

SEA-ELEPHANTS

(Written for "The Listener" by
J. H. SORENSEN)



I RECALL having heard some years ago a then popular song in one part of which the sad fate of a billy-goat was mentioned. The last lines, to the best of my recollection, ran thus:

"And what do you suppose, they cut
off the poor brute's nose,"
"How does he smell, Mr. Gallagher?"
"Something awful, Mr. Sheen!"

"Something awful" might also be well used to describe the smell of the sea-elephants. When shedding their coat, an annual event, these seals lie on tussock or grassy slopes for from five to six weeks. Wallows or depressions in the soft peaty ground are made by the weight of their bodies and, in sub-antarctic latitudes, rain falls with almost monotonous regularity. The condition and stench of a mob of 50 or more huge sea-elephants lying in such places for weeks on end is best left to the imagination.

Great was the delight of other members of coast-watching parties on the Campbells when some unfortunate person slipped into a deserted wallow. Although the unlucky one did not go, like the character who encountered a skunk in David Harum, "into the woods for a week and hate himself," he had to immerse himself completely in the nearest clean pool or arm of the sea, and thoroughly clean and scour all his clothes. Few members of the party escaped this misfortune; hence the delight at the next victim's discomfiture.

The sea-elephants are the largest in size of the sub-antarctic seals. The males, or bulls, as they are generally called, reach 20 feet in length and have a fleshy, inflatable "trunk" which hangs down over the mouth. It is this enlarged nose, found only on adult males, which gives the group its popular name.

Harems and Pups

None of our party on Campbell Island in 1942 had ever seen sea-elephants in their native haunts. Our only knowledge of them was from the occasional animals which had strayed to the mainland of New Zealand. Therefore we kept a close



At top: Mature bull sea-elephant on the shores of Perseverance Harbour, Campbell Island. Below: Cow sea-elephant, with "pup" only a few hours old (Campbell Island)

watch about the time our predecessors had stated the harems would be formed. The first cows hauled out in early September and were immediately gathered into a group by an immense bull which had been cruising around Perseverance Harbour for fully a fortnight. At this time, too, several other harems were formed in other sheltered places around the island.

The pups were born later in the month. They were most attractive little fellows with a glossy black coat of soft velvety fur. Their shrill yapping cries, very like those given by young dogs, were now to be heard in all directions.

Elephant seals, although not entirely devoid of intelligence, are rather stupid. Some cows had congregated near some very deep wallows and into these pools

of slush and filth many pups were continually falling. We then had to do rescue work. It was a two-man job for, while one of us threw a noose of rope around the pup and dragged it protestingly out, another had to fight off the outraged parents with an oar or long stick. So often did the pups fall back in that we finally had to drag them down to a near-by beach. The mothers were attracted to this place by the yapping of the hungry pups and eventually the harem was re-formed there.

The pups begin shedding the black coat a fortnight after birth and it is gradually replaced by velvety bluish-grey fur. They are weaned at three weeks, being then tremendously fat and almost unable to scratch themselves. The

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