

Name: _____

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 was 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 Mexico's 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 water.

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

3. Describe two reasons why elephant seals come on land.

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

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

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Fill in the missing letters to create a vocabulary word from the article. Then write the full word on the line. Be sure you spell each word correctly.

1. ___ n ___ ___ m o ___ s

clue: extremely large

1. _____

2. ___ o ___ i n ___ n ___ e

clue: power or superiority over others

2. _____

3. c ___ u ___ ___ y

clue: awkward; ungainly

3. _____

4. ___ e r ___ a ___ e n ___

clue: lasting indefinitely

4. _____

5. ___ ___ l ___ n i e ___

clue: groups of elephant seals

5. _____

6. e ___ ___ i n ___ t ___ ___ n

clue: disappearance from the planet

6. _____

7. ___ e l l ___ ___

clue: make a loud roaring sound

7. _____

8. ___ ___ u b ___ e r

clue: fatty tissue that helps sea mammals stay warm

8. _____

