

The Seals Of San Simeon California

by Edwin Marcow

The sky was dark and threatening, black clouds hung on the horizon menacingly. The air was charged, as if something was about to happen. The male bulls appeared excitable, their grotesque bulbous shapes dotted the shore like a Manhattan skyline.

The stage was set for battle, like giants of Greek mythology who had been asleep for aeons and were slow to anger, but whose wrath was violent and vindictive. So the male elephant seals, squared up to each other as Gladiators.

The male bulls weigh up to 2,300 kg and grow to a length of 4.5 metres. They have large, imposing tusks that can inflict fatal wounds on a lesser opponent and with their pronounced proboscis they are a very imposing sight to behold.

Papa Bear, as Andrea liked to call him, was such an imposing sight. He was the alpha male and he had a lot to defend. He had the prize of a large colony of females, who were sure to pass his lineage on to the next generation. He would pass on one day, but his genes would live on through them. This was now all under threat however, as younger bulls threatened his dominance.

We were in San Simeon, California to photograph and document what we observed and we encountered more than we hoped to dream.

A lone younger male charged up the beach on Papa Bear's right flank, full of spirit and impertinence. On his left flank, two other males now gave chase. Papa Bear moved his enormous bulk down the beach towards the shore line. As he did so, he swung right to the first male. The earth shook and trembled, as a roar went up from Papa Bear and this young upstart stopped in his tracks. There were still the two males on his left flank, however, who were steadily moving up the beach. Things looked ominous. Maybe the game was up for Papa





Bear. He turned and charged straight at this motley crew he saw before him. Another roar bellowed in the air, tusks bared for all to see. He had no choice, his only defence could be to attack, otherwise he may lose all that he pervade. His right to all the females as long as he could muster the strength and stamina to fend off repeated and sporadic assaults on his dominance of his harem. Would be lost this very afternoon.

At first, the younger males stood their ground, refusing to give up any advantage they had made. Papa Bear drew closer, still bellowing and baring his tusks as he went on. A terrible battle was about to commence - someone had to lose. Then, just when one thought there was only one option but to do battle, the two younger males turned and like a bunch of alley cats on a hot tin roof, they scattered like the four winds before them.

After a brief rest and a chance to eye all that he behold, Papa Bear went on to mate with a receptive female that did require some coxing to his advances. One can only assume that this mating so soon after his successful defence of his realm was twofold; firstly, to propagate his lineage and secondly, to send a message to the younger males and in particular, to the three that he had just stood down.

Life for the average sea lion on the Californian coastline is a precarious existence, they are predated by White sharks and Orcas who patrol the shoreline. Life for a young male is especially dangerous as older established males will capture and kill them long before they reach maturity. This will result, in that their mothers will be receptive to mating.

The Northern Elephant seal lives in the Pacific Ocean, 30 degrees north latitude. This mammal has very thick blubber and as a result of this was hunted to the brink of extinction in the 1800s. They are intelligent and social mammals that congregate in colonies and in smaller groups in the water, called rafts.

Their breeding areas are called rookeries. Males will fight for mating dominance and often bear deep scarring from such battles. The Northern Elephant seal has no external ears. This pinniped is born black, with the fur turning a dark silvery brown as they mature. The whiskers [vibrissae] on the snout function to help the



seals sense of touch, the nostrils remain closed in the resting state. Male bulls weigh up to 2,300 kg and grow to a length of 4.5 metres, long whilst female cows weigh up to 760 kg and grow up to 3.6 metres long.

Once a year, from December to March, these seals migrate between their warm breeding grounds on the the Californian and Mexican coastlines and their cold feeding grounds in the northern Pacific Ocean, near Alaska.

Northern Elephant seals are carnivores. Males will dive to depths of 800 metres and females, to a more modest 600 metres, in search of food. They are excellent divers, able to breath-hold dive for twenty minutes. Their diet consists mainly of fish, eels, skates and rays as well as octopi and red crab. Elephant seals do not chew their food, but swallow it in large pieces, they themselves are predated by Orcas and White sharks.

Elephant seal classification;
mammal, Order Carnivora
Suborder Pinnipedia. Family
Phocidea [earless seal]

Camera Nikon 801 Film
Kodak Ektachrome sv 100 Flash
Fill in

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