

THE NORTHERN ELEPHANT SEAL

(*Mirounga angustirostris*)

IN BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERS AND VICINITY¹

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IN THE WINTER of 1935-36 M. E. Lohbrunner of Victoria reported to us that on April 25, 1934, while trolling for salmon 35 miles southward of the "Gander Islands" [Moore, Byers, Harvey and Conroy Islands, B. C., approx. 52° 60' north lat. and 129° 40' west long.] he had seen an adult male elephant seal. The animal permitted close inspection with binoculars.

Again on May 14, 1934, 40 to 50 miles southwest of "South Gander Island" the same or another individual was sighted by Lohbrunner, this time at some distance.

On an unstated date in May or June of the same summer several members of the crew of a whaling vessel reported sighting a bull elephant seal in Queen Charlotte Sound.

These accounts left us convinced that this large seal occurred upon occasion in the waters off the British Columbia coast and led us to make further inquiries.

Many fishermen were questioned but none had seen anything resembling the animal. Our convictions were reinforced, however, by the taking of a specimen at Kasaan, Prince of Wales Island, Alaska, in the winter of 1939-40 (Willett 1943).

Dr. V. B. Scheffer, of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Seattle, Washington, during the course of marine mammal studies off the Washington coast has obtained several circumstantial accounts of the occurrence of elephant seals in the area both recently and in the distant past. These he has generously made available to us as follows.

An individual was sighted in August 1941, 70 miles west south west of Cape Flattery, Washington, by Chris Svendsen of 3200 East 62nd Street, Seattle, while trolling for tuna. Svendsen has fished off the Pacific northwest coast for 40 years and has frequently seen elephant seals, called by him "mermaids."

They are seen in the summer months in calm weather 60 to 70 miles off shore. They go through shark nets with ease and have never been caught by any of the local fishermen. He reports three of four "kinds" [ages and sexes?] all distinct from the sea lions of which Svendsen has seen thousands along the northwest coast and among the Shumagin Islands, Alaska.

In the case of the individual noted in August 1941, Mr. Svendsen brought his 60 ft. boat quietly up to within a few feet of the seal and noted that it was "almost as long as the boat, had a hairy body, and round head with a long nozzle tilted backward." [The size is of course an exaggeration but reflects the impression of great bulk conveyed by this seal.]

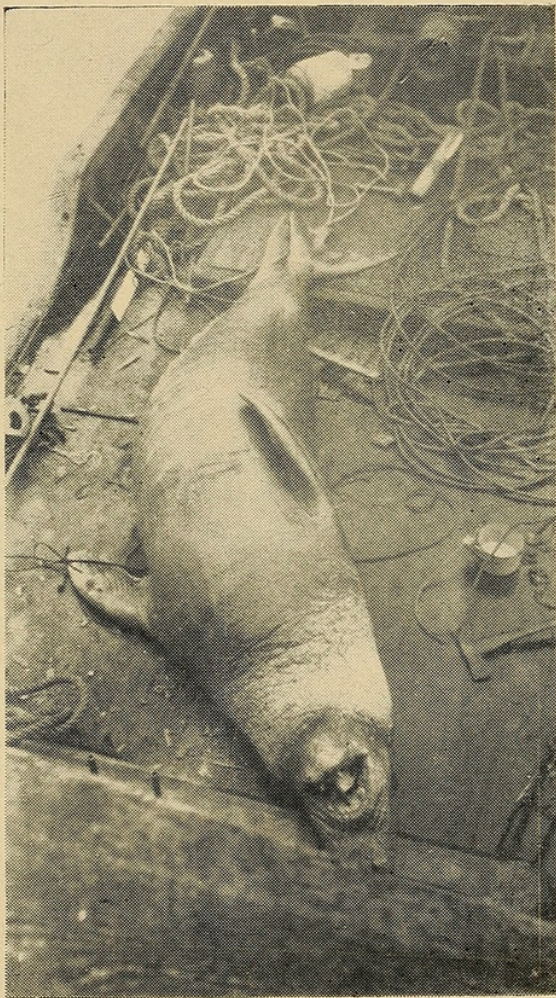
Carl Julius, fisherman of Point Roberts, Washington, interviewed by Scheffer on June 16, 1942, stated that elephant seals are occasionally seen. He and Richard Peltier told of seeing an "elephant seal" several times over a 3-4 week period, the last about two months previously. It was seen at Point Roberts light, at the dock and on the beach. It was said to be as large as a sea lion, chocolate colour, "over a ton," raised its rump out of the water when swimming, and was once within 75 feet of them. It had a long snout. Nothing like it had been seen before.

The description of this specimen as "chocolate colour might tend to throw some doubt upon its identity but if the long snout was actually observed and not added afterwards this detail alone could be considered diagnostic.

On October 25, 1944, J. W. Slipp and V. B. Scheffer interviewed, through an interpreter, an old Makah native, Lance Kallappa [spelling?], perhaps 90 years of age.

Kallappa stated that the elephant seal was familiar to him, and to his father and grandfather when they used to hunt fur seals 20 miles or more off the Strait of Juan de Fuca,

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Northern elephant seal (*Mirounga angustirostris*) taken near Pine Island,
Queen Charlotte Strait, September 22, 1944.

He had never killed one although he had seen the animal close at hand. It is called *lik kwa si* by the Makah, which means one who draws his neck in, or hunches his shoulders. It is lighter in colour than the Steller's sea lion and larger. It stands more or less upright in the water. The smallest ones are as large as a harbor seal [100-300 lbs.?] and have a single hump or ridge on the snout. The number of ridges increases with age up to about four.

Only one elephant seal at a time was seen, never mother and young. The only time the Makah ventured out this far was in the spring, and so they have no information as to whether the seals are present in other seasons..

The flippers are hairy. The flesh good to eat. The bones are somewhat like halibut [translated as porous by the interpreter], light and with more holes than the sea lion. The natives always butchered elephant seals at sea, never brought them to land entire. Live or stranded ones were never, to his knowledge, seen on the Washington coast itself.

John Markishtum and two other men who were fur sealing [off Cape Flattery?] two or three years ago saw an elephant seal.

The above description contains sufficient detail to make it certain that the Makah had encountered the elephant seal with fair frequency and that formerly at least it was of fairly regular occurrence as far north as Cape Flattery.

One further possible sight record from the British Columbia coast is contained in a letter from Charles Haan, fisherman, of Prince Rupert, B. C. received on December 29, 1944. He tells of seeing a beast answering the description of an elephant seal off the west coast of the Queen Charlotte Islands. "It looked much the same as a sea lion in colour but with a different shaped head and seemed to move much slower in the water." What made

us first notice it was that it would stand straight up in the water about 5 feet high and remain that way for quite a little while."

The final and incontrovertible evidence of occurrence in British Columbia waters was obtained when a large male was shot near Pine Island, Queen Charlotte Strait, on September 22, 1944.

According to A. Lyon of Port Hardy, who informed us of the capture, this animal had been reported at and near Pine Island since the first part of May, 1944. Several times in the three years previous Lyon had heard fishermen mention "a large, grey-headed sea lion" in the vicinity of the Scott Islands, off the northern tip of Vancouver Island. These are only some 50 miles from the place of capture of the specimen and it is possible that this or another elephant seal was involved rather than a sea lion.

The specimen was 15 feet long but other measurements were not taken. However, this with the excellent photographs furnished by Lyon make possible its determination as an adult male.

The skull is destined for the Provincial Museum.

In view of the above records and in the absence of any precise knowledge of the whereabouts of the elephant seals of the Guadalupe Island herd outside the pupping season (Davidson, 1929), it seems plausible to suggest that they lead a pelagic existence through waters well to the north of the breeding colony and not infrequently reach British Columbian latitudes.

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