The Newsletter of The Marine Mammal Center

Keep people and dogs away, but take note of its size, condition, color and location.

What to do if you spot a seal pup alone on a beach:

1. Stay back at least 50 feet
2. Keep people and dogs away, but take note of its size, condition, color and location.
3. Call 415.289.SEAL (7325) and report the seal and its location to The Marine Mammal Center.

During March and April, Pacific harbor seal pups are born in rookeries along the California coast. After about four weeks, the pups are weaned from their mothers. This time period is critical for the development of their immune systems—without it, they may not survive.

Felicia Nutter
A. The Marine Mammal Center is excited to have Dr. Felicia Nutter, DVM, PhD on board as the new staff veterinarian. For the past four years, Dr. Nutter and her husband Chris, who is also a wildlife veterinarian, were based in Ruhengeri, Rwanda with the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project.

Dr. Nutter is no newcomer to The Center; in 1997, she spent about six weeks as part of the Zoo and Wildlife Medicine residency at N.C. State University. She says her positive experience, coupled with her passion for marine mammals, was the impetus for her return.

Above: Dr. Felicia Nutter in Rwanda approaching a gorilla. Photo: C. Whittier

Felicia Nutter

B. December 2006 The concrete foundation for the new education building was poured by contractors. Workers smoothed the concrete after the pour had been completed. Photo: The Marine Mammal Center

C. January 2007 The education building’s structure was started. A crane positioned a structural beam of the building. Photo: The Marine Mammal Center

Point Reyes Elephant Seal
D. December 2004 Staff and volunteers from The Marine Mammal Center removed a yellow packing strap constricting an elephant seal found by researchers at Point Reyes National Seashore. Photo: Stan Jensen

E. January 2007 The same elephant seal was spotted at Gus Cove, Point Reyes, healthy and with a pup. Photo: National Park Service

2006 Animal of the Year
F. Kellan swimming in a pool while recuperating from an injury. Photo: Karla Fernandez
G. Kellan is released with a yellow hat-tag needed for post-release monitoring. Photo: Deborah Gabris

‘Leave Seals Be’ and Call 415.289.SEAL

The “Leave Seals Be” public education campaign is designed to reduce human interactions with harbor seal pups by asking the public to leave ill, injured or abandoned seal pups alone. Instead, beachgoers should call The Marine Mammal Center’s 24-hour response hotline at 415.289.SEAL (7325) to report the location and appearance of the seal. The Center can dispatch trained staff and volunteers to monitor the animal until the mother returns or it becomes necessary to bring the animal to the hospital.

Researchers at The Marine Mammal Center are studying infectious causes of reproductive failure in harbor seals. While it is sad to see a dead pup on a beach, the knowledge gained from studying them is valuable. Please also report dead seal pups to The Center at 415.289.SEAL.

Stay tuned for more information on the harbor seal health program in the next issue.

Spread the Word!
Remind the world that seal pups need our help by sporting a fun, stylish “Leave Seals Be” shirt, available at our retail stores and website.

Shirt Design: Doug Ross

Send an e-Postcard!
Cute e-postcards have three designs to choose from and space for your own special message.

See our website for details.
Northern Fur Seals Mystery

It started in early November—first one northern fur seal, then another, began stranding on beaches along the central California coast. It’s not unusual for The Marine Mammal Center to rescue a fur seal or two each year, but by the time the new year began, staff and volunteers had rescued 34 malnourished seal pups—surpassing a record set at the hospital in 1997 when 33 seals were rescued. So, why did so many seals strand in 2006? Could it be another El Niño year like in 1997?

Deb Wickham, animal husbandry manager at The Marine Mammal Center, could not believe there were 22 northern fur seals on site at once. It was mid-December and normally a quiet time at the hospital. Yet, the bleating sounds of young fur seals were deafening as they emanated from the back pens and pools. One pup stood out from the rest of the pack by chirping like a bird. In one pen, a circus of small fur seals was swimming back and forth in the pool. In another, a group was lounging on a floating pad, while across the pen another group was perched on the edge of the pool as if it were a tightrope. The animals had taken up residency in three pens with the largest measuring 30’-by-30’ and outfitted with a 2,000 gallon pool.

El Niño–Food Chain Collapse

It’s been nearly ten years since The Center has seen this many fur seal rescues. In 1997, rescues coincided with the beginning of an El Niño. An El Niño is a temporary warming of ocean waters that begins in the tropics and spreads to the Pacific, according to Bob DeLong, a research biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service. “El Niños have been around since the dawn of man,” said DeLong.

In an El Niño year, food sources such as anchovies and squid move to deeper, cooler water. This means that the coastal ocean becomes less productive and ultimately, the food chain begins to collapse, like the scenario in 1997.

DeLong is hesitant to attribute the recent strandings of these northern fur seals to El Niño. He says there is evidence of an abundance of food sources and although the fur seal pups weaned at low weights, adult females looked good and were of a healthy weight. The million-dollar question is “If there is plenty of food, why did the young pups not find it?”

On the Road to Recovery

Veterinarians at The Center may never know what caused the fur seals to become malnourished and strand this past year. They examined each of the patients to see if there might be other medical reasons, such as disease causing them to be underweight.

El Niño Facts:

1. Trade winds normally blow east to west, piling warm, surface water in the Pacific. Upwelling of nutrient-rich colder water occurs.

2. In an El Niño, the opposite occurs and the cold, nutrient-rich water is blocked by the warmer layer of surface water, eliminating many food sources.

3. Depressed thermocline* means marine mammals and birds are on a low nutritional plain that causes survival issues.

*Refers to the depth in the ocean where temperature decreases rapidly
PO2a and PO2b, the rare Hawaiian monk seal twins, are no longer the only two benefitting from the captive care initiative at California’s Marine Mammal Center. At this point of the year, the two gregarious seals have been joined by new pen mate PO48.

Upon inspection, the twins immediately interacted with PO48 and are seen playing in the water together daily. At night, they have been frequently observed sleeping together in a pile. All three continue to put on the necessary weight to increase their chance of surviving into their reproductive years.

In a neighboring pen, there are three other juvenile female seals, PO49, PO2a and PO2b. All six, weaned born, are being monitored regularly and fed Atlantic herring three times a day as part of the winter monk seal program.

The objectives during the winter season are to provide nutritional supplements, mostly fish, to help the animals gain weight and to monitor the wild monk seal population in Midway Atoll.

“Our winter monitoring is important because historically there is very little data collected over the winter and this is the time, between the summer field camps, when many juveniles disappear,” says Tenaya Norris, Captive Care Coordinator from The Marine Mammal Center: “Our observations will hopefully shed some light on what may be contributing to these disappearances.”

The winter “pilot program” on Midway is a collaboration between the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and The Marine Mammal Center—both are providing experienced personnel and the majority of the funding. Important supporting agencies include Fish and Wildlife Service and Seaworld.

The six animals currently in captive care are slated for release in late March.

None were found. So far, no more, veterinarians and volunteers will continue to care and feed the young pups until they reach a healthy release weight.

“We are collaborating with Long Marine Lab in Santa Cruz to help these animals get ready to be released back to the wild,” said Wickham. In late January, The Center transferred six fur seals to the Santa Cruz-based facility so researchers there could measure each seal’s resting metabolic rate and perform other tests designed to observe reactions to water temperature shifts. This research will not only provide basic physiological information about northern fur seals (resting metabolism, thermal capabilities), but it will also enable an assessment of body condition and health prior to the pups’ release back into the wild.

All of the fur seals were released in March or April.
Looking back at 2006

Rainy first four months — The Center’s construction project continues as perimeter road is built, pipes laid and work on foundations begins.

Traveled to San Miguel Island — Researchers collect samples to investigate causes of reproductive failure in California sea lions.

The Center lends a helping hand — Staff and volunteers care for extremely rare, twin, Hawaiian monk seal pups.

Pool at the Zoo — The San Francisco Zoo lends a helping hand (actually a big pool) to elephant seal pups, freeing up much needed pen space at The Center.

New Marine Mammal Visitor Center opens at Rodeo Beach.

Fur Seals Strand — The Center rescues and cares for a record number of seal pups (see cover story.)

Phoca Rescue (Seal Rescue) — The Center travels to Puerto Rico to train and strengthen local stranding network.

People at The Center

If you see an ill seal on a beach this pupping season and call our response hotline at (415) 289-SEAL—chances are you will speak with one of these people. They respond to calls about marine mammals in need of help, 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

Sue Andrews started as a volunteer in 1993 and then became the Field Manager at the Monterey Bay Operations Rescue and Triage Center. She says she is amazed by the people working at The Center because they all have big hearts and a desire to be a part of the solution for the animals and the ocean. | Sue is the Field Manager at The Center’s Monterey Bay Operations.

Erin Brodie started at The Center in 1997 as an education outreach instructor before becoming part of the stranding team. She says she loves the challenge that comes with coordinating animal responses. Erin says every situation is different and no two days are the same. Her involvement with The Center makes her feel that in some way she is positively affecting the world. | Erin is a Stranding Coordinator at The Center.

Lauren De Maio adjoins the dedication of the Marine Mammal Center towards the health of marine mammals and the knowledge gained through scientific research. She loves her position and says, it is a pleasure to work with such a great staff and dedicated volunteers because they give so much of their time and efforts to The Center. | Lauren is a Stranding Coordinator at The Center.

Shelbi Stoudt started volunteering in 1993 and then joined the staff in 1998. She says the Center gives her the personal satisfaction that she is making a difference and affecting change. She also notes, “Where else could I strap on a helmet and crawl around like a sea lion?” (referring to training courses she teaches to volunteers on the art of using herding boards to rescue seals and sea lions.) | Shelbi is the Stranding Manager at The Center.

The Protected Resources Circle

The Protected Resources Circle (PRC) is The Marine Mammal Center’s circle of donors whose annual leadership contributions of $500 or more support The Center’s core work of rescue, rehabilitation and release of marine mammals. Donors who contribute at least $500 to The Center’s capital campaign are also included in the PRC in 2007.

Benefits and privileges of PRC membership include invitations to private releases of rehabilitated animals back to their ocean homes, private tours of The Center, an invitation to The Center’s annual gala and listing in The Center’s Annual Report and in this newsletter.

Four private release events for PRC members will take place between June and August this year. We invite you to contact the Development Office at 415.284.7335 to become a PRC member in time to receive your invitation to attend a private release event this summer!

Say Thank You Ocean

Did you know that only five percent of the ocean has been explored and that the deepest part of it is roughly seven miles deep—much deeper than Mt. Everest is tall? The ocean also provides food, water, commerce and even recreation. You can learn more about the ocean and its affects on our daily lives by visiting www.thankyouocean.org. This new web resource includes ocean and marine life facts and activities designed to teach, educate and inspire ocean stewardship.

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<th>2006 Number of animals admitted</th>
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<tr>
<td>Species</td>
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<td>Northern elephant seals</td>
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<td>California sea lions</td>
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<td>Guadalupe fur seals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cetaceans-various species</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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* Percentages are approximate due to rounding procedures.

Seal Volunteers Needed!

Our busiest animal rescue season is in full swing and we have many seal pups in need of TLC. Join a fun and committed group of individuals who make a difference in the lives of marine mammals every day.

In addition to animal care, there are many other opportunities to get involved, including the rescue and release of animals, youth education, administration, retail and more.

Learn more about these opportunities on our website or contact Kathleen Hanahian, volunteer coordinator at hanahian@tmmc.org.

A listing of volunteer orientation dates is on the front page of this newsletter.

Run for the Seals — April 15

The Center’s famous 4-mile fun run/walk is back! This year’s Run for the Seals takes place on Sunday, April 15, at Rodeo Beach. Named as one of the Bay Area’s best short runs, the course begins at Rodeo Beach and winds through the beautiful Marin Headlands. Runners, walkers, baby joggers and dogs on leashes are welcome. Proceeds benefit The Marine Mammal Center. Don’t miss the fun—you may even see SF Giants’ mascot Lou Seal at the finish! Online registration is available at www.runfortheseals.org through April 2.

Runners just starting the 4-mile course on the Marin Headlands in 2005. Photo: The Marine Mammal Center

Volunteers cleaning harbor seal War On’s umbilicus. Photo: The Marine Mammal Center

Build-A-Bear Workshop™ — Help a Seal

Build-A-Bear Workshop™ and The Marine Mammal Center, along with the San Francisco Giants™, have teamed up for a special offer that will help marine mammals. Starting this spring at Make Your Own Lou Seal™ by Build-A-Bear Workshop at AT&T Park™, when you purchase a plush miniature veterinary kit, Build-A-Bear Workshop will donate $1 to The Marine Mammal Center. This one-of-a-kind accessory will be sold exclusively at Make Your Own Lou Seal™ at the ballpark, so snag them while they last and help a seal or sea lion at the same time!