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ELEPHANT SEAL JUVENILE AT CAPE TURAKIRAE, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

(NOTE)

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ABSTRACT

On 30 August 1970, a juvenile elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) was found among an estimated 500 fur seals at Cape Turakirae, Wellington.

On 30 August 1970, in the fur seal (*Arctocephalus forsteri*) colony at Cape Turakirae (41° 26' S, 174° 55' E), I found a phocid seal later identified from photographs (Fig. 1) by Drs C. A. Fleming and R. A. Falla as a 10–11 month-old southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*). Diagnostic features included the almost uniform colouration, and characteristic shape and wrinkles of the hairless nasal region. It was 5–6 ft (1.5–1.8 m) long, of undetermined sex, and was firmly wedged between large boulders well above high tide mark among about 500 fur seals (497 were counted by A. H. Whitaker on 12 August 1970). The seal was obviously weak and was bleeding at the bases of the nails on the front flippers from its efforts to escape. It took about 30 minutes to urge the seal over the boulders and down to the sea. The seal may have been driven up the beach by the more aggressive and agile fur seals, and would probably have died without help.

Southern elephant seals breed on many subantarctic islands, the largest colonies near New Zealand being on Campbell and Macquarie Islands (Falla 1965), although there is one recent record of an elephant seal born at Kaikoura (Bowring and Stonehouse 1968). Elephant seals frequent the whole New Zealand coastline, but whether as strays or migrants is not known (Turbott 1952).



FIG. 1—Juvenile elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) wedged in rocks at Cape Turakirae fur seal colony, 30 August 1970.

This record of a juvenile elephant seal on a North Island beach is unusual, in that yearling elephant seals do not normally haul out further north than Dunedin. Those recorded at Kaikoura are mostly two year old males, while Wellington and other North Island elephant seals are usually at least three years old (R. A. Falla, pers. comm.).

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