



**“I’m pinned on my back and can’t seem to roll over on either side. Then I hear loud snorting and yelping sounds.”**

**WHERE:** CHANNEL ISLANDS  
**THE FIND:** THERMAL FRIENDS

**T**here’s no joy in being wet and cold, especially now, when my down sleeping bag is considerably soggy. I knew what I was getting into when I decided to circumnavigate the islands of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa, roughly 30 miles off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, in my trusty blue Necky kayak.

These two isles are joined by the Santa Barbara, Anacapa and San Miguel Islands in comprising the Channel Islands National Park. It’s one of the most remote parks in North America, despite being only 60 miles west of the Los Angeles megalopolis. The islands are also known as “the Galapagos of the north” for their unique biodiversity — and they’re one of my favorite places on earth to paddle.

One thing is certain while kayaking around the craggy chain: Gale-force

winds out of the northwest are going to rear their ugly head during the journey.

During this particular episode, I am paddling into a rather nasty head wind on the southwest side of Santa Rosa Island. By the time I reach Sandy Point on the western tip of the island, the wind velocity has increased and I’m battling a swell in the solid 6-foot range.

I sneak between several knobby sea stacks cloaked in acorn barnacles, black mussels and frothy white water, when my luck runs out and several waves eject me from my kayak. The dry bag holding my sleeping bag breaks free from my kayak into the water. Fortunately, a thick canopy of giant kelp keeps it from completely sinking.

After climbing back into my kayak, I retrieve my dry bag, reattach it to the stern and continue on through unpredictable seas. When I finish the 22 miles at Arlington Canyon, my stiff

legs gingerly step across a deserted, driftwood-strewn beach. I pitch my tent and open my dry bag. As I expected and to my dismay, my sleeping bag is soaked.

It’s almost dark, and the wind is picking up momentum. To keep warm, I wear every article of clothing that I brought with me, but I’m still cold while curled up on my sleeping pad inside my tent. Despite being chilled to the bone, I somehow fall asleep.

Just after midnight, something rouses my slumber. I’m initially confused because I’m pinned on my back and can’t seem to roll over on either side. Then I hear loud snorting and yelping sounds. What in the world? I quickly realize that two northern elephant seal pups outside of my tent are the reason, squeezing me on either side. I guess even well-insulated marine mammals like them need to get out of the water to rest and warm up. I laugh out loud. My tent poles are bowing



inward, but amazingly, they don't snap.

Known as weaners, elephant seal pups are freshly separated from their mothers, and after two months of nursing, they typically weigh a robust 300 pounds. During their first year away from mum, they generally stay behind, not attempting the long, arduous journey back to the frigid Bering Strait in Northwest Alaska. It seems I have two weaners on my right and one on my left, roughly 900 pounds of insulation to help get me through this windy, chilly evening. With the full moon, I can make out their rotund silhouettes through the white walls of my tent. At one point, the closest one presses its face into mine, only a thin layer of nylon separating me and the curious pinniped.

Despite the tight confines, I fall back asleep and assume my new tent mates do the same. I'm thankful it's the pups that are cuddling me instead of a full-grown 3,000-pound bull, with its floppy snout squashing me. Plus, we're all able to keep each other warm and cozy.

Dawn breaks and I have no trouble rolling over. The weaners must have left



my campsite sometime in the early morning. I unzip the front tent flap and find two of the adorable, teary-eyed weaners lying on their sides facing me. I exit through the rear tent flap so as not to disturb them, and I'm greeted by dark, cobalt blue seas and frothy wind-whipped white water. Another wet, challenging day on the water is ahead of me, but the weaners don't seem to mind. Dozens of them are busy frolicking in the surf without a care in the world. They jostle and posture with one another, rolling their bulbous bodies in the small surf. I, on the other hand, prepare to paddle on into heavy seas while bracing against stiff, piercing winds, leaving my newly found tent mates behind. — *Chuck Graham*