



Harbor Seals

When you walk along a trail overlooking the numerous pocket beaches of Point Reyes, you may catch a glimpse of shy harbor seals. They often haul out along the Pacific Coast from the Bering Sea to Baja California, sometimes in large numbers. Harbor seals are curious animals, and often lift their heads from the water to look around. Sometimes when they see a person walking on the shore, they follow at a distance of 150 feet or so out at sea. Harbor seals do not migrate, so they may be sighted year-round both on land and in the water just off shore.

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

These rather small marine mammals (up to six feet in length and 300 pounds in weight) are typically silver, white or gray, but are sometimes black or brown with pale spots. Their rounded heads are distinctive. Harbor seals differ from the also frequently sighted sea lions in their smaller size, lighter color, and lack external ears. Harbor seals are unable to rotate their pelvis, whereas sea lions use their back flipper to move easily on land.

Harbor seals (and sea lions) haul out daily to absorb the heat from the sun. They cannot maintain their body temperature if they stay in cold water all the time.

Why Harbor Seals Haul Out

Harbor seals (unlike sea lions) also haul out to give birth. The mother harbor seal frequently goes out alone to sea to feed, leaving her newborn pup alone on the beach.

After she has fed, she returns to her offspring to lavish attention on it. She grooms, caresses and nuzzles her baby pup constantly, and nurses it with her rich milk. The 48% fat content of milk makes the pup gain weight rapidly.

The newborn's thick baby fur insulates it from the cold, enabling it to survive alone while the mother is feeding. Even though it is born with the ability to swim, the pup does not spend much time in the water until it has learned to swim fast and has gained weight.

Harbor Seals Vulnerable to Disturbance

When seals and other marine mammals haul out, they are extremely vulnerable to disturbance. Harbor seals leave their haul-out sites when harassed by people, dogs, boats, aircraft or other equipment. 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, as they did at historic sites in San

Francisco Bay, due to a high incidence of human disturbance.

March through June, the pupping season, 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.

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 practically impossible 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. Seals may flee into the water immediately when they hear or sight a human. This flight disrupts their habits and may endanger their health.

Maintain a minimum distance of 100 feet from any marine mammal in the water or on the shore to prevent a disturbance.

Avoid areas closed to visitors during the breeding season, from March 15 through June 30. Drakes Estero and the mouth to Drakes Estero are closed to boating, canoeing and kayaking. Double Point is closed to all visitor access. Tomales Point and Limantour Spit are harbor seal pupping areas, but are not closed. Please use care not to disturb the animals at these places. Ask at 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	415-663-1092
Lighthouse Visitor Center	415-669-1534
Ken Patrick Visitor Center	415-669-1250
Visitor Protection	415-663-8525

If no answer at National Seashore numbers, call:

Marine Mammal Center	415-289-7325
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Volunteer your time to help protect the harbor seals at Point Reyes National Seashore. Volunteers monitor the population of harbor seals in spring and early summer. The data that they gather helps scientists assess the health of the population, identify disturbances to the harbor seals and protect and preserve this valuable resource. Call 415-663-8522 ext. 224 or 454-4758 for more information.