



Harbor Seals



Harbor Seals at Point Reyes

When you walk along a trail overlooking the numerous pocket beaches of Point Reyes, you may catch a glimpse of harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*). They often haul out along the Pacific Coast from the Bering Sea to Baja California, sometimes in large numbers at established colony sites. Harbor seals are curious animals when in the water, and often lift their heads out of the water to look around. Sometimes when they see a person walking on the shore or kayaking, they follow at a distance of as close as 50 feet in the bays and estuaries of the park.

Their curiosity and habit of hauling onto land to warm themselves in the sun provides nature enthusiasts a chance for an excellent wildlife sighting, but also makes the harbor seal vulnerable to disturbance. Harbor seals are shy animals whose habits are easily disrupted by the presence of human activity.

How to Identify Harbor Seals

Harbor seals, northern fur seals, California sea lions, Steller sea lions, and northern elephant seals are the five species of pinnipeds a visitor might see at Point Reyes. Harbor seals can usually be distinguished from elephant seals by size alone. The harbor seal is rather small, only getting up to five to six feet in length and 250 pounds in weight. In comparison, bull elephant seals range in weight from 3,000 to 5,500 pounds, while females can weigh from 800 to 1200 pounds. However, yearling and weaned elephant seal pups weigh about 300 pounds, so a young elephant seal could be mistaken for an adult harbor seal, if one attempts to identify the seal by its size.

What color is the seal? While young elephant seals are a uniform gray, harbor seals are typically silver, white or gray, with black spots, although some harbor seals also are black or brown with white spots. Sometimes a harbor seal may have a reddish colored

head or body, which is due to iron oxide deposits on the hair shafts.

Harbor seals and elephant seals are in the Family Phocidae (the earless seals), so unlike sea lions and fur seals, they do not have external ear flaps on the head, just a small hole where their ear is. Harbor seals and elephant seals drag their body inchworm fashion around on land, on beaches, or other nearshore substrates that have a low slope. Sea lions, in contrast, can rotate their pelvis forward and walk on all four limbs, enabling them to use steep, rocky shoreline habitat unavailable to harbor seals. Harbor seals also differ from sea lions in their smaller size and lighter color. When in water, harbor seals propel themselves with their hind flippers in a sculling motion, and steer with their front flippers, whereas sea lions and fur seals propel themselves with their fore-flippers, like wings.

Why Harbor Seals Haul Out

Harbor seals haul out (come onto shore) almost daily to rest and to warm up. They cannot maintain their body temperature if they stay in cold water for long due to their relatively small size and thin blubber.

All pinnipeds give birth on land, and that is one fact that distinguishes them from cetaceans, i.e., whales and dolphins. Harbor seals give birth between March and June on tidal sandbars, rocky reefs, and pocket beaches. They can give birth on areas which are

inundated at high tide because harbor seal pups, unlike most pinniped species, can swim at birth. During the pupping season, mother seals will spend more time onshore nursing pups and resting, for an average of around 10–12 hours per day. The mother harbor seal stays with the pup almost continuously and rarely leaves the pup alone onshore. Mothers can take their pups with them when they go swimming and feeding because pups are adept swimmers.

Harbor Seals Vulnerable to Disturbance

When seals and other pinnipeds haul out, they are extremely vulnerable to human disturbance. They will often react when humans come within 300 feet. Their reactions can be anything from a head alert—lifting their head—to flushing—retreating into the water. Harbor seals leave their haul-out sites when harassed by people, dogs, boats, aircraft, or other human actions. Even a temporary disruption stresses the animal by cutting into its time to warm up, rest, and nurture young. Harbor seals may also abandon a haul-out site permanently due to high and chronic incidences of human disturbance.

The pupping and molting seasons from March through July is an especially vulnerable time for harbor seals. While hiking along the shores of the Pacific during these months, you may come across a seal pup alone on the beach. It is most likely not abandoned. The mother is probably in the water nearby feeding. However, if a mother is repeatedly disturbed on a site with her pup, she may decide to abandon her pup for the safety of the water, so please be sure to stay well away from any seals you see.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972

The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 provides federal protection not only to harbor seals, but also to elephant seals, sea lions, whales, porpoises, sea otters, and other marine mammals. This law

prohibits killing or harassing these shy creatures in any manner. **Any human action that causes a change in the behavior of a marine mammal is considered harassment.**

How You Can Help

If you see a lone pup, do not touch, move, or otherwise disturb the pup. It is extremely difficult to reunite a mother and her pup after the pup has been moved, and very difficult to raise a pup in captivity.

Please take care NOT to make your presence known—either visually or audibly—when you come across an individual or a group of harbor seals when you are on land or on the water. Seals may flee into the water immediately when they hear or see a human. This flight disrupts their resting, can cause mother-pup separations and may endanger their health. If you see the seals raise their heads in a startled response, immediately back away so that they do not feel threatened.

Avoid areas closed to visitors during the breeding season, from March 1 through June 30. Drakes Estero and the mouth to Drakes Estero are closed to boating, canoeing, and kayaking. Double Point and the western end of Limantour Spit are closed to all visitor access. Tomales Point is a harbor seal pupping area, but is not closed. Please use extra care not to disturb the animals at these places and **maintain a minimum distance of 300 feet from any marine mammal in the water or on the**

shore to prevent a disturbance. Ask at park visitor centers for a map indicating closed areas.

If you see an animal (adult or pup) that you think is in distress, do not touch or approach it. Contact a park ranger and give its exact location and a description of the animal, making note of its behavior, color, size (length and girth) and particular markings or tags.

Contact the nearest National Seashore ranger first:
Bear Valley Visitor Center 415-464-5100
Lighthouse Visitor Center 415-669-1534
Ken Patrick Visitor Center 415-669-1250
Visitor Protection 415-464-5170

If no one answers at National Seashore numbers, call:
Marine Mammal Center 415-289-7325

Become a Harbor Seal Monitoring Docent
Volunteers monitor the population of harbor seals in spring and summer. The data that they gather help scientists follow trends in the population, assess their health, identify disturbances to the harbor seals and protect, and preserve this valuable resource. Call 415-464-5210 for more information.