



IN SEARCH OF ELEPHANT SEALS



Seal pups (top) are born at California's Año Nuevo State Reserve between December and March. Above, adult seals lounge on the beach of the coastal refuge.

California reserve serves as winter breeding ground

By Mary Forgione
Los Angeles Daily News

Walking across the wind-whipped dunes of this stretch of California coast less than a mile off Highway 1, you hear the strange bellow of elephant seals before you see them.

"People compare it to an outboard motor being started or a Harley-Davidson without a muffler," park ranger Leander Tamoria tells a group of visitors who have hiked a half hour to the deep-sand beach dunes of Año Nuevo State Reserve in search of seals.

At first glance, these listless 1,500-pound pin-nipeds look like giant slugs strewn along the sandy shore, hardly the type of wildlife that would draw worldwide attention to this coastal strip 22 miles north of Santa Cruz. But almost as soon as they come into sight, a second docent-led group is al-

ready tramping across the dunes — a fraction of the 40,000 who will come to gawk at these seals during the breeding season that ends in March.

What makes this 4,000-acre coastal reserve so popular at this time of year is that it is the only mainland beach in the United States where elephant seals breed. These marine mammals traditionally breed on islands.



Federal law requires visitors to stay at least 20 feet from the elephant seals.

"This is a wildlife spectacular similar to something you would have to go all the way to Africa to see," says supervising ranger Gary Strachan.

The show, about a 70-mile drive down the coast from San Francisco, doesn't disappoint.

On this mid-December day, two males, called bulls, suddenly bellow, rear up, and begin smashing their chests and oversized, bulbous noses against each other in a battle over turf. Though these violent clashes often draw blood, they are rarely fatal.

"Bulls aren't protecting the offspring, they're protecting their right to mate," explains a docent leading a group.

Meanwhile, the pregnant females huddle together to protect their unborn pups. Farther down the beach, Mr. Tamoria points to the sole baby seal



Visitors take guided walks to view the seals, which are marine mammals.

Winter is seal season at Año Nuevo

The elephant seals are a year-round attraction at Año Nuevo State Reserve, but the breeding and birthing season from December through March offers an opportunity to see them in large numbers with their young.

The reserve, a 4,000-acre strip of coastal bluffs, dunes and mountains, is about 22 miles north of Santa Cruz, and 55 miles south of San Francisco. The entrance to the park is less than a mile off Highway 1.

Through March, visitors are limited to touring the park on guided walks, and reservations are required. Tickets are \$2 per person, plus a day-use fee of \$4 per vehicle. There are no refunds for cancellations, and walks proceed as scheduled, rain or shine.

The guided walks depart every 15 minutes from 8:45 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. Weekdays are easier to book than weekends. Reservations can be made up to eight weeks in ad-

vance, or as late as 10 days before the desired date. March 20 is the last date reservations will be taken.

For last-minute openings, park volunteers schedule four "open walks" daily when they try to accommodate visitors on a first-come, first-served basis. Show up at 10 a.m. at the visitors center to sign up for a standby list. Weekdays are better than weekends.

Visitors should arrive at least 15 minutes before their hike time. The walk is three miles round-trip and takes about 90 minutes to complete. Bring layered clothing, including a windbreaker and rain gear, particularly for children, because part of the walk crosses dunes that can be windy, wet and foggy.

There are no water sources or bathrooms along the trail, and no food or beverages are sold at the reserve (food is prohibited on the guided walks).

For photography buffs, take along a telephoto lens to get close-ups of the elephant seals. Visitors are required to stay at least 20 feet from the animals, and docents allow an even wider berth with groups.

If you fail to get reservations or access to the reserve during breeding time, don't despair. Weaned elephant-seal pups remain on the dunes through April. During the summer, elephant seals visit the reserve to molt: females from April to May, young males from June to July and adult males from July to August. From April through November, visitors must obtain a hiking permit to enter the wildlife protection area at Año Nuevo Point. The permits are issued on a first-come, first-served basis from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

For recorded information about the reserve, call (415) 879-0227.

— Mary Forgione

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born this season that is snuggled against its mother. It is rare to see a birth, but pups are among the thousands of seals on the beach during this season.

Mostly, the elephant seals languish in the sand among willows and ice plant, allowing visitors to approach within 20 feet — close enough to peer into their eyes. These elephant seals spend most of the year in coastal waters off California, heading as far north as Vancouver Island in British Columbia. But during their breeding season, mid-December to March, they beach themselves, losing about a third of their body weight in the months spent ashore.

Through March, visitors are al-

lowed on the reserve in groups no larger than 20. The walks have become so popular that the 300 volunteers who lead them every 15 minutes daily starting at 8:45 a.m. can't keep up with demand. Last year, about 40,000 of the reserve's 210,000 annual visitors came during the 3½-month breeding period, Mr. Strachan says. From December through March, reservations are a must for the three-mile walks, which are conducted in rain, hail or fog.

"We don't want to disturb the animals. The preserve is set aside for wildlife and habitat," Mr. Strachan says. "If we can get the public in, that's great, but it's the animals first."

After March, no reservations are required to walk the reserve's beach paths and view the seals. By then,

the adults return to the water and the babies are left to learn how to swim and forage for food.

The popularity of baby elephant seals, which has attracted international attention, is a relatively recent phenomenon for the reserve, an area of mountains, bluffs, dunes and beaches.

In the late 19th century, the hundreds of thousands of seals along the coasts of California and northern Mexico fell prey to hunters who were after them as a source of oil. By 1920, the species was thought to be extinct until about 50 elephant seals were found on the Isle of Guadalupe off Baja, Mexico. Because both countries agreed to protect the species in the 1920s, their numbers have climbed to 120,000 today — 4,000 of which head inland at the reserve



BY TOM POLITEO

Docent Barbara Blacha leads tours of a wildlife reserve in California dunes where elephant seals congregate.

during breeding time.

In 1955, the seals were first spotted on a small rocky jut of land a half-mile away from the reserve, where an 1890 lighthouse and a research facility still stand. The first pup was born on that island six years later. The elephant seals headed to the mainland in 1965, after the island became crowded. The colony has since proliferated and shows no signs of abating.

"Every year there are more seals, and every year they stay longer," Mr. Strachan says.

But despite this safe inland enclave, docent Mary Shea says only 50 percent of the babies born this year will be back next year. Most will fall prey to whales or great white sharks.

Seeing a pup born is a rare event, she says.

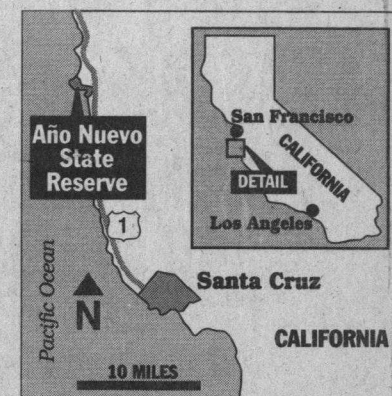
"I've been out here for seven years now, and I've never seen a birth. A few times I've seen one right after;

the sea gulls do the cleanup."

The baby seals weigh about 70 pounds at birth and bulk up to 300 pounds in just one month after being weaned off their mother's milk, which is 50 percent fat. Some "super weaners," as they are called, go from one seal mother to another seeking nourishment. "They wind up looking like basketballs," says docent Dan Shea.

After about a month of nursing, the mothers head back to the ocean, leaving the pups to learn how to eat and forage for squid. Until April, mostly babies and yearling seals remain on the beach.

The guided walks begin at the visitors center — a barn converted from a dairy bought in 1971 and added to the state reserve, which was established in 1958. A prominent sign this day reads: Males: 330; Females: 11; Yearlings: 231; Pups: 1. Docents and rangers inside the center have binoculars trained on



JOHN RASCHKA/STAFF GRAPHIC

the cove about two miles away and watch the seals come up on shore.

Visitors continue by themselves along well-defined paths through coastal brush about a half-mile from the visitors center (there's wheelchair access via a wooden walkway) toward the dunes. At that point, they are assigned to a group and set out with a docent.

Federal law requires visitors to stay at least 20 feet from the elephant seals. As viewers walk past the sluggish bodies, the seals' eyes occasionally open and a fin inadvertently scoops sand onto their stomachs. Near one large male, Mr. Tamoria says, "He saw us and went back to sleep. He knows we mean no threat to him."

For those who want to feel the seal's skin, Mr. Tamoria pulls a plastic bag from his jacket that contains a large patch of surprisingly soft fur. He explains that the seals molt once a year on land between April and August — shedding all their skin right down to their whiskers.

When the elephant seals began arriving on land, many people who saw them thought they were dead because they can go up to 10 or 15 minutes on land without taking a breath.

"In the open water, they go 20 to 30 minutes without breathing," Mr. Tamoria says. He also notes researchers "tag" the seals by identifying each with a name written with hair bleach.

Docent Barbara Blacha, a computer graphic artist, promises visitors that the beach will be "elbow to elbow, fin to fin" in the next few months.