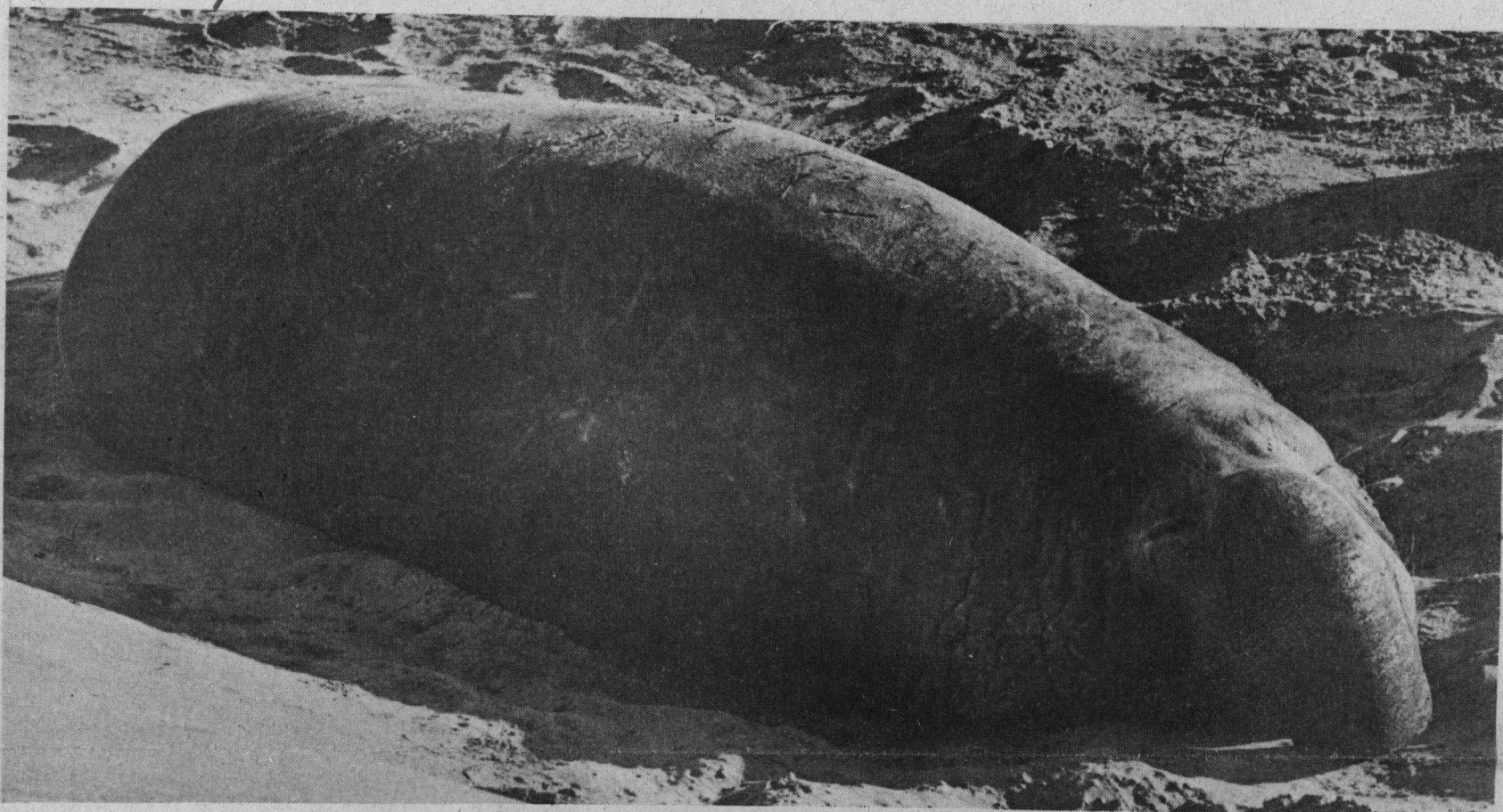


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An elephant seal doing what he does best — snoozing.

Elephant seals enjoy happy New Year's

By STEVE SHENDER

Where do you go for a three-month siesta, a diet that would put Dr. Pritikin to shame, and if you're particularly strong and hearty, a rousing good orgy?

If you're a 16-foot, 6,000-pound male northern elephant seal, you go to Punto del Año Nuevo — New Year's Point — in southern San Mateo County.

By now, some 1,700 male and female seals have gathered at New Year's Point and on adjacent New Year's Island for their annual December to March mating rites.

The males began arriving in mid-November, the first females in late December.

Humans can journey to Año Nuevo to visit them, but by appointment only. Año Nuevo is a state preserve, and during the seals' mating season, is off limits to people unless they are on guided tours, which must be booked well in advance.

A visit to Año Nuevo is a unique experience. New Year's Point is the only place in the world where elephant seals come to the mainland to breed.

Actually, most of the action is out on the island. The seals, which have been making a comeback from near-extinction in the late 19th

century, did not begin coming ashore at Año Nuevo until 1965, when the island filled up.

The bulls on the mainland are mainly losers in a Darwinian struggle for breeding space. The early-arriving males battle for territory, first on the island and then on the mainland. Having staked out the choicest spots on the mainland and the island, the victors settle in to wait for the females' arrival. When they come, the "ladies" collect around the males in "harems" which may include as many as 50 to 100 seals. The victorious bulls mate with every one of them.

The unsuccessful males — too young, too old, too small to win out in the battles for breeding room — are relegated to the status of voyeurs, if they bother to watch. Mostly, they don't, spending the balance of their days in what seems to be an elephant seal's main pastime ashore — lying inert on the sand.

For their first five weeks at Año Nuevo, the females are busy bearing and nursing their pups. The female seals give birth about six days after their arrival. During the next 27 to 29 days they nurse their offspring, which grow from 75 pounds at birth to 300 or 400 pounds by the time they are weaned. Each female

generally bears only one pup a year.

The pups are the only seals which get anything to eat during the annual sojourn at Año Nuevo. None of the bulls or females eat anything the whole time they're there.

The first elephant seal birth on the mainland came in 1975, 20 years after the animals were sighted on the island for the first time. In 1978, 86 pups were born on the mainland and 872 were born on the island.

At the beginning of the 19th century there were hundreds of thousands of elephant seals, but by 1892, after decades of wholesale slaughter, only 50 were left — on Guadalupe Island off the coast of Baja California. Protected first by Mexico and later by the U.S., the seals have been migrating steadily northward, repopulating their old range as far north as Point Reyes.

Not much is known about where the seals go after they leave Año Nuevo. UC-Santa Cruz researchers are studying the animals' movements. To keep track of them, they have given the bulls names and painted the names in their fur with Lady Clairol hair dye.

The best time to see the seals is probably in the morning. According to tour guides that is when they are most active. That's also when

visitors to Año Nuevo must be prepared to move quickly.

Elephant seals, a sign posted at the start of the tour trail warns, are "dangerous wild animals." Though park rangers have hung heavy black ropes to mark the trail, the seals pay no attention to them. They move about the dunes at will, and the trail shifts according to their movements. State law actually prohibits anyone from venturing within 20 feet of an elephant seal, though authorized researchers approach closer than that.

Afternoons tend to be uneventful at Año Nuevo. The seals lie around for hours, barely moving a muscle. A yawn is a major event. Now and then a bull will dig his flippers into the dunes and shower himself with sand to keep the sun off. Occasionally, bulls will let out a bellow to warn other seals to keep their distance. They sound like they're belching through 20 foot pipes.

Visitors to Año Nuevo can get relatively close to the bulls, but the harems can only be viewed from a distance. The females are especially nervous while bearing and nursing their young and the trails are laid out to give them a wide berth. Researchers have made no attempt to paint names on them.

The elephant seals begin leaving Año Nuevo in March. The pups are weaned abruptly when they are abandoned by their mothers, who return to the sea for a delayed-action pregnancy that does not really commence until three months after mating. It takes that long for the female seal's fertilized egg to become implanted in her uterus — a delay that guarantees next year's pup will be born on land.

By mid-March, most of the adult seals have left Año Nuevo. The pups remain behind through April, when they follow the adults to sea, after first learning to swim in the shallow coastal waters.

Tours at Año Nuevo have been all booked up for the balance of the season, but it is still possible to see the seals without reservations. Park rangers will take names on a "stand-by" basis, and visitors who have not booked tours can take the places of those who have, if they fail to show.

Tours are conducted by rangers and U.S. Santa Cruz students, are about three miles long and take approximately two and a half hours.

They are G-rated, despite some foul language, understandable, fortunately, only to elephant seals.