

Cetacean Vacation

Elephant Seals of Piedras Blancas

by Shari Snitovsky

The northern elephant seal, *Mirounga angustirostris*, is the largest pinniped in the Northern Hemisphere. Males can reach a length of 13.5 feet, and weigh up to 4400 pounds. Much smaller females reach lengths up to 10 feet and weigh in at a mere 1300 pounds. The breeding season is an interesting time to observe these magnificent animals, as they must come on land to breed. Males arrive at the breeding site in late December, ready to fight other males for dominance. This dominance hierarchy is very important, as only the most dominant males on a given beach will mate with most of the females. Elephant seals have a mating system known as polygyny, where one male will mate with many females. Most females come on shore in mid-January to give birth. They nurse their pups for about 28 days, with pups nearly tripling in size. Mating begins near the end of the nursing period. Pups are then weaned, and left alone to fend for themselves.

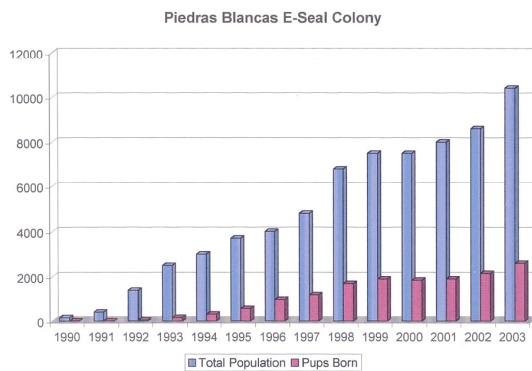
Most of the California breeding sites are near-shore islands: the Channel Islands, Farallon Islands, and Ano Nuevo Island. There are few mainland sites where elephant seals establish a breeding colony. Ano Nuevo State Reserve, once the largest mainland breeding colony in the world, hosts approximately 3100 animals per year, with about 1500 pups born there each season.

In November, 1990, in a small cove in central California, known as Piedras Blancas, two dozen elephant seals were spotted. The following spring, 400 elephant seals came to this cove to molt (molting is where these animals shed their outer layer of fur and skin once per year). Between January of 1992 when the first pup was born in this area and the 1996 breeding season, the number of pups born here grew to almost 1000 animals! During the 2003 breeding season, the number of pups born at Piedras Blancas, about 5 miles north of the famed Hearst Castle, was 2600. The graph below shows the phenomenal growth of this colony.



In December, 2003, I visited this remarkable colony. Once you get to this fairly isolated section of the coast, an ample parking lot puts you right next to the seal haul-out area. A boardwalk has been built overlooking the colony and there is much to see. Even in December, which is early in the breeding season, we observed bulls fighting, nursing moms and a few pups being born while we were there. The pup in the picture below is about an hour old. Note the umbilical cord is still attached! For a better view of this photo, visit

<http://smccd.net/accounts/snitovsky/elephseal.html>.



We ended up spending a few hours viewing these magnificent animals. There are no reservations or guided tours. Docents are available to answer your questions through Friends of the Elephant Seal, a local non-profit established to protect this elephant seal colony. Please remember that elephant seals are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Stay at least 100 feet from the animals at all times. It is illegal to harass these animals in any way. The boardwalk has been built to give you a fantastic view while maintaining this

distance. For more information on this colony, please visit <http://elephantseal.org>.

