

## First elephant seal born at Race Rocks

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Times Colonist

A baby elephant seal born at Race Rocks a few nights ago is the ecological reserve's first, and might be the most northerly birth of the mammal recorded, say the area's guardians.

"This area has long been a place where elephant seals come, but we've never seen anything like this," said Garry Fletcher, a volunteer warden who manages [racerocks.com](http://racerocks.com). "Babies are usually born in Baja California, not this far north."

Fletcher has been involved with the provincial reserve since the mid-1970s as an instructor with Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific,

which uses the park — south of William Head near East Sooke — as a teaching site.

He said the elephant seals started showing up on the rocks in the '80s for a month or two. "Now there are seals here almost year-round," he said, adding animal populations often fluctuate for no clear reason.

Larry Paik, conservation protection supervisor for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, said he's never heard of an elephant seal being born here before. He said the elephant seal population has expanded "tremendously" over the last 20 years and moved north. Prior to that, they had almost been hunted to extinction and were living in small groups in Mexico, he said.

The past year has seen at least four elephant seal sightings on the Island, an unprecedented number, Paik said. While they were infrequent visitors before, "Now it's like they've taken up residence."

Ryan Murphy, the resident marine biologist at Race Rocks, was the first to spot the baby seal Friday morning near the Race Rocks helicopter pad.

Murphy said he was going to investigate the scarring on an adult female when he saw another adult female with a young male that had been following her around. "Beside them was this tiny pup that must've been born sometime the night before," said Murphy, 26, who started his work at the

site eight weeks ago. He's kept a close watch on the newborn seal since. "This morning it had milk around its mouth, which is a good sign that he's feeding ... The pup was the size of a small dog when he was born and now he's as big as a harbour seal."

The unusual birth is the latest indication of increased elephant seal activity on the Island.

"We are definitely getting more seals spotted around here moulting," said Fletcher, referring to the process in which elephant seals shed their skin and hair and grow a new layer. "But it's usually around June."

Earlier this month, a young elephant seal caused a commotion in upscale Ten Mile Point



RYAN J. MURPHY, PEARSON COLLEGE

The pup, born a few nights ago, is already as big as a harbour seal.

when it settled in a roadside ditch to moult, returning to the ocean a few days later.

In November of last year, the body of an enormous male elephant seal washed up on a Nanaimo beach. Biologists were doubly mystified by what killed the seal — weighing

2,700 kilograms and 4.1 metres long — and why it was there. The species had never been spotted in the Strait of Georgia before. Blunt force was ruled the likely cause of the animal's death, possibly due to a run-in with a boat or whale.

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