

Information about Weaners

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Elephant seal pups are about 60-90 pounds at birth, but by the time they are weaned they are 250-330 pounds. Superweaners can be 500 pounds or more. At this time they tend to group together in weaner pods and move away from the males on the beach for safety. Before they go out to sea to feed for the first time, they lose 30-50% of the weight they had at the time of weaning.

Weaners stay on the beach for 8-12 weeks after their moms leave. They spend much of this time sleeping, but they do also play with objects such as driftwood or kelp. Males will also engage in mock fights, and females will appear to “argue” over space. About 2 weeks after weaning, they begin to enter the water, quickly becoming better swimmers within a week or so. They practice swimming in shallow water or tide pools. By about 8-10 weeks after weaning, they are ready for their first trip to sea, which is usually 4 or 5 months long.

During the 8-10 weeks they are on the beach after being weaned, their bodies change so they can live at sea. In addition to losing weight, they begin to metabolize blubber. Their hemoglobin, blood volume and myoglobin levels increase. Their stored oxygen capacity increases 46%, while their metabolic rate decreases 50%. Both of these changes are necessary for the ability to make deep dives. Their bodies are also redistributing mass by changing fat, which made them buoyant, into muscle.

When weaners leave for their first trip to sea, they tend to head north. Some travel as far as Alaska. By the end of this first trip, they are diving to depths of 600-1800 feet during dives lasting 10-20 minutes. This first trip at sea lasts 4-5 months, after which they return to the rookery for a month in the fall. Then they head out to sea for another 5 months. They become accomplished divers by the age of 2, when their dive patterns become similar to that of an adult. Only about half of the weaned pups that leave the rookery live to return. Fewer than 20% live beyond age 3.

Sources:

Mirounga, by Sheri Howe, 1986 and 1997 update

Elephant Seals by Carole and Phil Adams, 1999

Elephant Seals, edited by Burney Le Boeuf and Richard Laws, 1994