

2016 Piedras Blancas Northern Elephant Seal Breeding Season Summary

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The number of adult females counted at the rookery (and therefore the number of estimated births) this breeding season was up by more than 400, resulting in an estimate of the number of births being up approximately 8% from last year (to roughly 5,700). Although the number of live young-of-the-year seals counted at the end of the season was a record high (~5,000, Figure 1), this number was up only 2.5% from last year. The difference between the number of estimated births and the number of live pups/weaners/orphans indicates that mortality was approximately 12% this year (compared to approximately 7% last year). The higher mortality this year is almost certainly due to the prolonged periods of large ocean swells that often coincided with high tides. In addition to the direct mortality, it is likely these conditions were responsible for mother-pup separations and the high number of very small orphaned pups seen during the pup/weaner/orphan count this year. Although a subjective measure, the estimate of “very small” seals this year (almost 300) is about three times the number counted last year. As in 2015, deaths of pups/weaners that appeared to be in good body condition were rare (unlike 2014).

The two coastal segments with the biggest increases in pup production this year compared to last year were from Pt. Piedras Blancas to South Point (the first rocky headland down coast from Pt. Piedras Blancas) and from South Point to – but not including – VP-3. There was also an increase at the southern end of the rookery (Arroyo Laguna and south, Figure 2). The segment with the largest decline was the area north of Pt. Piedras Blancas. Fewer numbers at Arroyo del Corral this year compared to last year accounted for this decline (Figure 3). Slightly fewer pups/weaners were counted at VP-3. There were actually more counted off the south end of VP-3, but much fewer off the north end compared to last year.

There was no expansion of the breeding range of the colony this year. Only two pups were counted at the mouth of Arroyo de la Cruz this year, down from 5 last year. Again this year, no pups were born south of Pt. San Simeon.

Figure 1. Total Live Pup, Orphaned Pup, and Weaned Seal Counts at Piedras Blancas (Late February/Early March)

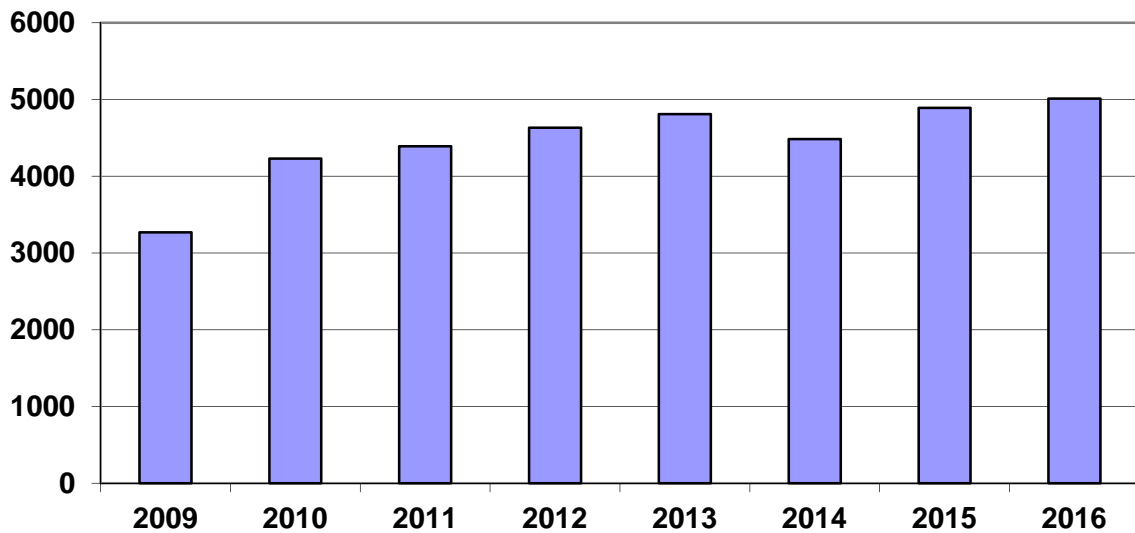
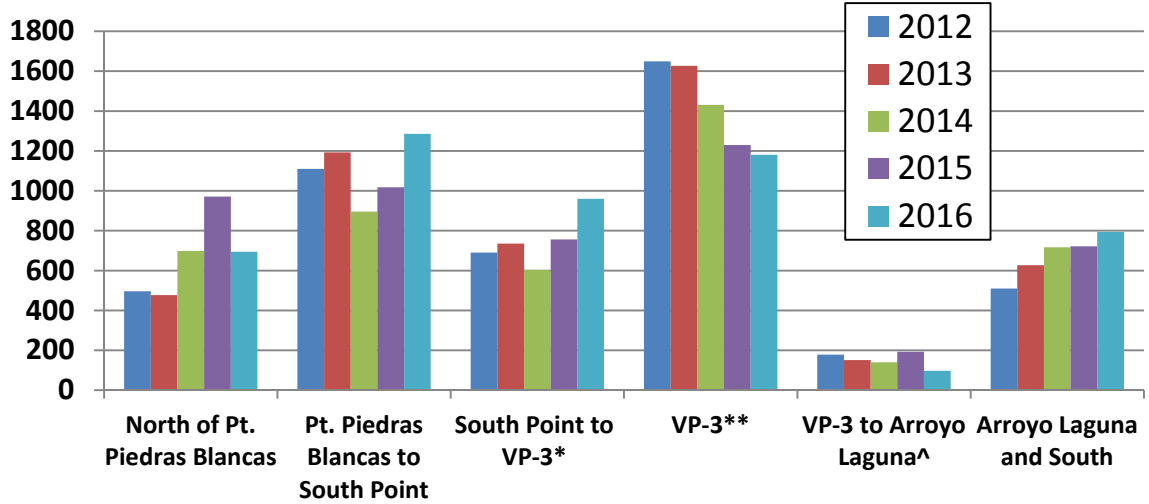


Figure 2. Live Pup and Weaner Counts at Piedras Blancas, By Area (Late February/Early March)



*does not include VP-3 **includes cove just south of dunes ^does not include beach at Arroyo Laguna

Figure 3. Live Pup and Weaner Counts at Arroyo del Corral Beach

