

Short Note

A southern elephant seal *Mirounga leonina* (Linn.) resident on the Skeleton Coast, S.W.A./Namibia.

by

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A female southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) has been sighted several times at the South African fur seal colony at Cape Frio (18°25' S, 12°E) on the Skeleton Coast - SWA/Namibia. This animal, which measured 3,4 m in length, was first observed in November 1983, and although it was not always present when the area was revisited, it has frequently been resighted at Cape Frio (Table 1). Size and diagnostic scars were used to positively identify the animal at each sighting and this, together with the fact that this species can be regarded as an uncommon vagrant to this area (J.H.M. David pers.comm.), enhances the possibility of the same animal having been observed on each occasion.

Ross (1969) reports that individual southern elephant seals have been recorded sporadically along the southern African coastline, while Best (1971) regards visits by this species as being fairly frequent. Since 1941, 28 confirmed sightings and two unconfirmed sightings have been recorded along the west coast of southern Africa (Oosthuizen et al. in press.) The majority of these sightings have been of male animals observed during the summer months between October



PLATE I: The female elephant seal resident at Cape Frio showing signs of moult — October 1985.

TABLE 1: Sightings of the female southern elephant seal at Cape Frio between November 1983 and January 1986.

Data of visit	Elephant seal present (+) or absent (-)	Time of day	Weather
23/11/83	+	12h15	Sunny and warm. Moderate SW. wind
17/ 3/84	-	12h00	Hot, clear and calm.
11/ 5/84	+	14h00	Overcast and cool. Strong SW. wind.
15/ 6/84	-	14h00	Partly cloudy, warm and calm.
16/ 7/84	-	09h45	Clear and cool. Strong SW. wind.
10/ 9/84	-	13h45	Overcast and cool. Strong SW. wind
24/ 9/84	-	10h07	Hot and sunny. Slight N. wind.
11/10/84	+	11h30	Partly cloudy and cool. Strong SW. wind
10/11/84	+	12h15	Overcast, warm and calm.
8/12/84	-	11h35	Overcast and cool. Strong SW wind.
10/ 1/85	-	10h00	Overcast and cool. Strong SW wind.
6/ 2/85	+	11h30	Overcast, hot and calm.
7/ 3/85	+	14h00	Clear and cool. Strong SW wind.
8/ 4/85	+	15h45	Clear and cool. Moderate SW wind.
5/ 5/85	-	15h00	Overcast and cool. Strong SW wind.
31/ 5/85	-	14h00	Clear and warm. Slight SW wind.
3/ 7/85	-	09h41	Overcast and cool. Strong SW wind.
30/ 7/84	-	08h00	Overcast and cold.
17/ 9/85	-	12h00	Overcast, warm and calm.
14/11/85	+	14h00	Partly cloudy and warm. Moderate SW wind.
19/ 1/86	+	13h20	Partly cloudy and warm. Slight SW wind.

and March (Ross 1969, Best 1971, Oosthuizen et al. in press.) The elephant seal at Cape Frio is the 14th confirmed record from South West Africa since 1951, five of which, all females, have been observed along the Skeleton Coast (Oosthuizen et al. in press).

Ross (1969) reports that the nearest breeding rookeries of the southern elephant seal are on the Prince Edwards Islands (46°50'S, 37°50'E). He suggests that the elephant seals recorded along the southern African coastline originate from these areas and presumes that the animals observed along the South West African coast have been carried northwards by the Benguela current. Best (1971) regards the need for moulting to take place on land as the main reason for elephant seals coming ashore on the southern African coast. Moulting of elephant seals on Marion Island occurs between November and April and temperature and radiation are regarded as being the most important factors regulating the moult cycle (Condy 1979). The elephant seal at Cape Frio showed obvious signs of moulting during October and November 1984 and during October 1985.

Although the elephant seal is often seen basking amongst large groups of South African fur seals at Cape Frio, no obvious interaction between the two species has been observed.

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