

Stranded Weaned Pups

The Piedras Blancas rookery is a natural habitat for elephant seals so we do not interfere with the animals unless they have been injured by human behavior. However, beyond the boundaries of the rookery, injured or stranded animals do receive assistance from The Marine Mammal Center located in Morro Bay.

Animals stranded along our coast may be from Mexico, the Channel Islands or any central coast rookery. They may be suffering from malnutrition, injury, northern elephant seal skin disease, pneumonia, or parasites such as lungworm. When troubled animals are spotted along our coastline, The Marine Mammal Center rescue team is called upon to assess the situation and, when appropriate, bring the animal in for treatment. Along with condition, the size and weight of the animal for its age are used to determine treatment. A stranded weaner that weighs between 75 and 100 pounds would be a candidate for dietary rescue.

At the local treatment center, the rescued animals are tube fed a mixture called a fish milkshake and given electrolytes subcutaneously. Usually, within 24 hours the animal is stabilized, and is driven up to The Marine Mammal Center headquarters in Sausalito where it will continue treatment and be taught to recognize, hunt, and eat fish. This process has several steps. It begins by exposing the weaners to fish, usually thawed Pacific herring that is fed to them by tongs or pulled along by a string to imitate the movement of live prey. Over time, the young animals get curious and bite the fish. They then must be taught to position and orient the fish so it can be swallowed. In some cases live fish and squid are provided to help pique the seal's instinct to catch live prey. In the wild, the seal will have to react quickly to catch available food, so the final series of lessons include throwing fish into pools which forces the weaners to compete for food. At this point, the young seals are eating about 11 to 14 pounds of fish, or 10% of their body weight, per day. Once any other issues are remedied, and the hunting skill is mastered, the weaners are ready to return to the sea. The release weight of 110 pounds or more seems small to us, but we know that weaners leaving the rookery at much less than the average 225 pounds still learn to fish and survive.

Many yearlings, returning in early April from their second trip to sea, are no larger than the weaners departing the rookery on their first migration, but these yearlings have survived! An orange numbered tag is attached to the rear flipper to identify a rehabilitated seal. These tags have been sighted on healthy seals years after release.

In 2016, The Marine Mammal Center rescued 225 elephant seals, the most in its forty-one year history. Experts believe this higher number is primarily related to the El Niño storms earlier in the year and the warmer waters persisting off our coast. For additional information visit www.MarineMammalCenter.org