

Notify your local stranding network  
to report sick or injured seals.

**MAINE**

College of the Atlantic (Camden, north)  
207-288-5644

Marine Animal Lifeline (Rockland, south)  
207-773-7377

**MAINE - NEW HAMPSHIRE- MASSACHUSETTS**

New England Aquarium  
617-973-5247

**CAPE COD**

Cape Cod Stranding Network  
508-743-9548

**RHODE ISLAND - CONNECTICUT**

Mystic Aquarium  
860-572-5955

**NEW YORK**

Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research  
631-369-9829

**NEW JERSEY**

Marine Mammal Stranding Center  
609-266-0538

**DELAWARE - MARYLAND**

Marine Animal Rescue Program  
National Aquarium in Baltimore  
410-576-1098

**VIRGINIA**

Virginia Marine Science Museum  
757-437-6159

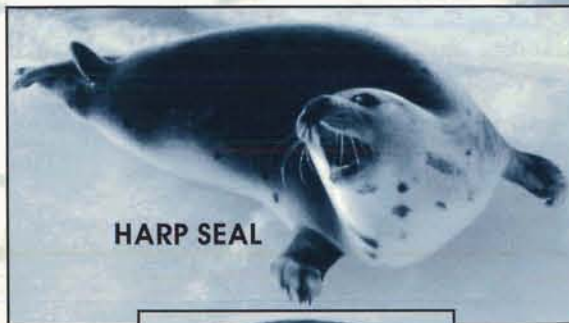
Photo: Elizabeth Pomfret / CCSN

# Seal WATCHING GUIDELINES



HARBOR SEAL

Protect Seals —  
Become a  
Responsible Observer!



HARP SEAL



GRAY SEALS

Whether you are watching seals  
from land or boat —

## Be a Responsible Viewer!

Comply with seal watching guidelines!

❖ **Seals are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).** It is against the law to touch, feed, or otherwise harass seals. Harassment occurs when *YOUR* behavior changes *THEIR* behavior.

❖ **Never get in the water with seals.** Seals are large, wild animals and can be extremely dangerous. If they feel threatened they may become aggressive in order to defend themselves.

**Harassment Warning Signs:** If your presence causes any of the following reactions, on land or in the water, you are too close.

- Increased vocalizations by seals
- Movement back into the water (single animal or the herd)
- All eyes are on you (single animal or several in the herd)
- Disturbance from normal resting position (lifting their head to watch you)

❖ **Never attempt to feed seals.**

- You could get seriously injured.
- Feeding seals is against the law; you could be arrested and/or fined.
- Food that isn't a normal part of their diet will do more harm than good!
- Feeding negatively impedes their ability to hunt and locate food on their own.
- Feeding encourages seals to approach boats looking for handouts. This behavior has resulted in injuries from boat propellers.

❖ **Kayaks & Canoes**

Close approaches to haul-out sites by these engineless craft should be avoided as they may elicit an alarm response, causing seals to rapidly enter the water.

❖ **Jet skis**

High speed water craft should avoid seal haul-outs to minimize potential collisions.

❖ **Stay at least 50 yards away from resting seals.**

- Seals that are continually being approached, never get a chance to rest.
- Repeated interaction can exhaust seals, leaving them vulnerable to predation and illness.

- Increased contact with people will eventually lead seals to habituate to humans. Habituated seals are more likely to suffer from negative human interactions and less likely to avoid dangerous situations.

- Continued disturbance of mother/pup pairs could lead to abandonment and subsequent mortality of the pup.

❖ **Limit your viewing time: maximum 30 minutes.**

Your continued presence can cause the animal unnecessary stress.

❖ **Keep pets on a leash.**

Inquisitive dogs are likely to startle a resting seal, causing an aggressive, defensive response, that might injure your pet or the seal.



❖ **Entanglements**

Reports of seals entangled in fishing gear, bait bags, and plastic debris such as ring frisbees, are on the rise! When seals get entangled, they may be unable to feed or defend themselves against predators. These entanglements often cause the animal to suffer and ultimately die.



Photo: Katie Touhey / CCSN

❖ **Vessel Collisions**

Increasing numbers of seals (like the gray seal above) are being sighted with propeller wounds. Seals are likely to surface unexpectedly. When entering and leaving a viewing area, maneuver your vessel slowly, watching for seal heads that are continually popping up around you!

Seals will bite!

Serious infections can be transmitted to you or your pet.

Report violations of the MMPA to NMFS Enforcement  
1-800-853-1964

NMFS Website:

[www.nmfs.gov/prot\\_res/MMWatch/MMViewing.html](http://www.nmfs.gov/prot_res/MMWatch/MMViewing.html)

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Compiled & written by Elizabeth Pomfret  
Cape Cod Stranding Network  
for the Protected Resources Division —  
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and the Northeast Region Stranding Network

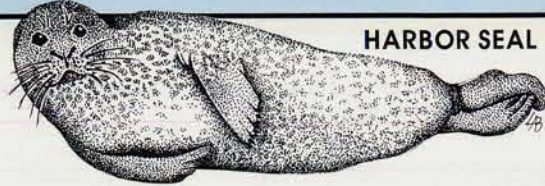
Designed and illustrated by Linda Bound  
International Wildlife Coalition



# Pinniped Identification Key

Five **species** (types) of seals are seasonally seen in New England waters. Harbor seals and gray seals are the most familiar and abundant species, and are seen year round. They are social animals, that are usually seen in large **herds** (groups), either in the water or **hauled out** (resting on shore).

The remaining three species (harp, hooded, and ringed seals), known as **ice seals**, are also seen seasonally in New England. The term "ice seal" refers to where these



HARBOR SEAL

## HARBOR SEALS - *Phoca vitulina*

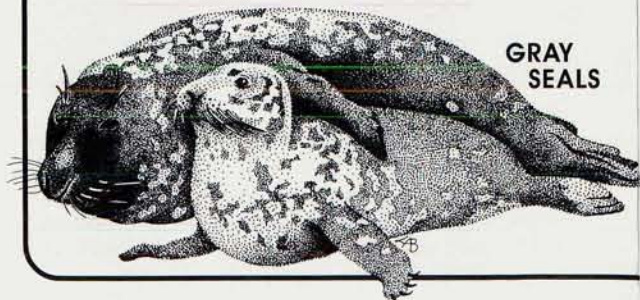
**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** The average size for a male or female adult is approximately 4 - 5 feet in length and 220-250 lbs. Their coloration ranges from dark gray to tan and is overlaid with many spots. They have small heads, very large eyes, and a face that resembles a cocker spaniel!

**BEHAVIOR:** They will usually retreat to the water when approached. Commonly seen resting on their side in a "banana" shape, on rocks along the coast.

**PUPPING:** In New England, pupping occurs between mid-May to mid-June along the coasts of Maine and New Hampshire. Mothers nurse their pups for 4-6 weeks and will temporarily leave them during foraging trips.

## GRAY SEALS - *Halichoerus grypus*

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** Males are characteristically larger than females. The average size of a male gray seal is approximately 7-8 feet in length and weighs between 660-770 lbs. Females will average approximately 6.5 feet and weigh between 330-450 lbs. Male's coloration is typically darker than females. Males are dark brown, gray, or black with smaller lighter spots and females have a tan background with darker spots. The most distinctive feature is the shape of their head. They have been nicknamed "Horseheads" because of the long, straight, slope of their profile.



GRAY SEALS

seals are born. **Pupping** (birthing) takes place on ice floes or pack ice off the eastern coast of Canada and extending north toward Greenland. During the winter, many **juvenile** (immature) ice seals **migrate** (move from one region to another) south and are frequently seen in New England. Although they are social animals in their northern territory, they are **solitary** (alone) when we view them.

**Reminder!** Stay at least 50 yards away from the seal. Use binoculars when observing field marks for identifying species.

**BEHAVIOR:** They may or may not retreat to the water when approached. They can be very vocal and aggressive.

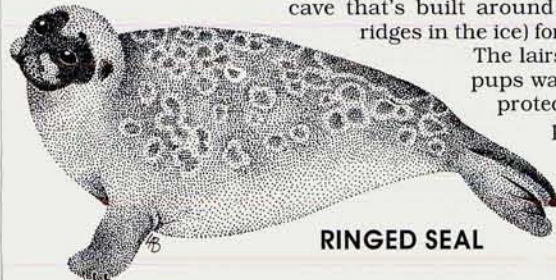
**PUPPING:** Born from mid-December to early February. In the United States, pupping takes place on islands in Penobscot Bay and Frenchman Bay, Maine, and on Muskeget, Tuckernuck, and Monomoy Islands in Nantucket Sound, Massachusetts. Their nursing period lasts for approximately 16 days, during which mothers will temporarily leave their pups during foraging trips.

## RINGED SEAL - *Phoca hispida*

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** Males and females are similar in size, ranging from 4-5 feet in length and weighing between 100-200 lbs. They have small heads with a short muzzle and large eyes. Their coloration may appear mottled with pale rings scattered over a dark gray body.

**BEHAVIOR:** The most abundant species in Arctic waters, they are seen only occasionally in our region. They tend to be cautious of humans, lifting their heads to keep watch but not necessarily returning to the water.

**PUPPING:** Pups are born in the Canadian arctic, from March to late April. Females build snow lairs (a snow cave that's built around pressure ridges in the ice) for birthing. The lairs offer the pups warmth and protection from predators.

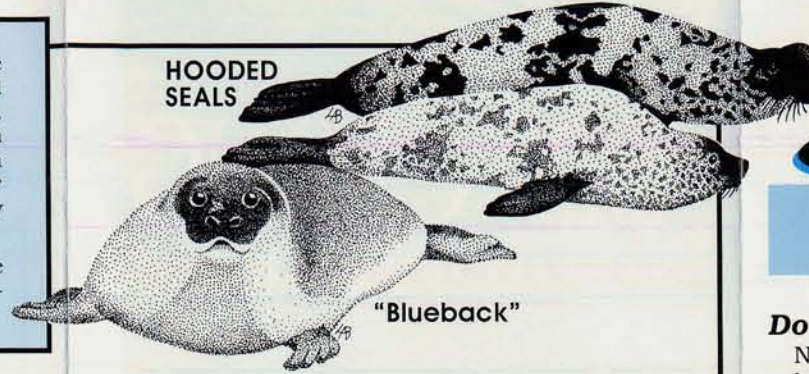


RINGED SEAL

## HOODED SEAL - *Cystophora cristata*

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** Males and females differ in their appearance. The male hooded seal grows to be an average of 8.5 feet in length and weighs approximately 700 lbs. They are darker in overall color, with silvery-gray blotches throughout their fur. Only adult males have a nasal sac, which hangs down over their nose and mouth. When the sac is inflated, it forms a hood on the top of the animal's head, a strategy to make their head appear larger and more intimidating. A second sac, which can be inflated through their nostril, looks like a red balloon and hangs down over their mouth. Females do not have a hood. Their average

HOODED SEALS



"Blueback"

size is 7.5 feet and approximately 400 lbs. Female coloration is similar to that of males, but females tend to be lighter in contrast. In the northeast, "Bluebacks" are the most common age group sighted. Their coloration is a bluish/gray on the dorsal (back) surface and creamy white on the ventral (belly) surface. Because of this fuzzy coat, they are often mistaken as abandoned newborns, but in actuality they are about one year old!

**BEHAVIOR:** They will not retreat to water when approached. They can be extremely aggressive and will bite if they feel threatened.

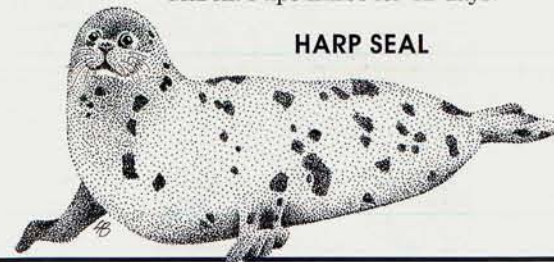
**PUPPING:** Born on offshore pack ice off the eastern Canadian provinces during late March. They have the shortest nursing period of any seal, 4 days in total!

## HARP SEAL - *Phoca groenlandica*

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** Adults have a silvery, white coloration with a black wishbone shaped marking on the dorsal surface and a black head. Both males and females average 5-6 feet in length and weigh up to 300 lbs. The stages of development we are most likely to see are the "Beaters" ranging in age from 25 days up to a year and the "Bedlamers" whose age ranges between 1-4 years. During these stages, their coloration appears gray on the dorsal surface and silvery-white on the ventral surface with an inconsistent array of black-brown spots of irregular shape and size.

**BEHAVIOR:** All age classes are typically not afraid of people. They will not necessarily retreat to the water when approached. Often they will raise their head to follow you with their eyes. They are aggressive and should not be closely approached. Open-mouth displays and vocalizations are signs that you are too close (see photo on front panel).

**PUPPING:** Mothers birth their pups on pack ice off the eastern Canadian provinces from late February to mid-March. Pups nurse for 12 days.



HARP SEAL

# Seal FACTS

### Do seals need to eat everyday?

No, a seal's body stores enough fat in the blubber layer to allow the animal to go for extended periods of time without eating. In addition, most seals are opportunistic feeders and will consume a variety of fish, shellfish, and crustaceans.

### Is it normal for them to be on land?

Yes, it is absolutely normal for them to be on land. Seals are semi-aquatic animals, which means they often spend a portion of each day on land.

### Don't they need to be wet?

No, they do not need to be wet constantly. Seals need to haul out for a variety of reasons: to rest, pup, and **moult** (annual shedding of old hair).

### Is it normal for seals to be seen alone?

Yes, many times seals will be sighted alone. Ice seals, in particular, are almost always sighted alone in this region.

### How do seals and sea lions differ?

Seals and sea lions are both pinnipeds or "fin-foots," but they belong to different families. Here is how they are classified:

**Suborder** — Pinnipedia (latin for "fin-footed")

**Families** — Odobenidae (Walrus)

Otaridae (Fur Seals and Sea Lions)

Phocidae (True Seals or Hair Seals)



True Seal/Hair Seal



Fur Seal/Sea Lion

Ear hole, no visible ear flaps

Hind flippers not used for walking

Streamlined body, short front and hind flippers

Common in our region

Visible ear flaps

Hind flippers rotate forward for walking on land

Elongated neck, longer front and hind flippers

Not native to the North Atlantic