



Locals of Silver Strand beach rescue seal pup

By [Carla Iacovetti](#) 08/06/2009

I stumbled upon Joey, an elephant seal pup, one evening while walking along the channel in Silver Strand. He was swimming alongside me, near the rocks. I didn't think much of it until I got onto the sidewalk and watched him swim to shore, scoot along the sand and go directly to the wall where I was standing. I was amazed when he tried following me up the steps leading to the parking lot.

Soon, people began to gather to watch the little pup. Once he reached the edge of the wall, Joey looked up with big brown eyes, and then lay his head down to sleep. Perhaps it was the connection we all felt with Joey, but it seemed that he felt comfort in being near us.

As nighttime approached, several of us locals were concerned. Someone called harbor patrol, who then contacted the Channel Islands Marine and Wildlife Institute (CIMWI), but it had already closed for the night.

CIMWI is a nonprofit organization that dedicated to rescues and rehabilitates marine wildlife that has been injured by either natural or unnatural causes.

The community concern was evident, as we pooled together ideas about how to help the little guy. One woman ran across the street and purchased a bag of fresh fish (bait), with the thought of luring Joey back to the water — or at least away from the steps. Michael Rodriguez, a young man from Oxnard, helped coax him to the water, and Joey really took to him. They actually played in the water together.

As Rodriguez and I fed Joey, we noticed traces of blood in his mouth; and even though he gobbled up the fish, he had difficulty biting down. By 9 p.m., everyone had dispersed, so I decided to go home. However, when Joey saw me leaving, he scooted his way to the wall again. Another call went to the CIMWI. It was still closed, so I left the little pup on the beach and hoped for the best.

The following morning, Joey was lying in the sand about 20 yards from the water. A crowd had gathered, watching and wondering if he was ill. There was evidence that CIMWI had been there, because an area had been roped off to give the seal some space. As I approached the wall, Joey began to scoot his way over, stretching his neck up, as if to say hello to the group. Joey was curiously social.

Breeanna Maldonado and Shelby Abram, two local teens, were strolling down the walk on their bikes when they spotted Joey. “We hung around for a long time,” Breeanna said. “He tried to follow me up the stairs, and I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t believe it!”

We soon spoke by phone with Jennifer Levine, a CIMWI volunteer. “Ron Barrett, one of our trained volunteers, was out there early this morning to evaluate the situation, and we are monitoring him,” she said. The young elephant seal, she said, had previously been tagged in San Pedro’s Marine Mammal Center as an abandoned pup and went through rehabilitation there, which helped to explain why he was so social. He was used to human interaction. I told Levine that a couple of us used fresh fish bait to lure him back to the water the night before, and while she appreciated our concerns, she said feeding or luring a wild animal is never a good idea.

Barrett, a volunteer at CIMWI for 14 years, returned to check on Joey in the afternoon. He said he was concerned that the pup was so social that people would not give him the space he needed to rest. The seal was certainly creating a stir at the beach, and onlookers were taking pictures, hanging over the wall and talking to Joey to get his attention. Barrett told the group that Joey was a male elephant seal having the potential to reach 5,000 pounds at full weight.

Barrett put on some gloves and heavy plastic overalls. The group stood silent as he approached the little seal with a gentle manner. In a moment he was straddling the pup, speaking to it softly and prodding its mouth open to examine him closely. It was not surprising to see the little pup bite down on Barrett’s hand; but when he told us that a seal’s bite is as difficult to break loose from as a pit bull’s, we were aghast. This is one reason people are discouraged from feeding or playing with seals, or wild animals of any kind.

Joey was bleeding on one side of his mouth, and he was missing a tooth. Barrett called Dr. Samuel Dover, CIMWI’s executive director and veterinarian.

Because Joey was previously tagged, CIMWI was able to get immediate information on him. While it is endearing to know that the local kids named him Joey, the institute identifies him by his tag number. “The orange tag placed on his left back flipper tells me this is a male,” Barrett explained. “If it were a female, the tag would be on the right flipper.” The tags are left on so that animals released into their natural environment can be easily identified, should the need arise.

Once Dover called back, and the decision was made to take Joey to the rehabilitation center in Goleta. Barrett asked Victor Lattuca, a transplant from Maine living at Silver Strand, to help get the seal into the oversized dog cage. Both Victor and his wife Allison, who works with a dog rescue group, were excited to be part of Joey’s rescue. Lattuca helped Barrett carefully load Joey into the cage and then into the cabin of Barrett’s truck. I was amazed at how swiftly Barrett took control of the situation and how little stress the seal exhibited.

Barrett explained that the pup would stay in rehab until the chief veterinarian thinks he can survive in

his natural environment. During rehabilitation, he will be monitored daily and receive care that includes feedings, treatment plans, observation and regular examinations by a staff veterinarian. Barrett mentioned that for a pup that is approximately 6 months old, Joey was a little underweight, so undoubtedly the volunteers will concentrate on fattening him up as well.

Once he is ready for reintroduction, he will most likely be released on one of the least human-populated beaches around Santa Barbara.

As a part of the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program, under the direction of the National Marine Fisheries Service, CIMWI rescues thousands of marine animals annually. CIMWI is located at the former Vista Del Mar School campus, south of the Gaviota pass on Highway 101, and it is considered to be first class. The facilities include a hospital, pharmacy, a laboratory with full research capabilities, administrative offices and outdoor pools.

We all stood and waved goodbye to Joey, Silver Strand's little elephant seal pup, and felt a sense of pride and excitement knowing that we had all been a part of his care.

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