

Recently asked questions (2007)

Do female elephant seals give birth their whole lives?

Yes. Most give birth at 4 years of age for the first time, although the range is from 3-6 years of age for the first birth. Females usually give birth annually.

Source: Elephant Seals, ed. by Le Boeuf and Laws

What are the boats fishing for this season?

Crab

Do gray whales sleep?

They don't sleep like humans, but they do take periods of rest. It has been estimated they take 1/2 hour rests, 6 or 7 times a day. During that time, they float near the surface so they can rise and breathe. They are voluntary breathers, which means part of their brain must always be awake so they will breathe (vs. humans, who are involuntary breathers). This floating near the surface is called "logging" because the whales look like a log bobbing at the water's surface. Sometimes gray whales lie in kelp beds just a few feet below the surface, rising to take quiet breathes every few minutes. Sometimes they swim in a "resting" pattern, slowly moving back and forth, for example across a bay.

Sources: Wandering Giants by Gray Whales Wandering Giants by Robert H. Busch
Gray Whales by Jim Darling

What were the historic haul-out sites of elephant seals?

Exact elephant seal distribution prior to 1840 is unknown. They were in southern California waters over 15,000 years ago, when humans colonized that region. A large number of aboriginals also lived on most of California's islands through the early 1800's, and seals seemed to be important to their existence, although the exact extent to which they were hunted is difficult to know. One source says there were probably seals on mainland beaches as well as the islands; another source says it's debatable whether they were on the mainland beaches.

Jules Evens' book, The Natural History of the Point Reyes Peninsula, says notebooks of early explorers and later ones of sealing and whaling vessels indicated elephant seals "crowded the beaches and coves" of Drake's Bay.

Seals were thought to be extinct by the end of the 1880's. Actually a small colony survived on Guadalupe Island off Baja California. As their numbers increased, they began populating other islands, then mainland beaches, from Baja north throughout California and now into Oregon.

Sources: Mirounga by Sheri Howe

Elephant Seals, ed. by Le Boeuf and Laws

Elephant Seals by Carole and Phil Adams

The Natural History of the Point Reyes Peninsula by Jules G. Evens

What were the historic numbers of elephant seals?

Elephant seal abundance prior to 1840's is unknown. Commercial hunting of northern seals began about 1818 and continued until about 1865, when they were nearly

extinct. They were hunted as whale numbers declined; they were hunted for their blubber which was used for oil for lamps, lubricating machinery and making paint, soap and candles. 200 gallons of oil could be had from one adult male seal.

Sources: Mirounga by Sheri Howe

Elephant Seals, ed. by Le Boeuf and Laws

Elephant Seals by Carole and Phil Adams