

# The Coastal Chronicle 2

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Año Nuevo State Park, California

# Life among brutes



**A 5,000-pound / 2,300-kilogram bull elephant seal, distinguished by his trunk-like snout, approaches a female seal to mate at Año Nuevo State Park in San Mateo County. She tries to scramble away, not yet ready because she's been nursing a new pup, still in his black birth coat, who is worried about being crushed.**

# Life among brutes

**F**or most elephant seals, life is far from easy. Theirs is a good-to-be-king kind of world; *force majeure* is the supreme law of the kingdom.

Elephant seals have all the usual pinniped handicaps of no hands, arms, legs or feet, which makes life on land a pain. But that's coupled with a rigid social structure enforced by and for the biggest, fattest bulls who are – by far – the minority demographic in a breeding colony. On my day at Año Nuevo State Park in February, there were only 191 sexually mature bulls among the 2,300-plus creatures, but only 1% of those bulls can expect to mate in a lifetime that will end by their early teens. It is their plight to impregnate all the 1,300 cows on that beach.

Anger and resentment seemed to permeate the bellowing challenges that echoed across the dunes.

The first two pictures on these pages is the story of the interaction among a bull, cow and pup at Año Nuevo. The words on this page are context for the lives of each. The first pup known to have been born at Año Nuevo was in 1961. Since then, the colony has grown to produce about 2,000 pups each winter and the number of elephant seals in the North Pacific has increased from near extinction a century ago to about 150,000, believed to be full recovery. Mexico was the first country to legally protect the seals.

The seals here are northern elephant seals, whose breeding colonies lie only on isolated beaches from Vancouver Island, Canada, to Mexico. They are related and very similar to the quarter-million southern elephant seals who inhabit Antarctic waters and breed on islands in the South Atlantic and Indian oceans.

Elephant seal bulls are about the size of a fur-coated Subaru Outback but 40% heavier. Eighty percent of their lives will be spent swimming in the North Pacific for months at a time, and the vast majority of that time will be beneath the surface looking for food like skates, octopuses, eels, sharks and other large fish.

They haul up on land twice a year: once in early December to fight with other bulls for mating rights and again in July or August to molt their skin and fur for new duds.

The cows, about a third the size of alpha bulls, arrive at Point Año Nuevo a bit later in December, pregnant and ready to give birth to a 75-pound / 34-kilogram single pup. They deliver within a week of flopping up on the beach, nurse the pup over four weeks to between 250 and 350 pounds / 110-160 kilograms while fasting themselves, and then mate for another 11-month pregnancy. Their fishing tactics are the most extreme of the species, diving for up to 1½ hours on a single breath and as deep as a mile / 1.6 kilometers to find prey.

The weanlings are the last to leave Año Nuevo. After 10 weeks, they molt their black birth coats, which are adapted only to life on land, for insulation better adapted to the ocean and then teach themselves to swim and fish.



**This photo was taken before the cover shot. My hiking group had been watching this pup search for a female seal to nurse. The park ranger leading our group said it's possible the female is not the pup's mother. All visitors to the elephant seal colony at Año Nuevo State Park must be accompanied by rangers because of the danger of wandering among the huge – often angry – animals alone.**



**A group of mostly female elephant seals sunbathe on the beach at Point Año Nuevo during their winter break on land. The buildings on Año Nuevo Island are part of a former lighthouse complex that has since been automated and abandoned.**



**A California State Parks ranger broadcasts a live science lesson about elephant seals to school classes through a mobile phone.**



**This young seal is probably a weanling, judging from the gray coat that indicates it has molted at least once since birth. The elephant snout that bulls develop isn't present in a seal this young, so this seal's sex is unknown.**