

News Release



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ELEPHANT SEAL GUIDED WALKS AT AÑO NUEVO STATE RESERVE

Guided walks to see the elephant seals at Año Nuevo State Reserve will begin this year on December 15, 2001 and continue every day through March 31, 2002, except December 25 and January 26. The Reserve is west of Highway 1, between the cities of Santa Cruz and Half Moon Bay, approximately 1.5 hours drive south of San Francisco.

Reservations are recommended for these guided walks. Two types of walk tickets are available: **School Group Walks**, and **Public Seal Walks**. School Group Walks are offered Monday through Friday mornings for first through 12th grade classes. Public Seal Walks are offered daily for families, individuals, or groups.

Reservations will be available through the California State Park's reservation service toll-free, at 1-800-444-4445, from 8 am to 5 p.m. every day except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years Days. **School Group Walk** reservations may be made beginning Saturday, October 6, 2001 for any dates during the season. **Public Seal Walk** reservations will be accepted beginning October 20, up to 56 days in advance, or as late as 1 day, prior to the reservation date.

School Group tickets cost \$21.00 each, and allow entry for up to 20 students and 2 chaperones, for a total group of 22. Two adult chaperones are required per ticket. There is a limit of 4 School Group Walk tickets per call. Public Seal Walk tickets cost \$4.00 per person. Children 3 and under are free. The entrance fee to the Reserve is \$2.00 per car, paid at the Reserve. There are no ticket refunds or exchanges for cancellations, no shows, weather, or late arrivals. Refunds are issued only when the Reserve staff must cancel a walk.

The first guided walk of every day will begin at approximately 8:45 a.m. and the last walk in mid-afternoon. These popular three-to-four mile walks over rolling sand dunes last about two and a half to three hours and are considered moderately strenuous. Each walk will begin on time; visitors who are late will forfeit their reservations.

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Guided Walks are conducted rain or shine. Winter weather can be very cold and windy, even on sunny days. Rain is frequent and the trail may be muddy. Visitors should bring hooded rain gear, layered clothing, and sturdy walking shoes. For safety reasons, use of umbrellas is not permitted on the walks.

Food and beverages are not sold at the Reserve, but picnic tables are available for use before or after guided walks.

Youth groups require adult chaperones. One chaperone is required for every 10 youths 17 years or under.

Disabled persons may make reservations for special Equal Access Guided Walks. Equal Access walks are available December 16 through March 31, on weekends only. Reservations are required. Tickets cost \$4.00 per person. Reservations may be made by phoning (650) 879-2033 beginning December 1, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m.

Año Nuevo State Reserve is home to a large colony of Northern Elephant Seals, and the interpretive program has attracted increasing interest every winter for the past 25 years. People who hope to see the seals during the winter breeding season are urged to get their reservations early.

The Wildlife Protection Area of the Reserve will be closed except for official guided walks from December 1 - March 31. Similar closures and guided walk programs since 1975 have allowed a natural development of the elephant seal herd. The mainland herd has increased during that time from only 35 males to more than 4500 animals, including more than 1700 pups born there last winter.

Adult seals begin arriving on the beaches by mid-December. Bulls engage in battles for breeding access to females. Pregnant females come ashore to have pups beginning in mid-December, with births reaching a peak by late January. Mothers nurse their pups for about a month before weaning their pup, mating, and departing back to sea. By the end of February most adult seals have returned to the sea, leaving behind hundreds of weaned pups. In March groups of pups play in the dunes and learn to swim in the tide pools before departing to the sea.

State Park volunteer naturalists from the surrounding community take an intensive 21/2 month (65 hour) training course given by California State Parks, prior to the breeding season. During the guided walks, they and Reserve staff will lead visitors among the huge marine mammals and explain both the story of the elephant seals and the other natural and cultural history of the area.

For more information on the elephant seal, the guided walk program, and other features of the Reserve, phone the Reserve at (650) 879-2025, or (650) 879-0227 for recorded information. Visit the Reserve's web site at www.anonuevo.org

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