



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

March 21, 2025

First Elephant Seal Pups of the Season!



Northern Elephant Seal pup "Orange".

Northern Elephant Seal pups are born during the winter months of December and January. At CWC, we typically see pups in need of help on the beaches of Malibu every March, April, and May. These pups are usually severely malnourished and often have secondary illnesses and injuries. This year our first eight elephant seal pup patients all arrived within a span of 10 days in early March!

One of these pups we refer to as "Orange." This nickname comes from the non-toxic coloring applied to our seal patients, which we use to quickly identify different individuals. Orange was rescued from a public beach that can only be reached by climbing over a large field of rocks. Fortunately, a local resident granted us access through a private pathway, which included 84 stairs.

Our Marine Mammal Team arrived just in time to rescue the pup from members of the public who were harassing her with plants. When she arrived at CWC she weighed in at only 59 pounds. Normally, pups of this age would weigh between 125 and 150 pounds. This patient will most likely be the smallest seal of the season and is the third smallest pup we have seen in the last 10 years.



Two elephant seal pups in care.



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"Orange" only weighed 59 pounds when admitted.

Northern Elephant Seals can have a pretty rough start to life. After birth, they nurse from their mothers for about one month, then wean and venture out on their own to navigate life at sea. It is not uncommon for pups to struggle to find their way and end up stranded on beaches. Our team usually finds that, once admitted, pups are below their birth weight and need medical and rehabilitative attention before they are well enough to survive on their own. For many of our patients, the first step in their care protocol is addressing dehydration. From there, our staff works with them to learn to eat fish and eventually catch it on their own in our pool.

Northern Elephant Seals are a solitary species (aside from the molting and mating season) and spend the majority of the year in the ocean. Elephant seals are deep divers and can reach depths of 1,000 to 2,500 feet; adult elephant seals can hold their breath for up to two hours!

This species has a resilient history. In the 1800s, Northern Elephant Seals were heavily sought after for their blubber, which was used to make lamp oil. By the end of the century, the species had been nearly hunted to extinction. Miraculously, a small group was later discovered off the coast of Mexico on Guadalupe Island. This small group of survivors was able to repopulate, increasing population numbers exponentially. Today, this species is classified as Least Concern.

Although population growth is no longer a major concern, rapid population growth over a short period can result in genetic bottlenecks, reducing genetic diversity. Minimal genetic variety means that an ailment could affect a substantial proportion of the population.

Patient Orange is accepting nutritional supplements and medications well. She is expected to transition to a fish diet soon, which is a positive sign of her progress!