

Field day Summary

Location: Año Nuevo

Observer: Tamara Russell

Volunteer, Day 1

So far this quarter, the other new volunteers and I, have spent our Saturdays at Long Marine Laboratory. We are learning about the elephant seals, the proper procedure for collecting data, and the research that is conducted by the lab.

Weeks of learning about these animals can only do so much to prepare you for being around them. Earlier today, when I first went out into the field to help with the flipper tag observations, I thought, "They aren't as big as I imagined." But soon, that thought was wiped away as I got closer and saw its enormous body move up and down as it breathed. Its blubbery sides spilled out upon the sand.

I won't forget the first time I approached a seal - the juvenile flopped its head back upon its body with astonishing flexibility. It seemed to fold in half backwards. As it rolled its head to its back, I was met with large circular eyes. I felt I could look into them with such intensity I could get lost in the expanse.

Elephant seals' eyes are dark and hauntingly beautiful. The trance of this stare was quickly interrupted by the most peculiar sound I have ever heard an animal make. I looked for the source of this noise, a noise like a giant blowing bubbles through a straw while slightly humming at the same time. It was coming from two seals laying in the shallow waves. They seemed to be chatting while they relaxed and let the waves crash over them. I can say from this brief moment, I was smitten.

We walked along the beach, continuing to identify tagged seals. At the same time we watched the seals play and appreciated the overall abundance of wildlife and scenery of Año Nuevo.

After working our way up the beach, we came to a location that was high in elephant seal activity. As we approached the large group, we spotted an isolated seal that had a large plastic ring stuck around its neck.

The strong plastic had cut deeply around the seal's neck. Luckily, the young seal was found early enough to help. The Marine Mammal Center was called. We later found out that with a collaborative effort the seal was able to be safely freed from the marine debris, which turned out to be a boat porthole! With the amazing way that these seals can recover from shark attacks and male combat wounds, they say this seal will fully recover.

The experience of my first day in the field with these seals made me captivated by their peculiarity and also made the issue of marine debris personal. It made me upset, but also motivated. There is so much work to be done to mitigate our negative effect on this planet, and we can all play a part of it. The more we understand the world around us, the more we are connected to it and can hopefully change and adapt new ways of sharing the world in a healthy way with the species we have left.

TAMARA