



# Shore Stewards News

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## Shore Stewards News Summer 2019

### What do you do when a northern elephant seal visits your beach?

*By Darcy McNamara, Extension Coordinator, Jefferson County Extension and Bob Simmons, Associate Professor, WSU Extension. Special thanks to Joanne for sharing her story and to Betsy Carlson, Port Townsend Marine Science Center.*



*This female northern elephant seal was recovering from injuries when it showed up at Joanne's house. Photo by Joanne.*

Joanne had a big surprise waiting when she returned home one afternoon in July. There was something on her beach. At first, she thought it was just a large seal, but as a recent graduate of WSU's Beach Naturalist class and a trained "seal sitter," something about it was different. Looking through binoculars she saw it had black whiskers, small fore flippers, and no external ear flaps (making it a *true seal*.) But the size was what gave the visitor's identity away. It was a northern elephant seal (*Mirounga angustirostris*) – the largest *true seal* in the northern hemisphere. Females grow up to 10 feet long and weigh up to 1,300 pounds and males can even grow larger, reaching 13 feet long and 4,000 pounds.



*The seal resting on the beach in July. Photo by Joanne.*

Joanne contacted Betsy Carlson, Citizen Science Coordinator for the Port Townsend Marine Science Center and learned that a badly injured female northern elephant seal had been seen on a nearby Olympic Peninsula beach in April. The seal in front of Joanne's home had some scars and they determined it was probably the same animal. Betsy consulted with other experts and they concluded the injuries were from a male northern elephant seal.

Northern elephant seals aren't that common in Washington. Individuals are sometimes seen in the Salish Sea with occasional reports of haul outs and even pups on Dungeness Spit and Whidbey, Destruction, Protection, Smith, and Minor Islands.



*This is the same northern elephant seal, with serious injuries, seen on a nearby beach in April.  
Photo by Steve Grace PTMSC MMSN.*

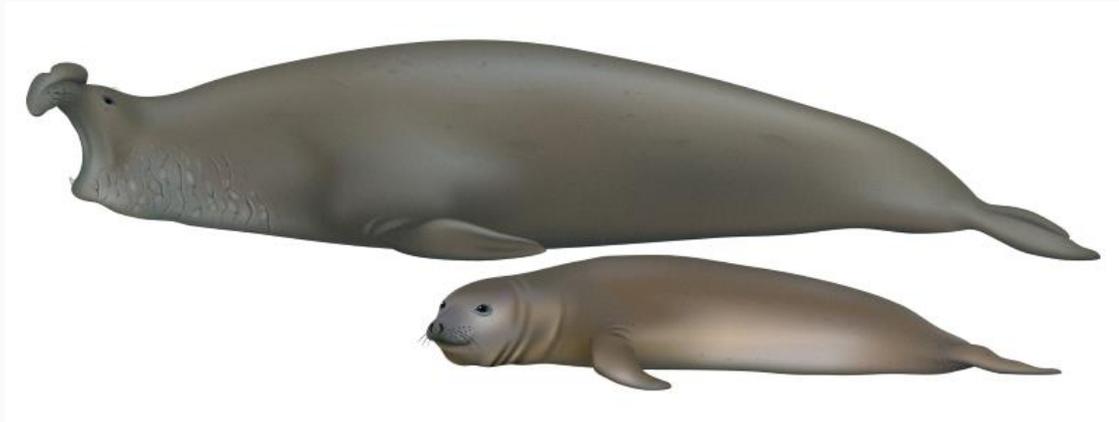
## **The life history of an elephant seal**

Northern elephant seals range from Alaska to Mexico. They spend about 9 months in the ocean eating squid, octopus, small sharks, rays, and large fishes. Males feed in Alaska while females feed in the waters off Washington and Oregon, from spring through fall. Adults molt on sandy beaches in the spring and summer, taking 4 to 5 weeks to shed their skin: a process known as catastrophic molting.

Breeding usually takes place from December to March on offshore islands in southern California or Baja California, Mexico. Northern elephant seals are polygamous. The males form a harem of many females during the breeding season. Adult males have large inflatable noses. They grow this nose, or proboscis, when they reach puberty, at around seven years old. The nose is key during breeding season, for making sounds to threaten other males and communicating with females. The males battle for social status using vocal threats and their enormous size.

After breeding, females undergo an 11-month gestation period. They haul out on shore to give birth in December and January. The pups are weaned for about a month. The female breeds again before her pup leaves. When not breeding or molting, elephant

seals return to their feeding areas; one of the longest migrations of any mammal – over 13,000 miles roundtrip. Males typically have a 13-year lifespan while females live to about 19 years.



*Male (top) and female northern elephant seal size comparison. Photo courtesy of NOAA.*

## **Threats to marine mammals**

Northern elephant seals are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). They were hunted nearly to extinction with only an estimated 30 individuals left before they were protected. Northern elephant seals became the focus of an international conservation effort and today the species is recovering with the US population at more than 81,000. While protected by the MMPA, the mammals are not listed as endangered or threatened. NOAA identifies entanglement in fishing gear, vessel strikes, and marine debris as the primary human-caused threats.

Pollution is another hazard impacting marine mammals. As carnivores, seals and whales are at the top of the food web. They consume fish and animals that may have concentrations of chemicals such as PCBs, chemicals used in flame retardants, and pesticides, in their tissue. The mammals absorb and retain these toxins in their blubber and can pass them on to their young in their milk. Non-migrating marine mammals, such as harbor seals, are at higher risk of physical abnormalities, compromised immune systems, and impaired reproduction from living year-around in the polluted waters of Puget Sound.

Stormwater is a major contributor to water pollution, which is harmful to marine mammals. Rainwater runoff carries everything with it – oil and gas, heavy metals, fertilizers, animal waste and other pollutants – as it makes its way to the Salish Sea.

## **What to do when a marine mammal shows up on your beach**

Thanks to Joanne's training, she already knew what to do. First, stay 100 yards (about the length of a football field) away from the mammal, whether it's in the water or on land. The distance is not just to protect the animal, but for people and pet safety too. Despite appearing slow and cumbersome, seals can be unpredictable and move fast. Joanne knew there was a good chance she couldn't outrun a charging elephant seal.

Second, educate other people. For example, kayakers paddling by Joanne's house allowed their dog to run along the beach. She was concerned because some elephant seals (especially during breeding season) can be aggressive and have been known to attack dogs. Remember, all marine mammals are protected under federal law and anyone harassing these animals may be subject to prosecution under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Finally, be prepared for a possible extended visit. Elephant seals haul out on the shore during molting season and may stay in the same area for weeks at a time. Some seals may appear injured as they slough large patches of old skin.

Some additional guidelines:

- Use binoculars and spotting scopes if you want a closer look.
- If a seal becomes alert (looks towards you) or agitated and begins to move away, you are too close.
- Dogs and seals don't mix. Dogs should be leashed and controlled.
- Agencies or organizations may post signs and use flagging to keep people away from a marine mammal on a beach. Respect the closed area and encourage others to do the same.
- If a marine mammal appears injured or is dead, call 1-866-767-6114.
- If the seal stays longer than 24 hours, call 1-866-767-6114 so the animal's movements can be tracked and you can be alerted of any special precautions.

## **The end of the tale**

As it turns out, Joanne's visitor was just passing through, resting and recuperating. The female stayed on the beach for several days, on and off. When it was hot, she would lay with her head facing the water. When the tide came in and surrounded her, she'd swim off. Joanne reported seeing the seal swimming by on several occasions, sometimes with only her nose above the water. She appeared to be recovering from her injuries, and likely was getting ready for the long trip south for her next breeding season.



*The female seal appears to be recovering from her injuries, thanks to shoreline landowners who respect marine mammals. Photo by Joanne.*

## Resources

- To report a **dead, injured or stranded marine mammal**, call 1-866-767-6114
- To report a **violation** of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, call the NOAA Enforcement Hotline 1-800-853-1964.
- For law enforcement, **harassment**, and other violations, call 1-800-853-1964
- For **entangled** marine mammals, call 1-877-SOS-WHAlE or 1-877-767-9425 or hail the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF Ch. 16
- To report **derelict gear**, call 1-855-542-3935

If you are interested in helping marine mammals, consider becoming involved with the West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network. It's part of the national Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response program, which coordinates emergency responses to sick, injured, distressed, or dead marine mammals. There are local organizations around Puget Sound associated with the program that provide training and opportunities to get involved. Shoreline landowners are uniquely positioned to be first responders for protecting marine mammals.

Learn more and find local contact information at: [https://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected\\_species/marine\\_mammals/](https://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/)

[stranding\\_network.html](http://stranding_network.html)

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