



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

### April 5, 2024

### Elephant Seal

The majority of the Northern Elephant Seal pups that we rescue need help because they are suffering from malnutrition. Some may have shark bites or even stingray barbs. The seal we picked up on Thursday the 28th from Lechuza Beach has a unique challenge, as this was the first time our marine mammal team rescued one who was not just covered in tar, but also had ingested it.



Elephant Seal rescued on Lechuza Beach

Off the Santa Barbara coastline lies a large line of seepage cracks. Due to the prevalence of geological shifting in this earthquake-prone area, petroleum naturally rises from the sea bottom to the surface of the Pacific. It's estimated that 20-25 tons of oil are emitted each day. There are thousands of seepage areas in the world—some are under the water and others more exposed. The LaBrea tar pits are a nearby example of another natural petroleum seep. There's evidence that beginning with Paleolithic man, humans have used these natural sources of bitumen for waterproofing vessels, medicinal purposes, and lining baths. These seeps are sources of natural gas, tar, bitumen, pitch, and asphalt.



Blue Pink at CWC

It's not unusual for us to receive calls about pelagic (or offshore) water birds (Murre, Loons, and Grebes) who have tar on their feathers, which compromises their ability to remain waterproof affecting their ability to maintain a healthy core body temperature. The tar and petroleum naturally rise to the surface and birds are particularly vulnerable. It's rarer that we receive marine mammals with significant petroleum on their skin and when we do get them, it's usually dry and sloughs off naturally while in care.

That's what makes this new patient so unusual. We call her "Blue Pink," as those are the colors we've striped her with to distinguish her from the other seals in care. Not only did she have significant amounts of fresh tar on her body, she also had ingested significant amounts of tar.

Upon arrival, it's typical that we will start each marine mammal patient with tube feeding to ensure that they are receiving enough hydration, protein, vitamins and nutrients. When our marine mammal staff tube fed this patient, the tube came out covered in black tar. For days, this was the case as she had obviously eaten a significant amount of the sticky stuff. We flushed her stomach and have been giving her medication to soothe her gastrointestinal tract. Staff believes that she must have eaten something that swam through the tar, as there is nothing in the tar itself that would lead animals to eat it.

Once she's feeling better, we will slowly move her diet to include blended fish and then whole fish. She will join the rest of the Elephant Seals in care and will more than double her 33-kilogram intake weight before she is released back to the Pacific Ocean, which generally takes around 10 weeks.