



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller Volume VII – Valentine's Day 2007

In Praise of Blubber

What better way to celebrate Valentine's Day than a voyeuristic spectacle of reproduction, combat, dominance and blubber? No, no, not the Republican National Convention - I'm talking about the annual **Northern elephant seal** (*Mirounga angustirostris*) mating extravaganza. If you dig on huge noses, raunchy sex and unchecked aggression, then head out to Point Reyes this month to catch a glimpse of one of the most bizarre congregations of wildlife in West Marin.

Linda Thomas best described the elephant seal as "a remarkable cross between a slug and a small foreign car." Female elephant seals, which can bulk up to 1,700 pounds, look downright petite next to the huge alpha males, which can tip the scales at 5,000 pounds!

The recovery of northern elephant seals is a conservation success story. The species was nearly hunted to extinction in the 1800s for their oil-rich blubber. By the time Mexico and the U.S. banned hunting in the early 1900s fewer than 1,000 seals were breeding on only one island off Mexico. The population has now rebounded to about 150,000 and they have re-colonized the California coast. The most famous breeding colony in the area is at Ano Nuevo Reserve in southern San Mateo County, one of the major elephant seal rookeries in North America. Elephant seals also breed on the Farallon Islands.

After an absence of over 150 years, these blubbery behemoths began returning to Point Reyes in the 1970s. The first local breeding pair was discovered in 1981. Point Reyes now hosts 1,500 to 2,000 elephant seals and with an impressive annual growth rate of 16 percent, the population here could reach 10,000 seals!

Elephant seals may at first glance seem ugly, smelly or lazy, but have a certain charm despite their atrocious courtship manners. Polygamy is the rule here and mating season brings out raw bloody nature at its best. The beach scene can quickly turn from lethargic and amusing to violent and disturbing. The larger bulls, with their comical floppy noses (called a "proboscis"), bellow and joust for dominance and access to harems of females.

The males arrive first in December to stake out their beachfront boudoir. Pregnant females appear next, with the first order of business birthing a single pup from last season's mating. Sub-adults and juveniles arrive last. February usually marks the height of the hormones and mating chaos, and most seals are gone by late March.

Elephant seals have expanded from the Point Reyes headlands and Drakes Beach well up Point Reyes Beach. The best vantage point for viewing the mayhem is from Elephant Seal Overlook near Chimney Rock, where the colony can number close to one hundred seals. You can watch testosterone battles and birthing of pups through spotting scopes provided by guides, hear cacophonous screams of females and pups trying not to get squished, and actually feel the resonant burps of the bull males. Oh, and be sure to admonish your kids not to base their personal relationships on any behavior they may observe on the mating play.

Weekends and holidays from Jan. 1 to Easter you must take a shuttle bus from the Drakes Beach parking lot to Chimney Rock. For more info contact the National Park Service at (415) 464-5100 or visit (www.nps.gov/pore/naturescience/elephant_seals.htm).

***West Marin Wild* is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Write to Box 111, Bolinas.**