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BREEDING ACTIVITY OF ANTARCTIC FUR SEALS (*ARCTOCEPHALUS GAZELLA*) AT ELEPHANT IS., SOUTH SHETLANDS, ANTARCTICA.

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In 1997, a small group of AFS was reported breeding at Stinker Point, Elephant Is. Since then, number of Antarctic fur seals present at Elephant Island during the austral summer has been increasing and the presence of breeding males and females has been confirmed. The present study aims to describe the general pattern of occurrence of AFSs at Stinker Pt., their breeding activities and to provide information on the foraging cycle (duration of foraging trips) and pup growth during the first six-weeks after birth in 2004-2005. This study was carried out at Stinker Pt., Elephant Is. in 1997/1998, 1998/1999, 2003/2004 and 2004/2005. Daily surveys conducted throughout the study period ensured that the number of Antarctic fur seal was recorded such that the temporal and spatial distribution of individuals was known. In 2002/2003 only two single counts of pinnipeds present in the study area were performed in mid December and early March. In 2004/2005, in addition to the census, all pups born in the study area and their mothers were individually marked with hair-dye after birth. Pups were captured by hand, placed on a small capture bag and weighed to the nearest 0,1kg using a digital scale shortly after female departures and arrivals from foraging trips. Initial pup weights were obtained no later than a week after birth (3/10 pups) and/or within a day of being born (7/10 pups). The results show that there has been an increase in the number of Antarctic fur seals present at Elephant Island during the austral summer. This increase in numbers is also accompanied by the establishment of a small breeding group in the area. The average duration of foraging trips reported for female AFSs in the present study are higher than average values reported for other breeding colonies. This may indicate that in 2004/2005 females had to travel far away in order to efficiently forage. It is important to continue monitoring these individuals over longer periods of time in order to establish whether there are interannual differences in foraging which may be attributed to differences in prey availability. On the other hand, differences in individual foraging patterns within years might be attributed to differences in foraging strategies by individual females. Thus, Elephant Is. represents an interesting site to investigate ecological factors and genetic aspects of a small group of AFSs in light of potential environmental variability.