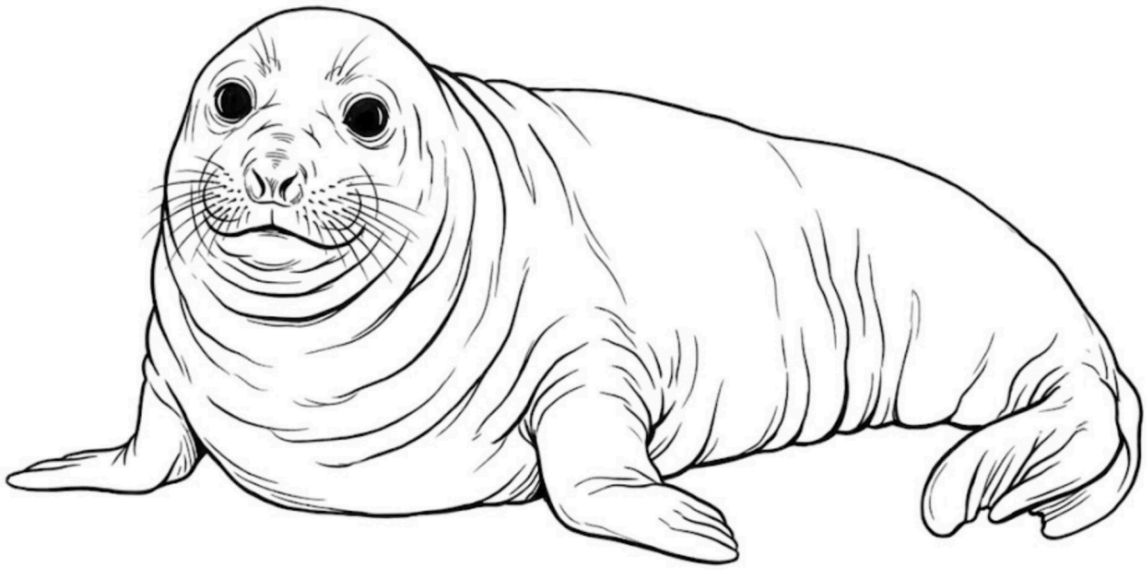
The Elephant of the Sea - Neil the Seal

By Catherine Duffett

Animal migration, Animal adaptations, True story



The storm that night was one to be remembered. It lashed at the small seaside town. The wind howled through the trees all night. Waves crashed and rolled on the beach. The rain pelted on the tin roofs while people tried in vain to sleep despite the chaos outside.

By morning, the only sign that it had been a wild night was the branches broken off the town's trees, which were quickly cleaned up by Council workers. People went about their business. Children went to school. Others went shopping. However, because of that storm, that small seaside town would never be the same again.

That night, during that terrible storm, a pod of elephant seals was migrating south, heading to a sub-Antarctic island where they would go ashore to breed. A heavily pregnant elephant seal, weary from her long journey, became separated from her family and blown off course by the storm. Her baby, eager to be born, forced her to come ashore on the closest land. She heaved her obese body up the beach of that small seaside town that the storm had battered the night before, where she promptly gave birth to her tiny, shrivelled pup, known as Neil.

Neil the Seal spent his first precious weeks with his mother, learning whatever baby elephant seals need to learn. They sheltered among the tall grass, undetected from the

townsfolk going about their business. Then one day, without saying goodbye to his mother, he slipped quietly into the ocean, diving to great depths and enjoying a banquet of fish and squid as he headed towards the icy waters surrounding Antarctica. All this feasting fattened Neil up, forming a layer of blubber that kept him warm on his journey through the freezing waters of the Southern Ocean.

A year later, after many long and tiring months at sea, Neil decided that it was time for a holiday. There was no better place than where he was born. On arriving at that quiet seaside town, Neil wobbled up the beach as best he could. Some rest and relaxation in the sun would give him a chance to shed his fur and top layer of skin and to grow a new coat. He was also looking forward to practising his wrestling skills with fellow elephant seals. He shuffled up the beach on the lookout for other young elephant seals to spar with, but, to his dismay, failed to find any, so continued on his way.

He arrived in the seaside town. While he didn't find a single elephant seal to duel with, he did attract the attention of startled shoppers who quite forgot what business they were going about. Instead, they turned their attention to the new arrival, their mouths agape, whipping their phones from their pockets to share this unusual moment with their social media friends.

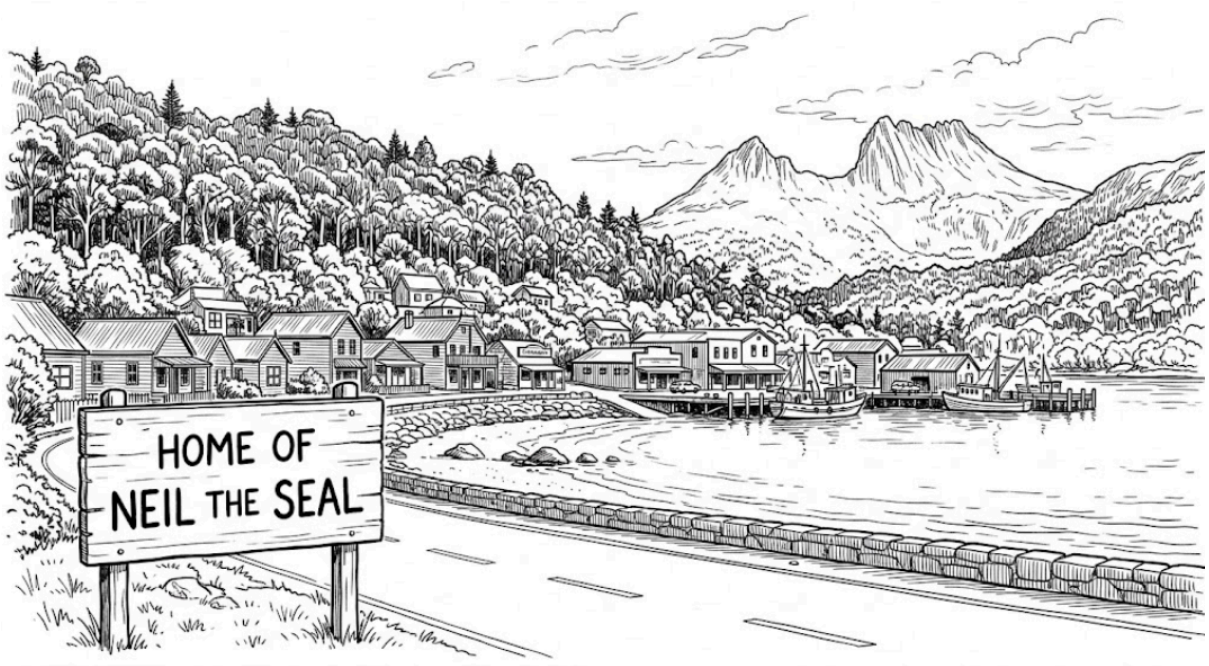
As Neil slowly shuffled his way across the road, what started as a few people stopping to take photos, quickly turned into a sizable crowd. A few individuals, worried that Neil was a traffic hazard, became self-appointed traffic police, waving at the oncoming traffic to slow them down. It wasn't long before a crowd of onlookers gathered. Neil found a street sign that he mistook for a wrestling partner and duly attacked it. Disappointed with the lack of response from the street sign, he continued his hunt for a sparring partner until he thought he had found one. It turned out that it was his own reflection in a car's side mirror!

The next few weeks continued in much the same way, but with Neal the Seal slowly gaining international notoriety via viral social media posts until he quietly returned to the ocean. The town returned to normal, with everyone again going about their usual business. Each year, when the time came for Neil the Seal to shed his fur, he returned to that sleepy seaside town. People started anticipating his arrival and looked forward to him. The years went by like that, until that is, he turned 5 years old.

Exactly on his 5th birthday, Neil emerged from the ocean. Having gorged himself on squid and fish he was now a truly mammoth creature. He heaved his monstrous body up the beach until he reached the town and wobbled towards the closest street sign desperate to relieve his itch, but in the process, bent the sign.

Unbothered by the fact that he damaged the town's property, he continued hauling his colossal body towards a parked car, resting it against the car causing damage to the bonnet. Word began to spread that Neil the Seal was back in town. A crowd of onlookers soon gathered to watch him haul his hefty body across the road, bringing traffic to a standstill. Halfway across, Neil the Seal seemed to have become worn out from the huge effort it took to move his giant body. He promptly fell asleep in the middle of the road.

Neil the Seal's arrival quickly became an even greater viral sensation. He was mobbed by large crowds. People travelled from far and wide hoping to catch a glimpse of Neil, their favourite seal. Neil even took to visiting people at their beachside homes, sunbaking in their backyards. Neil was assigned his own bodyguards to keep the swarming crowds at a safe distance and to redirect traffic when he napped in the middle of a road. Cafes and shops swelled as hordes of tourists flocked to the area. The Government even got involved, creating laws to make sure onlookers weren't tempted to get close up selfies with Neil.



Then suddenly one day, without any warning at all, there was no sign of Neil the Seal, except for a flattened safety barrier near the beach. It is thought he had quietly slipped into the ocean at night, once again embarking on his long journey towards Antarctica. After a while, people stopped looking for him. Tourists flew home. His bodyguards were no longer needed.

Yet Neil left his mark on that town in the form of mangled safety rails, dented cars, and disfigured street signs. His holiday cost thousands of dollars in security and repairs to the town's property. But everyone hoped that Neil, the elephant seal, would come again to spend time in their tiny seaside town.