

# Elephant Seal Season

By

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Elephant seals had a hard time in the past. People kept hunting them for their blubber and oil during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the end of that period only 50 animals were left. From that small group came all the northern elephant seals on the Pacific Coast today and we are privileged to have a colony of them a short drive north of Morro Bay.

Just south of the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse is the beach where a small contingent of seals chose to come ashore in 1990. Female elephant seals gave birth to a new generation; huge male seals did battle with each other, and mated with the females. Each successive year saw more and more seals at the site. It was inevitable that they would be discovered by the public.



Today, thanks to the development of the Friends of the Elephant Seals, no one ventures down onto the beaches where the seals are any longer. A large parking area accommodates vehicles, and a long stretch of boardwalk has been constructed just above the main rookery beach. Docents are on hand every day to greet visitors and tell them about the seals. This is probably one of the best wild animal viewing sites in the country and it is free!



Now is the time to go and see all the activity in the rookery. Adult male seals came ashore here in late November and early December. These two-ton animals, the largest of the seal populations, then entered into battles for the prime spots on the beach. Alpha males, as the winners of these contests are called, took charge of the space with Beta males staying nearby. Only the Alpha males get to breed.

Pups are being born in January and throughout that month. The beach is alive with small black wiggling pups and loud chirping sounds fill the air as the pups make known their existence and desire to nurse. Nursing continues for four weeks during which the pups gain weight from the rich fat milk eventually quadrupling in size.



Pups are the only seals being nourished during all this time since both males and females fast throughout the three-plus months they spend in the rookery.

In mid-February females wean their pups and come into estrus, ready to breed again. Alpha males pursue them and often roll over an unsuspecting pup in their eagerness to engage the females. Once bred, females leave the beach and go out to sea to feed. Males remain until the last female has gone.

Visitors coming to the rookery throughout these months are sure to see some part of the action taking place in the rookery. For the most part, the seals lay motionless to a great degree, sleeping. Aside from

nursing pups, the most activity seen are spurts of sand being shot up into the air as the seals flip it onto their backs to cool down. Every now and then, an immature male will come ashore to see if he can steal a chance at mating. Almost always an Alpha male will discover him and lift his head and bellow out his objection. While fights at this time are rarer, they do sometimes occur. More likely fights will break out between females who challenge each other to retain the spaces they hold on the beach.

While some elephant seals are always present at Piedras Blancas, this is the most interesting time to visit, so get in the car and take a short road trip and don't forget to bring your camera.