



*Seals mating*

# Elephant Seals of San Simeon

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*Sunset, Highway 1*

Just off Highway 1, approximately ten minutes north of San Simeon, California, is one of the largest colonies of Elephant Seals in America. During the month of February, the females spend most of their time on the sand giving birth to the new pups. The best time of year to see this event is mid month as the population is at its peak. The beach is full of Elephant Seals during this season. The pups weigh 60 to 80 pounds at birth and are 3 to 4 feet long. At this point the new pups are black because they haven't grown their fur yet. The adult females range from 900 to 1800 pounds and 9 to 12 feet in length. The males are considerably larger tipping the scales anywhere from 3000 to 5000 pounds and range from 14 to 16 feet in length.

Survival rate of the pups in the first year is 37% and by the fourth year the rate has decreased to 16%. If they survive the first 4 to 6 years, their life expectancy is approximately 20 years. Weaning of the pups takes about a month. The pups have increased to an astounding 250 to 300 pounds in this first month and have already quadrupled in weight. Female Elephant Seals have grown to full maturity within 6 years while the males continue to grow for a little longer and do not mature quite as quickly as the females.

By March, most of the adults are gone and the

weaned pups are left to teach themselves how to swim. At this time, the weaned pups often gather into pods for protection while on land. They also tend to move further up the beach and try to avoid the adult males that have not left yet. As pups, they will spend most of their time sleeping as their bodies begin to change and adapt to sea life. When not sleeping, the males will often spar and practice their fighting skills in order to get ready for adult life and male mating rituals. They square up with each other and bump chests. Elephant Seal pups have also been known to play with objects on the beach such as driftwood or kelp.

By two months old, the pups have become proficient swimmers. Half of the weaned pups that leave the area will not survive long enough to return. Their survival generally depends on whether or not they can find food, and be able to avoid predators. Their ability to deep dive plays a significant role in both of these. With the ability to dive as deep as 5000 feet, the only other mammal that can out dive the Elephant Seal is the Sperm Whale. These seals can lower their metabolic rate and divert oxygen to internal organs and the brain. Not only can they store oxygen in their lungs, they can also store it in their blood and muscles, allowing them to dive for more than an

hour at a time. Their exterior blubber helps them to maintain a 100-degree internal temperature while on these dives. This often makes it difficult to keep their internal temperature cool while on land. Adults will spend as much as 90% of their time underwater. These dives continue during the night as well as the day.

In the summer, Elephant Seals will return to the beaches of San Simeon to molt. The males have often returned from as far away as Alaska, while the females generally wander as far away as the southern end of Canada before their return. While in the water, the females dine on various types of squid. The males are believed to have a much larger variety of diet including rays, skates, ratfish, small sharks, and hagfish. Males are believed to be deeper divers than females. Adult male Elephant Seals can have canines as large as 6 inches long. Female's canines can reach 3 inches or more in length.

The Elephant Seals do not have too many natural predators. One of their predators is the Great White Shark, which reaches lengths as huge as 20 feet. However, they do not dive as deep as the male Elephant Seal thus they have to catch the seal while diving or resurfacing. The Orca or Killer Whale is another danger for the seals. Orcas can get as large as 30 feet in length making them big enough to prey on the seals. Another predator of the Elephant Seal is the Cookie Cutter Shark. Living in the deeper waters, these sharks only reach about twenty inches in length. They move in quickly and take a small chunk of skin or blubber about the size of a golf ball or tennis ball. These bites do not seriously injure the seal. While the seals are lying on the beach, you can sometimes see the small chunks taken out of them.

In June, when the Elephant Seals return, they have already begun to molt. As they repopulate the beach you can see them in all stages of molting. Some will still have their full coats while others may be entirely black revealing their skin. During this season, the seals tend to molt together with very little conflict between each other.

In July and August things get pretty exciting in San Simeon. The adult males begin to practice their fighting skills again by sparring with one another. Bumping chests together, growling, and biting at each other, these young males are again training for future mating rituals. This naturally makes it a great time to take out your camera and catch these gladiators in action. The beach with the Elephant Seals has a wooden pathway with side rails and while some of the seals snuggle up right next to the pathway, others keep their distance from human reach. When photographing the Elephant Seals, it's a good idea to bring a zoom lens such as a 300mm with some kind of image stabilization to capture the battling males in action.



*Relaxing*

Another reason to have a far-reaching lens is that the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse is just north of the Elephant Seal Sanctuary. This historical landmark has been in operation since 1875. The Coast Guard is now responsible for operation of the lighthouse. The US Geological Services Biological Resource Department also utilizes the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse area to monitor and survey the activities of seals, otters, and other marine life in the area.

Photos for this article were taken with a Nikon D-80 and a 300mm VR lens. If shooting in mid-day, use a circular polarizer, as the sunlight tends to wash out the lighter colors of the seals. Sometimes the fog will help defuse the light decreasing harsh lighting conditions. You may want to bring along a UV filter as well. Above all else, it's just an amazing experience. ■



*Males sparring*



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