



The Natural Laboratory Podcast Transcript: Elephants, Seals, and Lions, Oh My!

Introduction

[intro music]

Amy West: Along the coast from San Francisco to the tip of Point Reyes, you may encounter one of six species of marine mammals that hang out on land. Humans invariably have a tough time telling these seals and sea lions apart.

Interview with Paul Krantz

Paul Krantz: On occasion I do hear people say, “Look at the seals.” And here we have sea lions. Noticeable differences between seals and sea lions are sea lions have ears that come out of their head, and they also walk on their flippers, whereas seals, kind of, like, move like a slug on land.

AW: This fin-footed group of mammals, called pinnipeds, are divided into those with ears and those without. The very large Stellar sea lions also have earflaps, but roar as

opposed to the constant barking of California sea lions. Their bear-like head doesn’t have the obvious crest like the dog-faced California sea lion. The shorter-snouted northern fur seal has noticeably thick fur and longer earflaps and rear flippers. Finally, the Guadalupe fur seal also has thick fur, but is rarely seen in this area. None of these eared seals breed in Point Reyes National Seashore, but you might spot them hauled out on some offshore rocks or the Farallon Islands.

Interviews with Sarah Codde and Sarah Allen

Sarah Codde: I am responsible for the pinniped monitoring program. We monitor harbor seals and elephant seals.

AW: Those are the seals without ears. The shy, torpedo-shaped harbor seal is also the smallest of the pinnipeds, and the only ones to show no difference in size between the males and females.

SC: They’re really low-key animals. They don’t move around too much. They’re not very noisy. Um, but they are very timid around people, um, and other sources of disturbances. Um, sometimes birds can frighten them.

Sarah Allen: Harbor seals are the only species of the six that mates in the

water. And they haul out at these locations that are like their cities. This is where they congregate on shore to rest and nurse their pups. And these places are usually in remote areas that are inaccessible to predators or people.

AW: This aloof behavior is unlike their cousins the elephant seals, who are easily distinguished by the male’s large nose and hard-to-mimic sounds.

SA: Elephant seals trumpet. It’s a very distinctive sound. It’s very different from any other pinniped. [sound of bull elephant seal trumpeting] And this trumpet, uh, has been described as a... a single engine, uh, diesel popping noise.

**Interview with
Sarah Codde
and Sarah Allen
(continued)**

SA: So, it's easy for you, if you are walking down the beach, to confuse a harbor seal with a young elephant seal. A quick way to identify is the large eyes that an elephant seal has and, kind of, a larger head.

SC: They are basically just the one color, especially at the younger age. A yearling is going to be, kind of, a tan color, and it won't have spots.

SC: Harbor seals, um, have more of, like, a spotted, mottled look. Um, and they can be various colors. They can be brown, black, whites, different shades of tan, and kind of a rusty red color.

AW: Point Reyes National Seashore is one of the few places you can encounter this many species of seals and sea lions.

AW: So, if seeing one with earflaps, like the Stellar and California sea lion or northern and Guadalupe fur seal, listen for barking and look for a knot on top of the head.

AW: If you can't see any ears, it's an elephant or harbor seal, and, if spotted in color and shy, you are probably looking at a harbor seal.

SA: Keep a distance so that you don't interact with the animals. And watch them and enjoy their presence in these remote areas.

AW: Knowing the difference between them can guide your behavior, and could score you bonus points with your friends.

SA: And then elephants seals are [snorting sound mimicking bull elephants seal trumpet]. That's when you get too close to them.

SA: Elephant seal pup: baa baa [mimicking call of elephant seal pup].

SC: So, they're like ma ma ma.