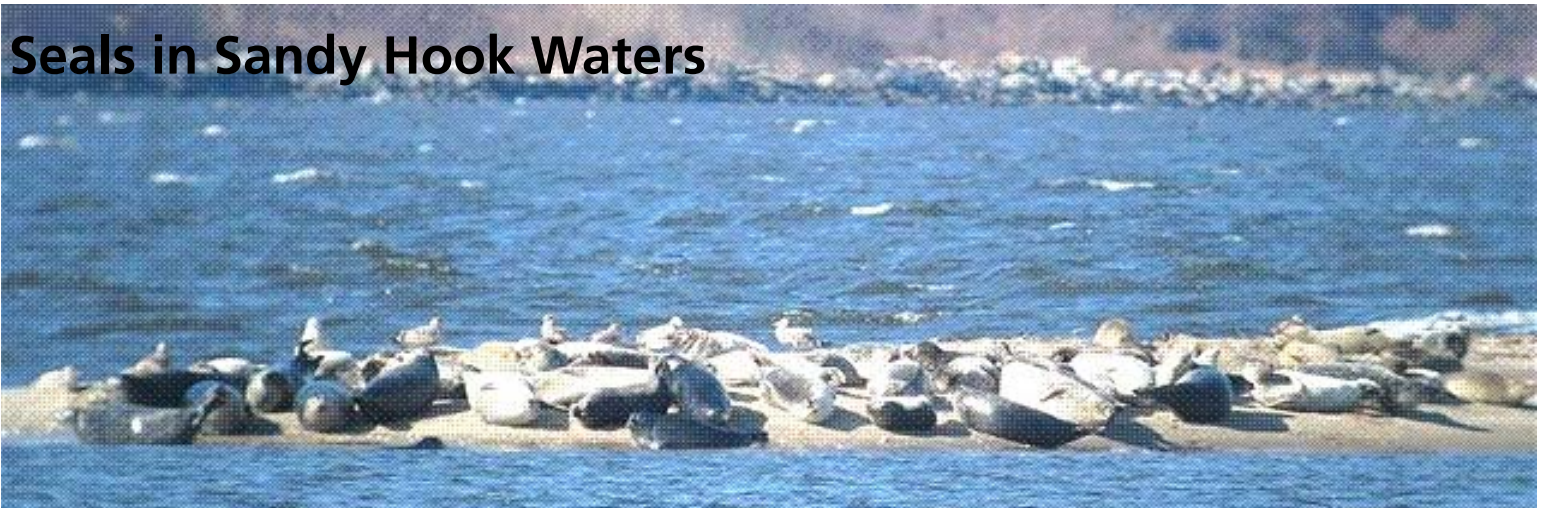


Sandy Hook Plants and Wildlife Series

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Gateway National Recreation Area

Seals in Sandy Hook Waters



Seals are commonly seen on Sandy Hook's Skeleton Hill Island in winter

Description and Habitat

Seals, along with sea lions and walruses, are classified in a warm blooded group called “pinnipeds.” Sandy Hook’s seal visitors are “true seals” lacking external ear flaps, unlike its relative the sea lion. They are also smaller and more skittish. Their long, hairless, front flippers are used for propulsion in water while the hind flippers are used for steering. The hind flippers can also be brought forward and under the body, allowing them to flop along on their bellies. Seals have a thick blubber layer which, combined with a fur coat, protects them in frigid climates.

Pinnipeds spend most of their lives in the water but come on land to give birth, raise their young and to molt. They can sleep in water but must wake up frequently to surface and breathe. They are gifted swimmers, able to dive up to 1,500 feet for as long as 40 minutes. Submerged seals use oxygen stored in their blood and muscles as well as their lungs. Large eyes protected by oily “tears” assist the seal in dark waters. In a “haul out” seals land on protected beaches or spits to bask in the sun. Haul outs on Sandy Hook can be seen from December through March.

Status

Depending on where it lives, a seal needs to guard against killer whales, sharks, polar bears, walruses, coyotes, eagles and of course people. Harbor seals eat many of the same species commercially fished, and until 1960 there was a bounty on them. In Canada, Norway, and the United Kingdom it is still legal to shoot harbor seals when protecting fisheries or fish farms. Seals can also get entangled and drown in commercial fishing nets.

Fortunately in the United States with the passing of the Clean Water Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act in the early 1970’s, the seal population along the northeast coast has been increasing. The Protection Act made it illegal to hunt, capture, kill, or harass seals or other marine mammals in federal waters. Over the last decade at Sandy Hook, seal counts have shown a dramatic rise presenting a hopeful sign that their population is stable.

What can you do?

Since beachcombers, surfers and kite boarders recreate at Sandy Hook even in the winter, seals and humans must learn to co-exist with each other. People should watch from a distance. Seals are wild carnivores with sharp teeth and they have a flight-or flight response to threats. While birthing does not occur at Sandy Hook, human encroachment can scare them off and disrupt their search

for food. When spotting seals by boat or on land, the legal distance between human and seal is a 100 feet. If seals are in a group on a spit, they are probably just enjoying the sun. Seals are group animals and it is unusual to find individuals alone unless they are injured or otherwise need attention. When encountering a seal alone on the beach, report the sighting to a park ranger.

Atlantic Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)



Harbor seals are the most widely distributed pinniped. American and Canadian populations are estimated at 70,000. They are found in temperate, subarctic, and arctic coasts of the North Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. When hauling out on Sandy Hook, they may be on beaches, sand and mud bars and in winter on bay ice floes. Groups of harbor seals tend to stay within 15 miles of the shoreline but individuals are sometimes found up to 60 miles offshore. *Phoca vitulina* means “sea dog” or “sea calf” as their blunt rounded head when viewed from the surface resembles a dog. Whiskered snouts and huge soulful eyes also aid in its resemblance to man’s best friend.

FAST FACTS

Size: Average length 5 ft.
Male 200-375 lbs; Female 200 lbs

Identification: Dark brown sides with light rings; belly with dark spots; “dog-like” head.

Range: Alaska to California. Hudson Bay. Greenland to the Carolinas

Breeding: North Atlantic & Pacific coasts; Baltic North Seas. Males mature 3-7 years. Females 3-6 years

Off-Spring: A single pup born on land in April weight 8-26 lbs.

Food: Cod, mackerel, herring; crustaceans; octopus or squid

Lifespan: 25-30 years

Harp Seal (*Phoca groenelandica*)



Juvenile Harp Seal

An ice-breeding seal whose name comes from the horseshoe or “harp” shaped pattern on the seal’s back and sides. The scientific name *Phoca groenelandica* means “seal of Greenland.” Harp seals resemble harbor seals but are somewhat larger. Young harp seals are all white, which helps them to blend in with the snow. Adults are grey or white with black markings on their back and head. The largest stock gathers on the pack ice off the coast of eastern Canada. Native Inuit people in the region hunt seal as they have for thousands of years. The majority of commercial sealing occurs in an area known as “The Front” in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This controversial practice is closely monitored by the Canadian government.

FAST FACTS

Size: Average length 5 ½ ft.
Male 300 lb; Female 260 lbs

Identification: Black head with pointy nose. Adult male has white coat with black “harp shaped marking; female gray with V-shape less visible, young are entirely white at birth

Range: Arctic Ocean & White Sea. North Atlantic from Greenland to Virginia

Breeding: Arctic Ocean, Greenland & Newfoundland. Sexual maturity at 6-8 years; dependent on pack ice for mating

Off-Spring: Single pup born in late February weighing 20 lbs

Food: Herring, cod, crabs and invertebrates

Lifespan: 35 years

Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)



The male grey seal has a long horse-like or “roman nose” which is the basis for its Latin name, *Halichoerus grypus*, meaning hooked-nose sea pig. Grey seals breed from eastern Canada to the Baltic Sea. Mating takes place on land, on ice or in the water. Young seals may wander widely and as pups they grow fast on their mother’s fat rich milk adding up to 3 pounds per day until weaned at around three weeks of age. Most grey seals prefer to haul out on remote sand bars and in the north waters rocky areas and reefs to haul out. Grey seals, however, are the least common of all three seal species to find in Sandy Hook waters.

FAST FACTS

Size: Average length 6 ½ -8 ft.
Male 375-800 lb; Female 220-570 lbs

Identification: Males dark gray or brown with light spots; female lighter coat with dark spots.

Range: Baltic Sea. North Atlantic from Labrador to New England and south to Virginia.

Breeding: Labrador to New England and in Baltic Sea. Males sexually mature 4-6 years. Females 3-5 years

Off-Spring: Single pup born on a beach between July and November weighing 35 lbs

Food: Wide variety of fish, crustaceans and cephalopods

Lifespan: 20 years

For More Information

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