

Marine Life in Whatcom County

∞ Mammal Series ∞

Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)

Description: The curious harbor seal can usually be seen bobbing among the waves close to shore, as they are the most abundant marine mammal in Puget Sound. Harbor seals can be distinguished from other pinnipeds, or fin-footed mammals, by their smaller stature, spots, and lack of ears. Adults are mottled tan to blue-grey in color with dark spots, weighing 250 to 300 pounds, and measuring between four and seven feet long. Male harbor seals are typically larger than females.



*The harbor seal is earless and is spotted.
Photo from National Marine Mammal Lab,
NOAA Fisheries*

MAP



<http://www.brainmuseum.org/Specimens/pinnipedia/harborseal/index.html>

Distribution: Harbor seals are widespread, along the coastlines of the northern hemisphere. In the Pacific Ocean their range extends from northern Japan up the coastline of Asia, east to Alaska, and down the coastline as far as Baja California, Mexico. In the Atlantic Ocean harbor seals are found from France up to Norway along the European coastline, west to Greenland, Iceland, and Canada, and as far south as New Jersey. Although, mainly a coastal dwelling species, some harbor seals have been found living year round in inland river mouths and lakes in Canada.

Reproduction: Harbor seals are generally ready to reproduce after they reach a weight of 75 kilograms for males and 50 kilograms for females. Harbor seals are sexually active from the ages of 3 to 6 years old. Pre-mating behavior includes rolling, blowing bubbles, and mouthing each other's necks. Mating season, also known as pupping season, takes place from spring through fall, depending on sub-species and region. Males can mate with more than one female and copulation usually takes place in the water. The mother gives birth to a single pup (about one each year), usually on land at low tide, and will return to the same breeding ground. Harbor seal pups can swim within one hour of birth and are nursed for 3 to 6 weeks. After weaning, young harbor seals



*Harbor seal mother and pup hauled out to rest, feed, or nurse.
Photo by Phil Green.*

spend most of their time in the water, rarely hauling out, and leave their birth location to explore new areas.



Fish, including salmon, make up the majority of the harbor seal diet. Photo by Phil Green

Ecology: Harbor seals have an estimated population of 400,000 to 500,000 individuals, and are not threatened as a whole. Local populations have been reduced or eliminated due to disease and interactions with humans. In the United States Harbor seals are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which states that it is illegal to kill marine mammals.

Harbor seals will “haul out”, or spend time out of the water, to bask in the sun, digest food, rest, or nurse young. They will haul out on a number of different materials, including beaches, spits, rocks, and logs, and slip back into the water if threatened.

Harbor seals have a great capacity to swim gracefully and swiftly away from any danger. They can swim as fast as 15 knots, plunge 300 feet, and stay underwater for as long as 28 minutes. Harbor seals are an ecologically important species, as both predator and prey in the marine environment. Harbor seals feed on a number of sea creatures including crustaceans, squid, and mollusks, but fish make up their primary diet. Predators to the Harbor seal include killer whales, sharks, bears, coyotes, foxes, large birds, and Stellar sea lions.

On average, females live 30-35 years, while males live 20-25 years. Scientists have suggested that males have a much higher mortality rate due to the stresses of breeding season.

Current Status

Harbor seals have a population of 400,000 to 500,000 and are doing well as a whole. Humans pose the largest threat to harbor seals, which are accidentally caught in fishing nets and are killed because they have been perceived as a threat to commercial fisheries. An estimated 17,000 seals were killed from 1947 to 1960 when a bounty was placed on seals due to the belief that they ate significant amounts of fish valuable to the industry. In the United Kingdom, Norway, and Canada it is still legal to kill Harbor seals perceived as a threat to commercial fisheries, but commercial hunting of harbor seals is illegal. In the United States harbor seals are protected under the Marine Mammals Protection Act.

Sources:

Alaska Fisheries Science Center-National Marine Fisheries Service-NOAA Fisheries
<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml>

Department of Ecology, Puget Sound Shorelines
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/sea/pugetsound/species/seal.html>

Whatcom Marine Mammal Stranding Network
<http://www.wmmsn.org/>

Vancouver Aquarium and Marine Science Centre
<http://www.vanaqua.org/education/aquafacts/>

For More Information:

Whatcom County MRC
(360) 676-6876
<http://whatcom-mrc.whatcomcounty.org/MRC>



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