

WHEN TO GO  
Early May and November

WHAT TO BRING  
Telephoto lens (300mm for  
the windsurfers, 400mm+ for  
the elephant seals)  
Polarizing filter  
Tripod

PHOTO POSSIBILITIES  
Windsurfers, elephant seals

# Windsurfers & Elephant Seals Near Hearst Castle

— Carol Leigh



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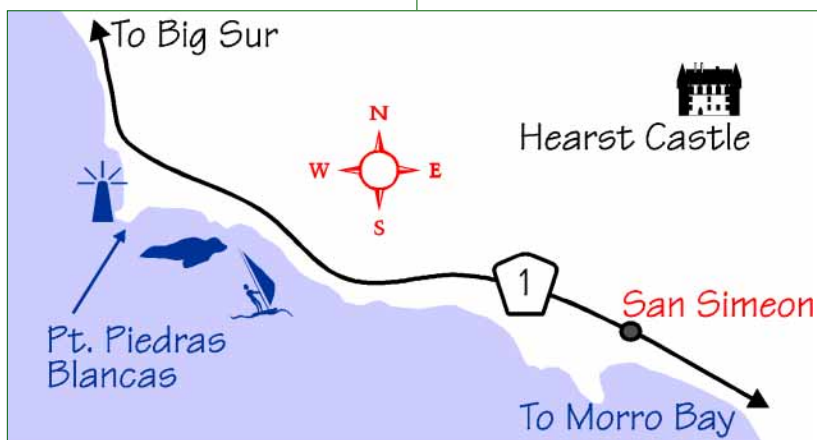
*Photographing windsurfers isn't easy. There's contrasty lighting to worry about, constant recomposing as they zip all over the place, and oh, yes, keep the horizon level.*

This past June, Chris and I were poking around San Luis Obispo County and decided to check out the elephant seals we had heard congregate on the beach near San Simeon. We indeed saw the elephant seals, but the bonus was an area nearby that's popular with windsurfers.

## Elephant Seals

Although elephant seals have been hauling out along this stretch of the coast since the late 1970s, their numbers really

began to increase in 1990 (peak count in the spring of 1996 was about 4,000 or more!). You'll find the highest numbers of elephant seals here in early May, during the peak of their molting season. The second-highest numbers of elephant seals are here in the fall (peak time being November).





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*Ordinarily I wouldn't show a photo as bad as this, but I want you to see what the actual shooting situation is like if all you have is a 300mm lens. Two groups of seals and sea lions and elephant seals litter the beach like rounded boulders. The best I can say about this photo is at least the horizon's level!*

We pulled into the parking lot on an incredibly windy day — so windy you made sure your gear was well protected before you went anywhere. So windy that the car door was practically ripped out of my hands as I opened it. Undaunted, however, we walked south along the coast from the parking lot, following a path as it led atop the bluffs overlooking the ocean with the seals down below. Docents were on hand to talk about the elephant seals and to make sure no one approached closer than 50 feet. (People are doing stupid things here with the animals, including encouraging children to try to ride these 1000-pound creatures! The word “Darwinism” comes to mind, but I digress . . .)

The longest lens I had with me was a 300mm, and that wasn't nearly long enough to take frame-filling photos of these guys. Even with a longer lens, however, and a sturdy tripod, the wind was blowing so hard that photography would be out of the question. Should you decide to visit, I'd suggest a wind-free day during high tide. Why high tide? The rising waters will encourage the animals to move higher up on the beach — closer to you and your camera.

A mile or less up the coast there were lots more elephant seals, but the parking area had been blocked off, apparently discouraging folks from disturbing the animals up there.

The brightness of the water, the sky, and the sand will tend to fool your camera's meter into underexposing, so keep this in mind as you set up your shots. Also, shooting down onto an animal creates a much less effective composition than if you

were to photograph the animal from its own level. If you're shooting from the bluffs, you're probably going to be shooting down, which isn't good. If your lens is long enough, you may be able to fill your frame with animals a bit farther away, making them look more on your own level than if you were shooting straight down. If the animals are close enough over toward the parking lot, you may be able to walk within the 50-foot range to get good shots. It would be good politics,



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*An elephant seal just offshore.*

too, to talk to a docent before you go plunging down there, letting him or her know what you're up to and that you're not going to annoy, bullyrag, pester, irk, harass, etc. the elephant seals.

### Windsurfers

A few miles south on Highway 1 we saw at least 30 windsurfers just offshore, taking advantage of the intense winds. It was easy to pull into the parking lot, climb over the fence, and walk down to the beach to photograph. In addition to the windsurfers in the water, there were lots more on the beach, enabling you to photograph offshore action with the colorful sail of a windsurfer in the immediate foreground.

Exposure and composition are tricky: the brightness of the sky and the water will fool your camera's meter into underexposing, while the horizon line tips this way and that as you're shooting away. Ascertain your exposure first, before you do any shooting (probably overexposing by a half-stop or so), so you can concentrate solely on composition (and keeping your horizon line level) as your subjects zip about.

### How to get there

Both these photo possibilities were within about 4 miles of each other. The elephant seals are located about two miles south of Piedras Blancas Lighthouse on Highway 1. Look for Call Box #165 and mile markers 64 and 62. The windsurfers can be found just offshore at mile marker 60, near Call Box #599 on Highway 1.