

# BACK TO BEACH THE

BY KATE HOFMANN

After months in the sea, these elephant seal mates cuddle peacefully on the sand. But beach life isn't always so calm and quiet! Turn the page for the rest of the deal on these seals.



INGO ARNDT/MINDEN PICTURES (32T, 33B); TIM FITZHARRIS/MINDEN PICTURES (32B)

For most of their lives, *northern elephant seals* swim at sea, far from any land. But each winter, the seals haul out onto beaches along the coast of California and Mexico. Great piles of seals cover the sand (see photo at **left**). Their roars, snorts, grunts, and squawks fill the air.

Are the seals here just to snooze and sunbathe? Nope! This is the time for *pups* to be born and grownups to mate.

The males, called *bulls*, arrive first. They're HUGE. A really big one can be around 16 feet long and weigh as much as 4,000 pounds—that's longer and heavier than most cars!



HEIDI & HANS-JÜRGEN KOCH/MINDEN PICTURES

Jumbo size is just one reason these creatures are called elephant seals. To guess the other reason, take a look at that extra-large nose on pages 30–31. Only the full-grown males have these “trunks.” The big snouts act as echo chambers, making the bulls' roars extra loud. With those roars, the bulls challenge each other to fights. They face off, rear up, slam their chests together, and slash with their teeth (**left**). Why? To decide who's “boss.” Winners get the chance to mate with females that will soon be coming ashore.

### Big Babies

The females, called *cows*, are quite a bit smaller than the males, each maxing out at around 1,300 pounds. When the cows arrive on the beach, they are pregnant from last year's mating. Soon each gives birth

to a pup. Mom sniffs her pup to learn its scent and listens to its cries to learn its voice. And she roars at the baby so it can learn *her* voice (**above**). Strange welcome, huh? But now the mother and baby can find each other if they get separated in the crowded colony.

Just how big are these babies?

Each newborn weighs around 75 pounds—but not for long. The pups get right to work drinking their mothers' milk (**below**). The milk is super-rich and full of fat. In less than a month, a pup can balloon to 300 pounds, putting on a bulky layer of blubber. That's a good thing: The pups will need all that fat for what comes next.





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The pups' bodies use the energy stored in their blubber for food. They sleep a lot. They also start practicing their swimming, and the young males practice fighting (**below left**).

### Out to Sea

After more than two months without food, the youngsters head to sea: their true home. Elephant seals are amazing swimmers and divers. They travel thousands of miles in search of food, diving all day and night to catch squid and bottom-dwelling fish. Most of the time a dive lasts 15 or 20 minutes, but once in a while it can be as long as an hour. And the seals dive deep—sometimes nearly a mile below the surface!



### Ashore Again

In summer, the seals return again to the same beach—this time to molt. They lose all their fur and grow new coats. For protection from the sun, they sometimes flip sand over themselves (**below**). But before long, they'll be back at sea, doing what elephant seals do best!

### Signed and Sealed

You can visit a northern elephant seal colony at places such as Año Nuevo State Natural Reserve and Piedras Blancas in California. If you go, you may be lucky enough to see a lot of seals. But it wasn't always that way. Over a hundred years ago, hunters killed elephant seals for their blubber—so many seals that people believed they were extinct.

It turned out that a small group survived off the coast of Mexico. Both Mexico and the United States made laws to stop hunting and to protect the beaches where the seals came ashore. The small group grew, and many seals moved northward to California. Scientists believe there are around 170,000 northern elephant seals today. Now that's a success story! 🐾



### Pups on Their Own

As the pups get fatter, their moms get thinner. The grown-up seals don't eat at all while they're on the beach. So once the pups become very plump (**above**), their moms go back to sea for their first meal in more than a month.

Before the cows leave, the "boss" bulls mate with them. Soon the bosses, and all the other bulls, leave the beach as well. They are hungry, too—they haven't eaten for up to 100 days!

The pups, still on land, are on their own now. They're called *weaners*, because they have been weaned (have stopped drinking their mothers' milk).



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