

WORLD'S LARGEST SEAL

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 habitats. 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 is 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 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.

Freezing = congelación

Freezer = congelado

Sout hern = del sur

grow = crecer

weigh = bueno

combined = conjunto

comes from = viene de

hot have = caliente para

thick = grueso

keeps = mantiene

in there = allí

grateful = agradado

easy = fácilmente

hot for = caliente para

here = aquí

arrive = a llegar

Underwater: they can easily dive to 9,000 feet to hunt

3 Why do male elephant seals reach land before females during the breeding season?

For dominance deciding who will have large harems of females

4 How does an elephant seal get its food? What foods are part of the diet of an elephant seal?

They eat fish and octopus

5 Are elephant seals going extinct today? Why or why not?

no because they are under legal protection