

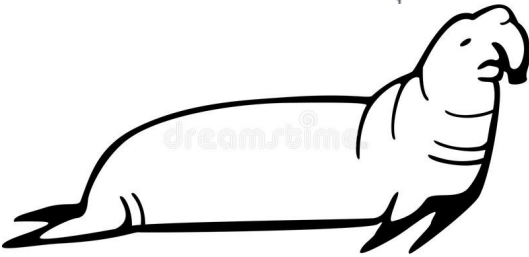


# Central Puget Sound Marine Mammal Stranding Network

## Elephant Seal Facts and General History

**Hello All:** This is the first in a series of newsletters about our Whidbey Island born elephant seal family of four. Issue #1 is a general history of Northern Elephant Seals (NES).

The details are taken from several guide books for Northern Elephant Seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*), and Google.



By the end of the 1880's elephant seals were thought to be extinct due to harvesting by whalers and sealers for their blubber. The oil obtained from NES was of a quality second only to that from sperm whales.

A small group of between 20-100 individuals on Guadalupe Island off Baja California survived. From that small colony come **ALL** of the elephant seals living today. Because of such a small genetic pool, they lack genetic diversity.

Elephant seals are polygamous, living in large colonies of females and pups governed by a large mature bull known as the harem master. Defending the harem from younger and stronger bulls is ongoing with the defeated harem master going out to sea to a solitary life. Most males do not mate.



Elephant seals spend most of their time at sea, coming ashore to give birth, breed and molt. They can dive for up to 20 minutes to 1500' to forage for food, but also dive to more than 3000' for up to 60 minutes. They have 50% more red blood cells than humans and 2x the blood volume with a tremendous store of oxygen.

Prey: females feed mostly on squid. Males feed mostly on bottom dwelling fish like rat fish and dogfish, as well as invertebrates like squid and octopus. They are not known to eat salmon!





Females: average about 10' long, weighing 900-1700 lbs with a life span of 20 years. Most females can give birth for the first time at the age of 4.

Males: can grow from 14-16 ' long weighing 3000-5000 lbs with a life expectancy of 14 years. Male elephant seals develop their big floppy nose around puberty, 7-8 years old.

Pups: At California elephant seal rookeries, females give birth in January. Pups weigh between 60-80 lbs and are about 3' long.

Mom will nurse for about 24-28 days producing milk that is 50% fat with the consistency of mayonnaise. Mom will fast during this time and will lose about 30-40% of her body weight. By the time the pup is weaned, mom is in estrus and will leave ready for mating.

At weaning, pups have quadrupled their weight to 250-300 lbs, males tending to weigh slightly more than females. About 2 weeks after weaning (mom is gone now) the pup begins to enter the water learning how to dive. By 3.5 months they have shed their black baby coat for a new silvery coat, morphed into the elongated seal shape and are ready to make their first trip to sea. Fewer than half the pups survive their first year.

Molt: Called a catastrophic molt, the seal comes ashore annually to shed its fur and epidermis. During this period in late April-May (females), it doesn't eat, becomes very lethargic due to hormonal changes, with runny nose and weepy eyes. We may see several molting seals on our beaches during molting time. They look miserable and scabby, but this is a natural process and they will be fine if left alone. Adult males molt later in July and August.



**Subsequent issues** of this newsletter will cover the behavior of each of our local elephant seals, suspected to act differently from the large colony animals. Our goal is to accumulate as much data and photos on behavior patterns as we can to understand our Whidbey Island animals. DNA is also being collected for analysis.

I know that there are many folks out there who have hands on experience with elephant seals (lucky you!!) and would have corrections/additions/comments to make on this information.

We welcome your input.

Thanks and enjoy... and please share your knowledge.

Orca Network: 1-800-ORCANET (1-800-672-2638)

NOAA Enforcement Hotline—1-800-853-1964

Sandy Dubpernell, Investigator/Archivist for CPSMMSN  
[dubpernell@yahoo.com](mailto:dubpernell@yahoo.com) - 360-678-3765

Garry Heinrich, Investigator, Volunteer Coordinator for CPSMMSN  
[ghretired10@gmail.com](mailto:ghretired10@gmail.com) - 1-949-233-2822

Jill Hein, Investigator, Editor, Photographer for CPSMMSN  
[jillhein@comcast.net](mailto:jillhein@comcast.net)—1-425-444-1263

