



Pacific Islands Region

News Release

Contact: Wende Goo
(808) 721-4098

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MONK SEAL PUPPING SEASON IN FULL SWING

Main Hawaiian Islands Experiences Boom in Number of Newborns

NOAA Fisheries Service announces the birth of two monk seals born earlier this week. This brings the total number of seals born in the main Hawaiian Islands for this year to 10 (compared to 7 at this same time last year and 13 pups for the entire 2007). Monk seals usually give birth between February to July with births peaking in the months of April, May, and June. Previously, Oahu recorded one birth at Rabbit Island and with the addition of these two births, Oahu is experiencing the highest number of seals born; the previous number was 2.

“This is going to be a busy pupping season. We are expecting several more births in the coming months as we have already identified several pregnant females out there,” commented Tracy Wurth, NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands Region Monk Seal Sighting Coordinator.

Monk seals are identified by an alphanumeric designation that allows scientists to collect life history data on individual animals. The female, R5AY, gave birth on Monday, May 12 at an undisclosed location on the North Shore to a male pup that appears to be doing well. R5AY was first identified as an adult on Kauai in 2002 and was sighted on Oahu in 2004 - 2005 and tends to frequent the North and Northwest shores. She gave birth to her first pup on Kauai in 2005. In 2006 she created excitement as she gave birth to another pup on the North Shore near Turtle Bay which necessitated the ramp up of a massive volunteer effort to keep watch over the mother and pup pair for 7 weeks until the pup was weaned and the mother left. It was the first time NOAA Fisheries Service Pacific Islands Region conducted an organized watch utilizing volunteers. Over 40 volunteers faithfully kept watch over the pair amassing over 2000 volunteer hours. Unfortunately the pup was found dead in a gill net off of Rabbit Island a few months later.

RK28 gave birth on Wednesday, May 14 at another undisclosed location on the North Shore to a pup that has not been sexed at this time. Mother and pup appear to be behaving normally. This is the first documented birth for RK28. It is believed she may have pupped on Niihau in the past since she has been sighted on Kauai looking pregnant only to be resighted a few months later looking much thinner. She was first identified on Kauai in 2003 and has been regularly sighted along the North and Northwest shores of Oahu since then.

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“The birth of two more pups is fantastic news!” remarked David Schofield, NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands Region Marine Mammal Response Coordinator. “Because the monk seal population is declining at an alarming rate, every birth is precious. We’re trying desperately to ensure monk seals do not become extinct like their counterparts in the Caribbean.”

On a related note, Lt. Governor James Duke Aiona signed a bill into law on May 14, 2008 that designates the Hawaiian monk seal as Hawaii’s official state mammal. It is hoped that this designation will bring attention to the plight of the Hawaiian monk seal because it will take all of us to save this island treasure.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center: <http://pifsc.noaa.gov>

Pacific Islands Regional Office: <http://fpir.noaa.gov>