



# ELEPHANT SEALS

*The Sun Bathing Experts*  
**at Piedras Blancas**

BY CLAUDIA ARMANN





OPENING SPREAD: IGOR KARON. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE UPPER LEFT: OKSANA PERKINS, CHUCK PLACE (2) SARAH MUELLER, KIM RIDDLE. THIS PAGE: PSHAW.

**M**ANY VISITS TO THE elephant seal rookery north of San Simeon begin the same way. “Those are rocks aren’t they? Or are they?” The first glimpse of thousands of immense boulder-like seals slumbering alongside Highway 1 is too wondrous a sight to be believed. But the natural spectacle is both full of wild drama and remarkably easy to reach.

In winter, observers at the boardwalk overlook may witness the birth of a dark furry pup or a ferocious battle between 4,000-pound males determined to win mating rights with the female seals. Males are distinguished by deeply scarred chests—indicative of past tussles—and enlarged elephant-like snouts

that gave the species its name.

“It’s so amazing to be so close to nature’s big show and see the seals birthing and breeding right before your eyes,” says Joan Crowder, a docent with Friends of the Elephant Seal. “I once saw four births in one day.”

Crowder, who has been a docent for six years, enjoys sharing her knowledge of the seals with the public, especially with visiting school children who don’t

conceal their instant fascination.

The seals have chosen an incomparable stretch of coastline between San Simeon and Piedras Blancas Lighthouse for their “haulout” (or coming on shore). The remote beach is a ribbon of cream-colored sand protected by a low bluff. Offshore, kelp beds darken the turquoise water as waves crash against gray outcroppings of rock. In winter, the sloping terrain on the far side of

Where else can one experience a National Geographic moment within a few yards of the parking lot?

Top, two males fight for the right of the harem. Males enter puberty around four years of age but they don’t reach their full physical growth until they are around age nine. Left: Elephant seals also provide visitors endless possibilities for humorous photographs.



# Visiting

## Piedras Blancas Rookery & Nearby Wildlife Spots

### **Piedras Blancas Elephant**

**Seals:** From Morro Bay or San Simeon, take Highway 1 north and proceed 4.4 miles past Hearst Castle to the rookery parking lot. From the north, Piedras Blancas Beach is south of the Big Sur area, just past the Monterey/San Luis Obispo County line.

*Visitors are warned to not go near the elephant seals.*

For more information, call (805) 924-1628 or visit [www.elephantseal.org](http://www.elephantseal.org).

**Bird Watching:** San Luis Obispo County consistently scores in the top ten national sites for Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count, when more than 400 species of birds have been sighted, including rare peregrine falcons (on Morro Rock), great blue herons (Morro Bay heron rookery), brown pelicans (coastal areas), California condors (Los Padres National Forest) and sandhill cranes (Carrizo Plain).

**Sea Otters:** The scenic overlooks at Dinosaur Caves Park in Pismo Beach are ideal for watching otters as they frolic through the kelp and float serenely on their backs. The park is located at Cliff Drive and Shell Beach Road.

Highway 1 turns a resplendent green against the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Northern elephant seals haven't always called the San Luis Obispo County coastline home. These intriguing marine mammals have only con-

gregated near San Simeon since 1990. It is believed that the herd expanded its home turf after outgrowing their favorite beaches on the Channel Islands and at Año Nuevo Reserve, south of San Francisco. What is most remarkable about this recent colonization of the central coast is that these animals were once on the cusp of extinction.

Like many of California's marine mammals, elephant seals were hunted for their blubber during the 19th century, and only a hundred or so persisted on a remote island in Baja California. When hunting ceased, the species rebounded and re-colonized its former territory in California. Now, approximately 9,000 seals can be found at Piedras Blancas Beach during peak season.

"In January, there are so many seals on the beach, you can't even see the sand," Crowder says. "In 2007, 4,000 pups were born at the beach."

Visitors can spot elephant seals throughout the year, but the largest congregations are found from January through May. Females arrive in December and January to give birth and then breed with the dominant bull that controls the beach. After only a month with their pups, the mothers return to the open sea, where seals spend 80 percent of their lives. In March and April, the beach is a virtual playground, where the unsupervised pups are left to fend for themselves.

"It's such a fun time," Crowder says. "The pups must learn to swim on their own, and they spend a lot of time playing and swimming."

In late spring and summer, a new wave of elephant seals comes ashore to molt, or shed their fur and outer skin. Fall is a time of rejuvenation as females, juveniles and young males rest on the beaches. All that relaxation may sound appealing until you discover

that the seals eat nothing during their long visits to the beach, and males travel up to 3,000 miles to Alaska to forage for squid, small sharks and rays.

Visitors can learn these and other amazing facts by chatting with knowledgeable docents. Clad in blue jackets, docents are eager to tell onlookers that elephant seals can hold their breath for more than 80 minutes, dive to depths in excess of 5,000 feet and engage in the farthest migration of any mammal.

But whether or not you take the time to learn the natural history of these fascinating animals, you won't soon forget your experiences at the rookery. Crowder recalls one young observer who inquired if the rookery was a zoo or "really real." Another visitor who watched a pair of seals mate just 30 feet away commented that he couldn't believe he was witnessing the act in person.

Similar adventures await those who travel along one of California's most scenic roads to the windswept beach. The accessibility of the Piedras Blancas rookery, just yards from Highway 1 and with a pleasant boardwalk for easy viewing, makes it a favorite destination for visitors to the central coast. Where else can one experience a National Geographic moment within a few yards of the parking lot? \*

*Claudia Armann has worked as research editor for business and travel magazines in California. As a freelance writer, her work has appeared in central coast publications, among them Santa Barbara Seasons. She also spent two winters volunteering at the harbor seal rookery in Carpinteria, California.*