

The Adventures of Sharkface

by

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Introduction



In my university youth, I was extremely fortunate to attend the University of California at Santa Cruz as a graduate student. At the time, fifty years ago, I was taken under the wing of a young professor who had just gotten involved in unraveling the lives of giant sea creatures known by the scientific name of *Mirounga angustirostris*, the northern elephant seal.

In 1970, their farthest north breeding colony was on an Island, Año Nuevo, off the coast of California north of Santa Cruz. I spent two breeding seasons on Año, watching and taking notes on hundreds of seals as they went about their daily business of intimidating, fighting, giving birth, suckling and copulating, and I got to know many of them as individuals (we were able to mark most of the seals on the island for identification) and have had memories of them ever since.

The studies, in which I was an early apprentice researcher, continued for fifty-two years and were pivotal to the understanding of the cornerstone of natural selection, the reproductive success of individuals.*

Elephant seals are the largest of the seal clan; the males are the dimensions of a Cadillac Sedan deVille, the females one third their size. The bulls are noted for their scarred hide, their aggressive character, especially towards their rivals, their resonant bellow, and their gigantic (hence their name) noses, known as snotters. They once thrived on the mainland and offshore islands from Mexico nearly to Canada, but their thick layers of stored fat, which when rendered yielded a valuable oil, nearly led to their demise.

On land, elephant seals are afraid of nothing save another elephant seal. Even humans, barely get their attention; consequently, they were easy to kill. Their numbers declined rapidly until the early twentieth century when the species was reduced to one group of a male or two and a small number of females on Guadalupe Island off the coast of Mexico. They were virtually extinct when they were protected by the Mexican government and, since then, their comeback has been nothing short of miraculous with a current population estimate of around 200,000 animals.

In 2004, when I was on an expedition to Guadalupe Island, their “ancestral” home, I came across an enormous bull who had

a harem of twenty or so females. He was scarred, but un-bowed and he could chase away his rivals with only a look. He was covered with healed gashes from the top of his head to his chin; one passed through his left eye, which was reduced to a glob of scarred pulp. He had been bitten in the head by a great white shark, many of which are prevalent off the beach. He was one of the most impressive bulls I have ever seen; I called him Sharkface, and he became my hero and an inspiration for me to write the stories of his travels and adventures. To me, he was Odysseus, Uncle Wiggly, Alice in Wonderland and Forest Gump all rolled into one.

The tales in *The Adventures of Sharkface* are obviously fiction, but they are all based on a kernel of truth about elephant seals and the various creatures Sharkface meets on his journey.

I have been charged, by many of the best, with excessive anthropomorphism, and to that charge, I plead guilty.

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*LeBoeuf, B. J., Condit, R. and J. Reiter, 2019: Lifetime Reproductive Success of Northern Elephant Seals, *Mirounga angustirostris*. Can J. Zool.97: 1203-1217.