

## **Northern Elephant Seals**

**Nature in its true and rawest state**

By Bob Garrison

California's cold, nutrient-rich ocean supports a great diversity of sea life, and top on the food chain are the marine mammals. Over 25 species of whales, dolphins, porpoises, sea lions, seals and sea otters can be found along our coast. Marine mammal populations have rebounded after 19th century commercial whalers and sealers nearly hunted them to extinction. The northern elephant seal has made a remarkable comeback from a small handful of animals on Guadalupe Island off Baja California at the turn of the century to thousands today. First recolonizing coastal islands off southern and central California, the elephant seals have now returned to a few select mainland beaches where you can see one of nature's most spectacular and brutal shows.

During the breeding season from December through April, bull elephant seals gather on coastal islands and on a few mainland beaches to spar in bloody battles to establish their dominance over one another. The most intense sparring occurs prior to the arrival of the females in mid-winter. When the females gather into harems to give birth and breed, the strongest male, or alpha bull, keeps all other males away so he alone can mate with the females. Continual testing by other males ensures that only the strongest bulls, presumably those best suited for survival, breed and pass on their attributes to a new generation.

Watching elephant seals offers a rare glimpse of nature in its true and rawest state. Death is as common as life in these large, crowded harems. While 5,000 pound bulls continually charge through the colony to fight with each other, the females are giving birth to 60 pound pups. Helpless at birth, the pups that aren't trampled to death are susceptible to severe winter storms and aggressive females. Many die before they are one month old. Those that survive spend most of their days sleeping and nursing on rich seal milk. They increase their weight from 60 to 200 pounds in only four weeks. At weaning time, the female simply swims away, leaving the pup, or "weaner" on the shore to fend for itself.

The weaners gather together in large pods for another eight to 12 weeks. While molting from a dark coat of fur to a silver one, the pups fast, living on their reserves of fat. Each day the young seals get a little bolder and more experienced until they finally swim out to sea, returning in successive years to molt, mate and give birth to new generations.

## Seal Watching Tips

- The best viewing is with binoculars from a nearby bluff overlooking the colony.
- Stay at least 50 feet away from any marine mammal at all times.
- Elephant seals will not retreat from you. Don't interpret their inactivity as an invitation to approach them. **Elephant seals are dangerous wild animals and can easily charge and crush a person.**
- Warn others who approach too closely.
- When possible, join a guided tour led by an experienced naturalist.

## Where to Watch Northern Elephant Seals

### Central California

Ano Nuevo State Reserve on the San Mateo/Santa Cruz coast is the finest elephant seal viewing site on the California coast. Over 3,000 seals breed on this sandy peninsula. Access is by guided tour only during the breeding season. Plan for cold wet weather and a long walk. Call up to eight weeks in advance to book a tour at 1-800-444-7275. Tours run \$4.00 per person with a \$4.00 parking fee.

### Southern California

A colony of elephant seals has begun to breed on a stretch of beach between San Simeon and Morro Bay on highway 1. Large crowds of viewers create dangerous traffic and parking conditions on the highway at this undeveloped site. Unfortunately, this area has unrestricted access and no ongoing interpretive or enforcement activities so the seals are often harassed by misinformed viewers and abusive passersby. Do your part by following the above tips and ask others to do the same.

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