

STRAWBERRY ISLE MARINE RESEARCH SOCIETY

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Scuttle Butt – July 1992

By Rod Palm



Elephant seal at schooner Cove

photo Pearl Palm

A FRIENDLY VISITOR by Rod Palm

On July 11, a visiting tourist, strolling the beach at Schooner Cove, came upon a rather rotund, fur bearing, air breathing, snorting, sand slinging ... “thing”. Parks Wardens were notified and identified the animal as a yearling elephant seal hauled out for its annual molt.

Elephant seals are rarely seen in our waters and have never hauled out to molt in the history of the park. Tipping the scales at over 4,000 lbs. (2,000 kg.), these are the largest pinnipeds (marine mammals with webbed feet) who visit the B.C. coast. Born on the California or Mexican shores in the winter they may, in the summer, forage as far north as Alaska. Recent studies have these guys diving as deep as 4,150' (1,265 m.) In pursuit of ratfish, sharks, eels and squid, this makes them the deepest diving of all the pinnipeds. With the heavy sealing of the turn of the century, elephant seal numbers were down to a few hundred animals but protected breeding grounds have allowed their population to return to historic levels, over 100,000. The fact that they don't regularly feed on any

commercial fish species has saved them from the wrath of fisheries management and fishermen.

A ribbon boundary was put in place around the Schooner Cove elephant seal but turned out to be of limited value. People respected the area of privacy but the seal was of a much more sociable nature. He daily moved about the campground intriguing adults, fascinating kids and scaring dogs. As often as not, he would plunk himself down, for the night, in the exact place where a tent would want to light a campfire. Most of his day was spent soaking up rays and applying sun screen, that is to say, hucking sand up on his back with his fore flippers. The method used to get sand on his face, was to drive his pointed nose into the sand, then a violent honk sent an eruption skyward to come raining down on his head.

When our friend initially hauled up on the beach, his skin had a crinkly appearance, almost scaly. As the days went by he started to look as though he had a bad case of mange then, finally, his velvety grey fur was obvious.

On the morning of July 27, the seal hauled himself down to the water and departed. It was felt that this being his first molt, he may come back to this same beach next year.

On the evening of Aug. 2, an elephant seal fitting the description of the Schooner Cove seal dragged himself up on the beach at Green Point to die of a gunshot wound to the head.

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caption

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