

**PLEASE REPORT SICK OR INJURED SEALS:**

NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE'S STRANDING HOTLINE: 1-866-755-NOAA (6622) OR CALL THE CLOSEST STRANDING NETWORK HOTLINE LISTED BELOW.

**NORTHEAST STRANDING NETWORKS**

**MAINE**

MAINE STRANDINGS COLLABORATIVE MARINE ANIMAL REPORTING HOTLINE 800-532-9551

**NEW HAMPSHIRE**

NEW ENGLAND AQUARIUM 617-973-5247

**MASSACHUSETTS**

(NORTHSHORE & BOSTON AREA)

NEW ENGLAND AQUARIUM 978-281-6351

(CAPE COD) INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR ANIMAL WELFARE 508-743-9548

**RHODE ISLAND & CONNECTICUT**

MYSTIC AQUARIUM MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING PROGRAM 860-572-5955

**NEW YORK**

RIVERHEAD FOUNDATION FOR MARINE RESEARCH & PRESERVATION 631-369-9829

**NEW JERSEY**

MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING CENTER 609-266-0538

**DELAWARE**

MERR INSTITUTE 302-228-5029

**MARYLAND**

MD DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES STRANDING PROGRAM (DEAD ANIMALS ONLY) 800-628-9944  
NATIONAL AQUARIUM IN BALTIMORE (LIVE ANIMALS ONLY) 410-373-0083

**VIRGINIA**

VIRGINIA AQUARIUM STRANDING RESPONSE PROGRAM 757-437-6159



**IFAW**

COMPILED & WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH POMFRET CAPE COD STRANDING NETWORK. REVISED 2010.

# NORTHEAST SEAL WATCHING GUIDELINES



*Protect Seals- Become a Responsible Observer!*

K. Geeringer UNE/MARC



NOAA



Whale, College of the Atlantic

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.

### Harassment Warning Signs

*If your presence causes any of the following reactions on land or in the water, then 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, stretching, waving foreflippers, yawning).

**PLEASE REPORT POTENTIAL MMPA VIOLATIONS TO NOAA'S OFFICE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT: 800-853-1964**

### Responsible Seal Viewing Guidelines

**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.

**Never attempt to feed seals.** Feeding seals is against the law and you could be seriously injured; you could be arrested and/or fined. Food that isn't a normal part of their diet will do more harm than good by impeding their ability to hunt and locate food on their own or by encouraging seals to approach boats looking for handouts, which can result in injuries from boat propellers.

**Always stay at least 50 yards (150 feet) 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.

**Be quiet.** Noise may affect seal behavior.

**Limit your viewing time to no longer than 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.

**Kayaks & Canoes: Avoid close approaches to haul-out sites.** These engineless craft have been shown to elicit an alarm response, causing seals to rapidly enter the water.

**Jet Skis: Avoid areas near seal haulouts to minimize potential collisions.**



**Never Attempt to Touch Seals...They Bite!**  
*Even though seals may look cute, they can bite leaving you or your pet vulnerable to serious infection.*



NOAA-M. Garron

### 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 can cause the animal to suffer and ultimately die.

### Vessel Collisions

Increasing numbers of seals 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 may pop up around you!

**PLEASE REPORT STRANDED OR INJURED SEALS TO NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE'S STRANDING HOTLINE: 1-866-755-NOAA (6622) OR CONTACT YOUR LOCAL STRANDING NETWORK PARTNER.**



# Seal Identification Key

# Seal FACTS

Four species (types) of seals are regularly seen in Northeast U.S. waters. Harbor seals and gray seals are the most familiar and abundant species and are seen year-round. The remaining two species (harp and hooded seals) are known as ice seals. They are seen seasonally during winter and spring months. The term “ice seal” refers to where these seals are born. Pupping (birthing) takes place on ice floes or pack ice off the eastern coast of Canada, extending north to Greenland. During the winter, many juvenile ice seals migrate (move from one region to another) south and are frequently seen in large groups in their northern territory. However, they are almost always solitary (alone) when we view them in our region.

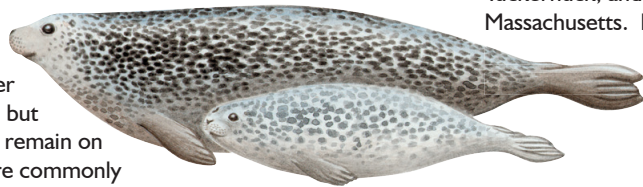
**Reminder!** Always stay at least 50 yards (150 feet) away from a seal. Use binoculars when observing seals and be quiet to minimize your impact.

## HARBOR SEALS (*Phoca vitulina*)

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

### BEHAVIOR:

Adults will usually retreat to the water when approached, but juveniles will often remain on the beach. They are 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. Mothers nurse their pups for 4-6 weeks and will temporarily leave them during foraging trips.

## GRAY SEALS (*Halichoerus grypus*)

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

**BEHAVIOR:** Single animals will usually stand their ground



when approached, while herds/groups will generally retreat to the water. 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. Mothers nurse their pups for approximately 16 days and will temporarily leave their pups during foraging trips.

## HOODED SEAL (*Cystophora cristata*)

**DESCRIPTION:** In the northeast, juveniles called “Blue-backs” are the most common age group sighted. They are usually about one year old. Their coloration is a bluish/gray on the dorsal (back) surface and creamy white on the ventral (belly) surface; juvenile males and females look the same. Adult 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 pounds. 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 size is 7.5 feet and approximately 400 pounds. Female coloration is similar to that of males, but females tend to be lighter in contrast.

**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 (*Pagophilus groenlandica*)

**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 pounds. The stages of development we are most likely to see are the “Beaters” ranging in age from 25 days up to one 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 irregular or “splotchy” black-brown spots.

**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.

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



All seal illustrations © Garth Mix  
www.gmixdesigns.com

## Q: Do seals need to eat everyday?

**A:** 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. Seals do not eat on land.

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

**A:** Yes, it is absolutely normal for them to be on land. Seals are semi-aquatic, which means they often spend a portion of each day on land. Seals need to haul out for a variety of reasons: to rest, pup, and molt (annual shedding of old hair). Young seals may haul out on land for up to a week.

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

**A:** No, they do not need to be wet constantly. They come out of the water to get dry and wetting them is a form of harassment.

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

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

## Q: How do seals and sea lions differ?

**A:** Seals and sea lions are both marine mammals. Both are considered to be “pinnipeds” (meaning fin-footed). However there are many differences between seals and sea lions so they are classified differently.

### True Seals/Hair Seals

Have ear holes/no visible ear flaps.

Do not use hind flippers for walking.

Streamlined body, short front and hind-flippers. Common in our region.

### Fur Seal/Sea Lion

Visible ear flaps.

Hind flippers rotate forward for walking on land.

Elongated neck, longer front and hind flippers. Not native to the North Atlantic.

