

Elephant Seals Return To Ano Nuevo Island

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Like the swallows' annual return to Capistrano, the elephant seals — giant sea creatures once thought to be extinct — are coming back to Point Ano Nuevo.

The Ano Nuevo State Reserve, 42 miles south of San Francisco, is the only place in the world where the elephant seal herd moves onto the mainland to give birth to their young and to mate, said chief ranger Mike Bradeen.

The males show up first, within a few days of Dec. 1, and the females join them a month later, around Jan. 1.

"Within three or four days the females give birth to their pups," said Bradeen. "The elephant seal pups weigh about 65 pounds when born, but grow up to a weight of between 300 and 400 pounds in 27 days."

After the 27th day, the females abandon their young, join the dominant male — who would tip the scales at about two tons — and head back into the Pacific Ocean.

"The young pups, called 'weaners' after their mothers leave them, will stay with the

males until late March when the entire herd will return to grazing sea," Bradeen said. (Ironically, that's about the time that the swallows, also following nature's precise calendar, arrive in San Juan Capistrano, south of Los Angeles.)

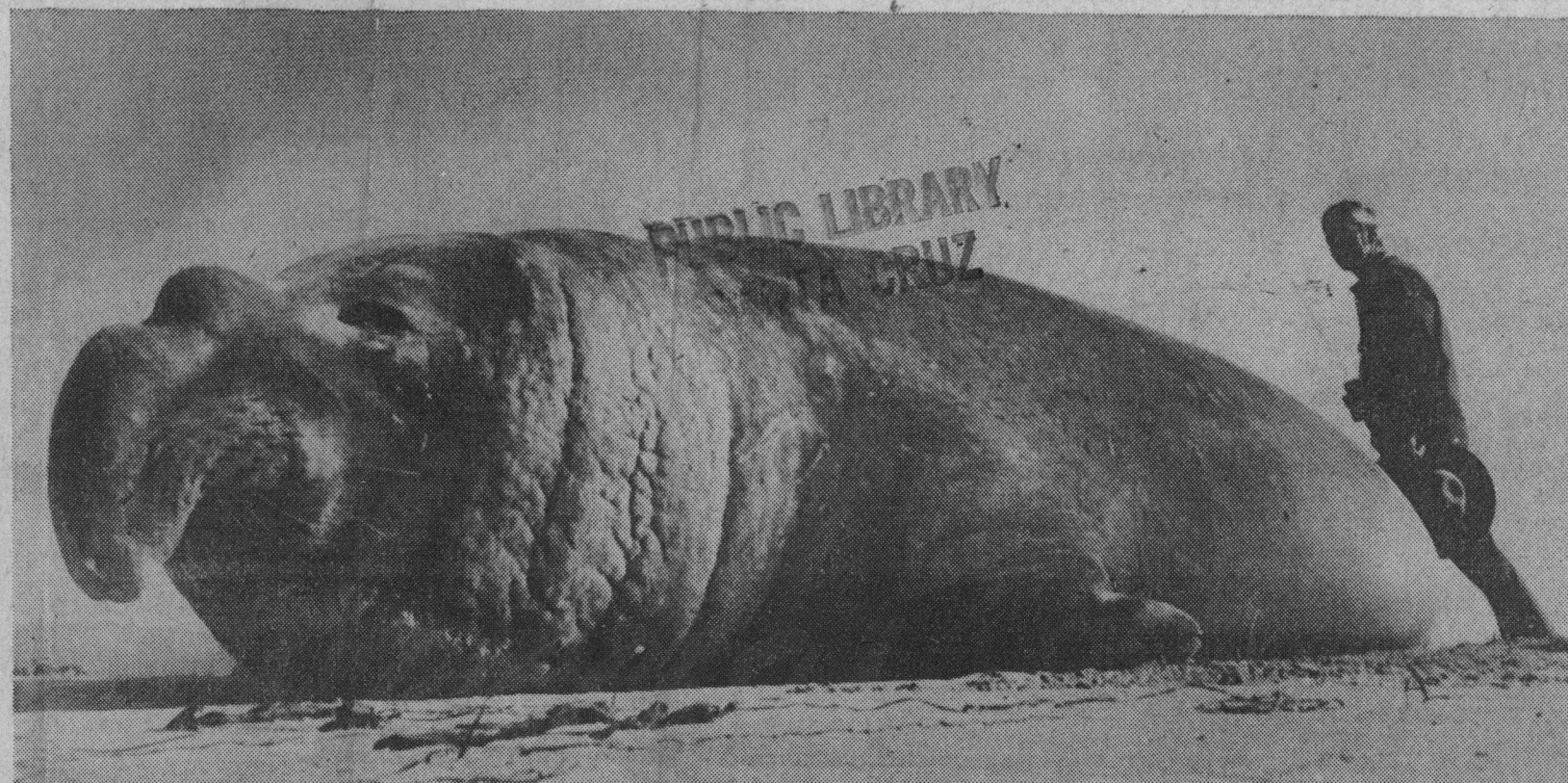
The elephant seals' land activity has generated a flood of human visitors — "200,000 last year, which was impossible to control," said Bradeen. This year all visitors will be limited to taking conducted tours, to insure they don't disturb the seals' breeding grounds.

Elephant seals, once slaughtered by South American blubber hunters, were once thought to be extinct, the ranger said. But in the late 1800s, a small herd was found on an island several hundred miles off the coast of Mexico. Then came an endangered species designation and legal protection.

"The herd is thought to be numbering near the 1,000 mark today, and growing at a fast clip every year," said Bradeen.

One of the most popular rookeries is Ano

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Staking out his territory

(AP Laserphoto)

Weather

Fair Through Thursday
Except Patchy Fog Night,
Morning; Slightly Cooler
Details Page 2

Santa Cruz Sentinel

Wednesday
Afternoon

121st Year No. 288

Wednesday, December 7, 1977

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Nuevo Island, three-fourths of a mile off the coast.

"The mainland breeding ground was established because of a population problem," said Bradeen. "The herd has grown past its

limit to reproduce on the island, pushing the animals onto the mainland."

The first elephant seals were spotted on the mainland in 1961, with the first birth recorded there in 1975.