

San Simeon's Unsung Celebrities

The amazing wildlife near publisher William Randolph Hearst's palatial estate is worthy of front-page headlines.

TOURISTS who flock to newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst's luxurious Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California are often unaware that an equally spectacular *natural* wonder is just a few miles to the north —the elephant seals at Point Piedras Blancas.



Depending on the time of year, you might see up to 2,000 of these magnificent sea creatures dotting the small unspoiled beaches and coves just south of the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse. It's quite a sight to see them sprawled on the beaches, continuously flipping sand on to their backs.

While some elephant seals are always present at Piedras Blancas, the most interesting time to visit is during breeding season, November through February. My friend Mary and I stopped there in January and found the beaches jammed with chubby females, little black pups and huge blubbery males roaring challenges.

We watched in fascination as two large bulls began to do battle for control of a female harem. Approached by another male, the resident bull reared up on his hindquarters, threw his head back and roared a threat.

Then the bulls reared up and slammed

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together with great force, slashing away with their large teeth. I've seen this in nature films, but it really is quite exciting to see in person. Fights can last a few minutes or go on for hours. This battle ended with the interloping bull being forced into the water.

Elephant seals began appearing on a secluded beach south of the lighthouse in 1990. It was an extraordinary occurrence that delighted folks traveling on U.S. Highway 1 on California's central coast.

I first saw the seals in the fall of 1994, literally stumbling onto them as they lounged on the beach. Later, I learned that the seal population has made a miraculous recovery after nearing extinction in the 1880s.

Most of the time, volunteers are available to answer questions—and make sure humans leave the seals alone. They'll provide all sorts of interesting information. For instance, did you know that bulls can weigh over 2-1/2 tons, making them the largest aquatic carnivores? Or that elephant seals can

stay under water longer than any other mammal—over 80 minutes?

No doubt about it, these are amazing animals. The elephant seal colony here is one wildlife phenomenon you shouldn't miss.

Before You Visit... The seal colony is open to visitors year-round. Docents are present every day during breeding season. You can learn more by visiting www.pelicanetwork.net/sansimeon.html or calling 1-805/924-1628.

More to See... The Hearst Castle is open year-round except on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Days. Four daytime tours and one evening tour are available. To learn more about the castle, log on to www.hearstcastle.org or call 1-805/927-2020.

To find out about other area attractions, log on to www.sansimeonsbest.com or call 1-805/927-3500.

SHORELINE STARS. Elephant seals (at left) are a common sight on the beaches south of the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse (below). Visitors there can get an unusually close-up look at these interesting animals (below left).

