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## **Southern Elephant Seal**

The Southern Elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) is located around the sub Antarctic near the Antarctic Polar Front. This very large seal received its name because of its massive size and the trunk-like nose of the males.

Southern Elephant seals live on fast ice, which is ice connected to land. These seals typically migrate seasonally. During the winter months they migrate north to South America. The summer months they migrate to the south, Antarctica.

The largest of its kind, the male Southern elephant seal weight ranges 2,200 to 4,000 kg (4,000kg is 8,818 lbs.), and length from 4.2 to 6.2 meters (6.2 m converts to 20.34 feet). In comparison, the Killer whale weighs twice as much and is about 30 ft long. The female weight ranges from 500 to 1,000kg and her length is 2.7 to 3.7 meters long. Adults range in color from dark gray to brown with a lighter coloring on the chest.

The gestation period for females is a little over 11 months. A female elephant seal usually gives birth to one pup annually but rarely has been known to birth two. Mothering seals lactate for about six weeks. Females have been known to foster and adopt other pups. Peak mating season is early November. The male elephant seal reaches sexual maturity between the ages of 4 and 6 years, the female on the other hand reaches her peak from the age of 2 to 7 years. If a full grown male was any larger, it would probably kill the female while trying to mate. Southern elephant seals can live up to 23 years of age.

Since the Southern Elephant seal lives in the Antarctic, they had been known to produce their own breathing holes. The seals create breathing holes by ramming the ice from below with their heads until it breaks. The holes are usually about 60 cm (about 2 ft) in diameter. The average dive time for a Southern Elephant seal is 20 to 22 minutes. The average dive for a Southern Elephant seal is from 30 to 175 meters, but documentation has been shown that they can and sometimes dive deeper than 175 meters.

Feeding typically occurs under water. An adult diet consists of cephalopods (cuttlefish), fish and squid. A pup on the other hand, tends to eat small crustaceans (krill and barnacles). These seals have been known to swallow rocks; the reason behind this is still unknown. The possible theory is because it helps to breakdown large pieces of food and the rocks help to grind up parasitic worms that are known to be in the stomach of the seals. No evidence has proven this theory.

Southern Elephant seals were hunted for centuries for its oil. Now they are regulated by the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals (CCAS). This species also receives additional protection by various countries within its range. Now they are hunted by killer whales and sometimes leopard seals.

In 2002, the estimated population was 750,000. Today's estimated population count is about 700,000. In 2000, the Australian Environmental Minister banned branding of Southern Elephant seals because the brands on the seals became infected which lead to a decline in the health of the total branded seals. Since 1993, 14,000 weaned seal pups have been branded in hopes of tracking the population decline in Southern Elephant Seals. Scientists are unsure of the decline of Southern Elephant seals. Speculation is that it is because of increased amount of fishing of squid and other fish that are in the seals diet.