

World's Largest Seal

by Guy Belleranti

In the freezing ocean waters of Antarctica, the planet's largest seals make their home in a frozen world. These giants are southern elephant seals, and they can grow as long as the length of a car and weigh as much as two cars combined. The name "elephant seal" comes from both the males' enormous size and from their giant trunk-like nose, called a proboscis. Females do not have a proboscis and they are much smaller.



A thick layer of blubber keeps southern elephant seals warm in their icy habitat. The seals are clumsy on land, but in water they're graceful swimmers and incredible divers. They can easily dive 1,000 to 4,000 feet to hunt for squid, octopus, and various kinds of fish. Elephant seals are able to stay underwater for 20 minutes or more. The longest underwater session researchers observed is an amazing two hours! When they return to the surface to breathe, it's only for a few minutes. Then they dive again.

While elephant seals spend most of their time swimming, they also gather on beaches in groups called colonies. One reason they come to land is to give birth and breed. Males arrive before females. They battle for dominance, deciding who will have large harems of females. Raising their enormous bodies, the males inflate their snouts and bellow. Usually these confrontations end quickly. However, sometimes only a physical battle can settle the matter. These fights can be bloody, but permanent injury is rare.

Females arriving on land give birth to a single pup they've been carrying since the previous year. Newborns weigh about 90 pounds. The mother nurses her pup for a little over three weeks. After this, she breeds with a dominant male and then returns to the sea to feed. Her pup now weighs well over 200 pounds and is on its own. If it survives, it too will enter the sea within a couple of months.

A second reason elephant seals come to land is to molt. When they molt, they shed old skin and fur and new skin and fur grows.

A smaller species, the northern elephant seal, lives in the Pacific Ocean, dispersed from Baja, California to Alaska. Both northern and southern elephant seals were once hunted nearly to extinction. However, under legal protections both have made incredible comebacks.

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1. Based on the information in the article, describe how an elephant seal's movements are different on land than in the water.

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2. Why do male elephant seals arrive on land before females during the breeding season?

3. According to the information in the article, describe two reasons why elephant seals come on land.

4. How does an elephant seal obtain its food? What foods are a part of an elephant seal's diet?

5. Based on what you read in the article, are elephant seals in danger of becoming extinct today? Why or why not?

ANSWER KEY

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1. Based on the information in the article, describe how an elephant seal's movements are different on land than in the water.

On land, an elephant seal is clumsy and has a difficult time moving around, but in the water, an elephant seal moves easily and gracefully.

2. Why do male elephant seals arrive on land before females during the breeding season?

Males come ashore before females to fight for dominance. Their fights decide which males will have the largest harems of females.

3. According to the information in the article, describe two reasons why elephant seals come on land.

Elephant seals come on land to breed and give birth, and to molt.

4. How does an elephant seal obtain its food? What foods are a part of an elephant seal's diet?

An elephant seal obtains food by diving to depths of around 1,000 to 4,000 feet to hunt. Elephant seals eat squid, octopus, and a variety of fish.

5. Based on what you read in the article, are elephant seals in danger of becoming extinct today? Why or why not?

Today, elephant seals are not in danger of becoming extinct. This is because laws are now in place to protect their populations.