

## Encounter with an elephant seal on Gabriola Island, April 20, 2011



A walk with our dog Buster, the last thing at night, along El Verano to the boat ramp and, unless the tide is very high, back along the beach, takes place every night regardless of the weather. We get to see many things on our walks, and the annual movement of the stars has become almost as familiar to me as it probably once did to a petroglyph carver. No doubt, one of the highlights of the walks is a good display of bioluminescence on a moonless night. The water sometimes looks like mercury as you wade through it. Magical! Herring runs and *en masse* red rock crab (*Cancer productus*) mating rituals are fun too.

The other night, it was just past a high 15-foot tide, we heard some very loud breathing and mysterious snorting noises by the rocks at the top of the beach. Both Buster and I knew whatever it was, it was not an otter. Buster is familiar—but definitely not friendly—with all the otters along here, and whatever was making the noise was way too big. Next morning, we found the source still there. It was a rare visitor to Gabriola, a Northern Elephant Seal (*Mirounga angustirostris*).

These seals spend 80% of their lives at sea and seldom visit inland waters, especially this far north. This one was a yearling and was moulting. They sometimes need to haul out at these times as they become susceptible to the cold as blood vessels become visible through their blubber. This one stayed twenty-

four hours at the top of the beach, and then left on the evening high tide to get on with the rest of its life. According to the DFO, we can expect to see more of these around Gabriola in future as they expand their range northward.