

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO PINNIPEDS**

Marine mammals were once land mammals that, over a long period of time, developed physical adaptations enabling them to live at sea. Like all mammals, they breathe air through lungs, are endothermic (warm blooded), give birth to live young, suckle their young, and have hair, at least at some time in their lives. Marine mammals probably entered the sea to find food or escape predators. Pinnipeds have adapted to a life at sea but they come ashore at times to mate, give birth, molt, and rest. They have to be able to survive in both marine and terrestrial environments. The three main groups of pinnipeds are the eared seals, the earless seals, and the walrus. The term "seal" is often used to encompass all pinnipeds, which are grouped according to whether they have external ears or lack them. Although their colors vary, most pinnipeds appear dark gray to black when wet.

**EARED SEALS (Otariids):** Eared seals are easily identifiable by tiny external earflaps. They have an elongated neck and use front flippers for propulsion and hind flippers for steering. Being able to move their rear flippers under them they are quadrupedal and surprisingly agile on land. In all Otariid species, the males are significantly bigger than the females. The young may be dependent for a year or more. The eared seals include sea lions and fur seals.



**California sea lions** This is the pinniped most people think of when they hear the word "seal." They are present here year round. They gather together in large noisy groups on land. In the water they gather in groups called "rafts." You may see them resting in the water with a front flipper and rear flippers raised. You may also see them swimming very fast and leaping out of the water in a behavior called "porpoising."

**Steller (northern) sea lions** Large, robust, with a broad snout. Males develop a large mane on the neck and chest and are blond in color. Steller sea lions appear light when wet. Vocalizations are grumbles, growls and roars, rather than the barking heard from the California sea lion. Steller sea lions are sometimes seen at Piedras Blancas.



**Northern fur seals** A small, eared seal with thick fur and very long hind flippers. Ears are located lower than eye level. They have a short conical snout and they appear black when wet. They spend most of their time at sea, coming ashore only to breed on rookeries in the sub-polar regions. However, females and subadult males spend winters as far south as California. Rarely, young northern fur seals come ashore at Piedras Blancas.

**TRUE SEALS/EARLESS SEALS (Phocids):** Earless seals, also referred to as true seals, have short necks and no external ear flaps. They cannot pull their hind flippers under them to walk like eared seals; rather, they heave their bodies forward like a caterpillar. Although they are not agile on land, they are graceful swimmers, using rear flippers for propulsion (in a side-to-side movement) and front flippers for steering. Except for the elephant seal, sexual dimorphism is rare. Pups grow very fast and are weaned young. Phocids include harbor seals and elephant seals which are the commonly seen earless seals in our area.



**Harbor seals** Spotted, plump seals that like to haul out on low rocks. They are usually solitary in the water. Often they can be seen resting in the water, nose pointed straight up in a position called "bottling." They have round heads and short flippers. Harbor seals are shy of humans when they are on land and can be easily disturbed. They are present in our area year round.

**Elephant seals** Largest pinniped in the Northern Hemisphere. Males develop a long pendulous snout, weigh 3000-5000 pounds, and can grow to 16 feet long. Females are smaller and do not develop a long nose. Weaned northern elephant seal pups are about the size of a big harbor seal. Elephant seals are present in the Piedras Blancas area year round but their numbers vary depending on the season. The winter breeding season brings large numbers of animals, as does the spring molt and the fall haul-out. Elephant seals haul out on sandy beaches along a six mile stretch from Arroyo Laguna to north of the light station. The rookery started in 1990 when elephant seals began hauling out in a little cove just south of the lighthouse.



**WALRUS (Odobenids):** The mustached and long-tusked walrus combines traits of both the Phocids and the Otariids. It has no external ear flaps, and moves quadrupedally on land. Tusks are present in both sexes. Extremely sociable, the walrus is most often found near the Arctic Circle, lying on the ice with hundreds of companions. They are prone to loudly bellowing and snorting at one another, and are aggressive during mating season. Walruses are not seen at Piedras Blancas.