

SAVE THE BAY'S 2021 Rhode Island Seal Report

VOLUME I, ISSUE IV
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RHODE ISLAND SEALS

The harbor seal is the State Marine Mammal of Rhode Island and one of the most charismatic residents of Narragansett Bay. Speckled tan or gray with large dark eyes and weighing 175-250 pounds, these seals migrate south from Maine and the Atlantic Provinces of Canada in the fall. Warm, sheltered waters and abundant food provide a winter haven for these animals. Although harbor seals are the most common seal in Narragansett Bay, gray, harp, and hooded seals are occasionally sighted as well, with gray seals more common on Block Island.

SEAL MONITORING

To better understand the habits and numbers of seals in Narragansett Bay, Save The Bay staff and volunteers began monitoring seals in 1994. Monitoring consists of regular volunteer observations at known haul-out sites throughout the seal season. Since 2009, an annual Bay-Wide Seal Count has been held on a single day near the peak of the season when all haul-out sites are visited at low tide. In 2019, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, volunteers began monitoring seals on Block Island, as well.

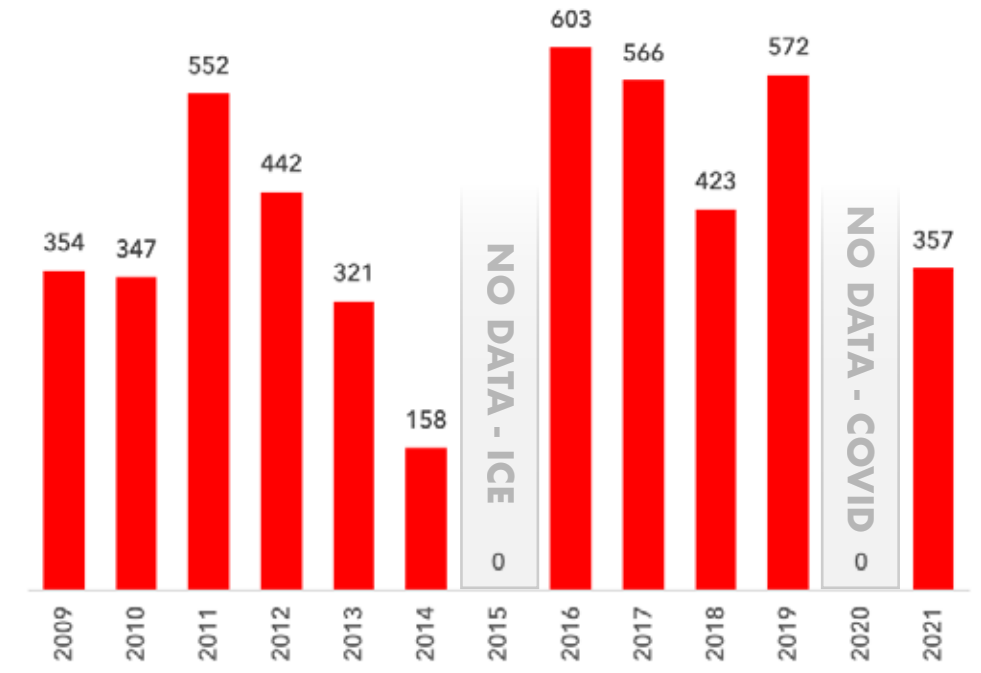
SEAL MONITORING IS BACK!

After disruptions to our 2019-2020 program from the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to redesign our program and come back for the 2020-2021 seal season! All the regular Narragansett Bay haul-out sites were monitored by Save The Bay volunteers throughout the season, while Block Island sites were monitored by The Nature Conservancy.

Continued on page 2.

BAY-WIDE SEAL COUNT

■ Sum of Total Number of Seals Seen



The COVID-19 pandemic led to disruptions in the seal monitoring program in March 2020 and we were unable to hold our traditional counts. This marks the second time in the history of our Bay-Wide count that we were unable to complete the survey. (The other time was in 2015, when extensive late-season ice and poor weather conditions made it impossible to hold the count.)

Continued from page 1.

Our Bay-Wide Seal Count was held on March 23, 2021. Weather conditions were not favorable, as thick fog did not lift as quickly as predicted, making visibility difficult. Plus, despite low winds, the seas were quite rough along the coast. Brenton Point, Newport is a boom or bust

site - we can get up to 100 seals there when the waves are calm, and zero when they are not. This year it was zero on the rocks and 4 in the water. Nonetheless, a total of 357 seals were spotted at locations around Narragansett Bay. This is only slightly below the average of 427 seals sighted annually on the Bay-Wide Count over the history of the project.



ABOUT CITIZEN SCIENCE DATA



The Narragansett Bay Seal Monitoring Program is a volunteer effort to observe and better understand local seal populations. The project is designed to provide useful observations from the general public, and it is not a formal scientific study.

For more information on Save The Bay's seal monitoring program and data, contact Save The Bay's Volunteer Manager, July Lewis, at jlewis@savebay.org.

HAUL-OUT SITES AROUND RHODE ISLAND

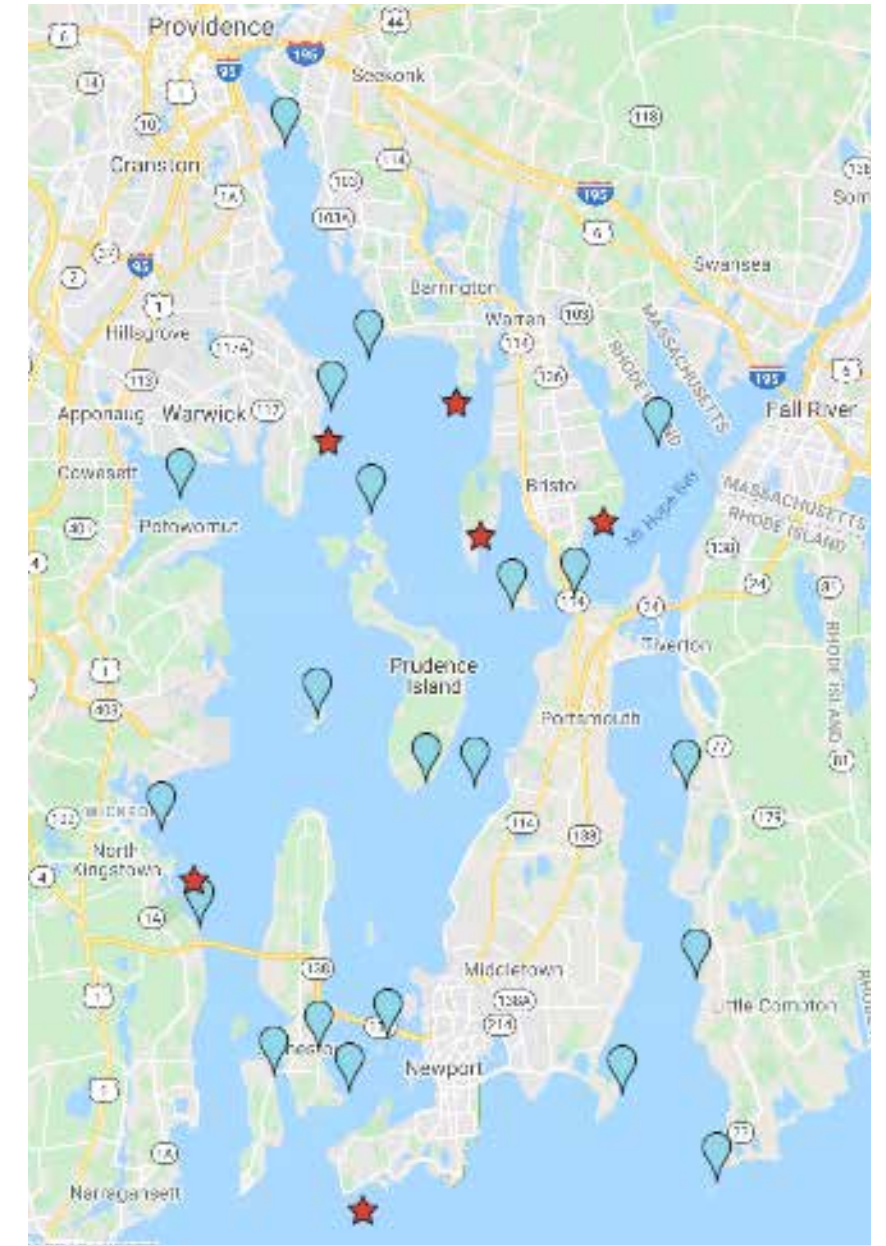
Harbor seals are seen from the mouth of the Bay at Brenton Point to as far north as Providence. Seals "haul out" on rocks for a variety of possible reasons, including regulating body temperature and rest.

Haul-out sites are variable in terms of their use by seals. Some are only occasionally visited, while others regularly have over 100 seals present at low tide. Others may be well-used, but difficult for volunteers to access.

The graphs on pages 6-8 represent haul-out sites that are regularly used by large numbers of seals and regularly monitored by volunteers. Frequent, repeated observations at these sites help illustrate the seal season in Narragansett Bay, answering the following questions:

When do they arrive and when do they leave? When is the peak of seal population in the Bay?

The data indicates that the highest numbers are usually seen in late March.



HAUL-OUT SITES AROUND RHODE ISLAND



HAUL-OUT SITE



HAUL-OUT SITE ILLUSTRATED BY GRAPHS ON PAGES 6-8

BAY-WIDE SEAL COUNT RESULTS

March 23, 2021 | Low Tide: 10:37 a.m. | Temperature: 42-56 F | Weather: Foggy, then sunny
Winds: 0-3 on the Beaufort Scale

MONITORING SITE	TOTAL # OF SEALS SEEN
Barren Ledge	1
Brenton Point	4
Church Cove	32
Citing Rock	48
Coddington Cove	26
Coldspring Rock	0
Dyer Island	16
Field's Point	0
Green Point	2
Halfway Rock	41
Hog Island	13
Hope Island	33
Mackerel Cove	0
Park Dock	0
Providence Point	3
Prudence Island T-Wharf	31
Rocky Point	7
Rome Point	69
Rumstick	0
Sachuest	0
Sakonnet Point	24
Sally Rock	1
Seapowet Rock	1
Spar Island	0
Usher Cove	5
TOTAL:	357

SEAL MONITORING ON BLOCK ISLAND

In partnership with The Nature Conservancy, we are establishing a seal monitoring program on Block Island.

While the monitoring program is still in its early stages, we had great participation in 2021 as we learned more about the local seal population, haul out sites, and behavior patterns.

An Island-Wide Count was held on Tuesday, March 23, 2021 in conjunction with the Bay-Wide Count. However, rough seas discouraged the seals from hauling out, and only 14 seals were sighted (2 gray seals and 12 harbor seals).

Far more seals were sighted on other days during the season. On February 6, 41 harbor seals were sighted, and on May 22, 36 gray seals and 14 harbor seals were sighted.

While gray seals are an unusual sight in Narragansett Bay, they are frequently sighted on Block Island. Their differing migration patterns may indicate a need for a year-round monitoring program.

We will continue to develop the Block Island seal monitoring program in 2022.



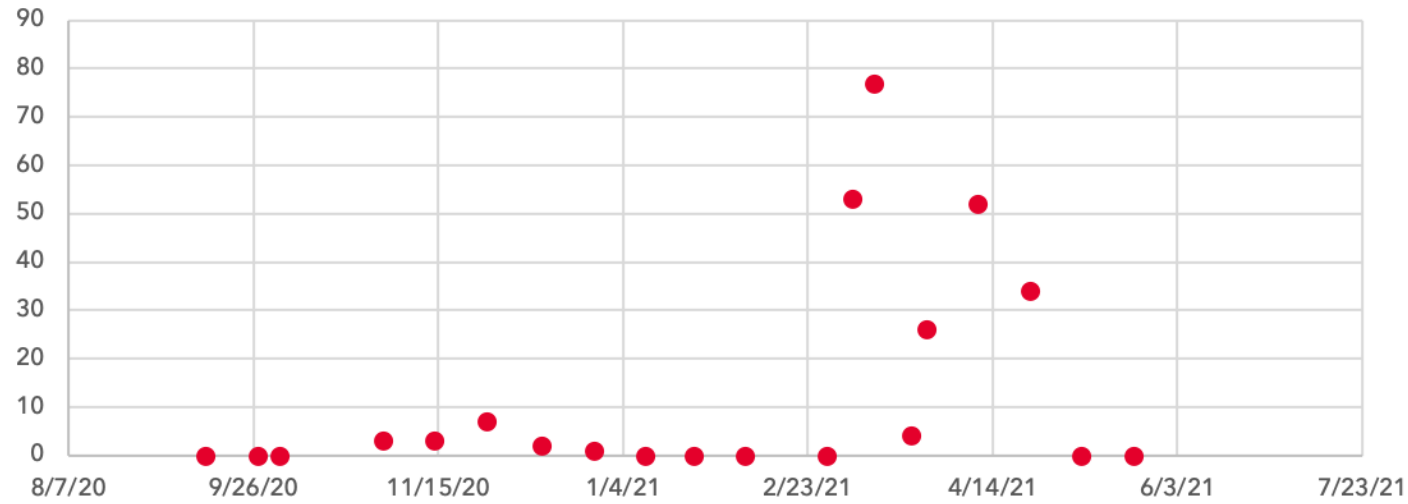
SEASONAL SEAL MONITORING

The following graphs illustrate the numbers of seals sighted at specific Narragansett Bay haul out sites throughout the 2020-2021 seal season. These scatter graphs make it easy to see the “shape” of the seal season, with seals beginning to arrive in the fall, peaking in March, and dropping off sharply in April.

BRENTON POINT, NEWPORT

2020-2021 SEAL OBSERVATIONS

• Total Number of Seals Seen

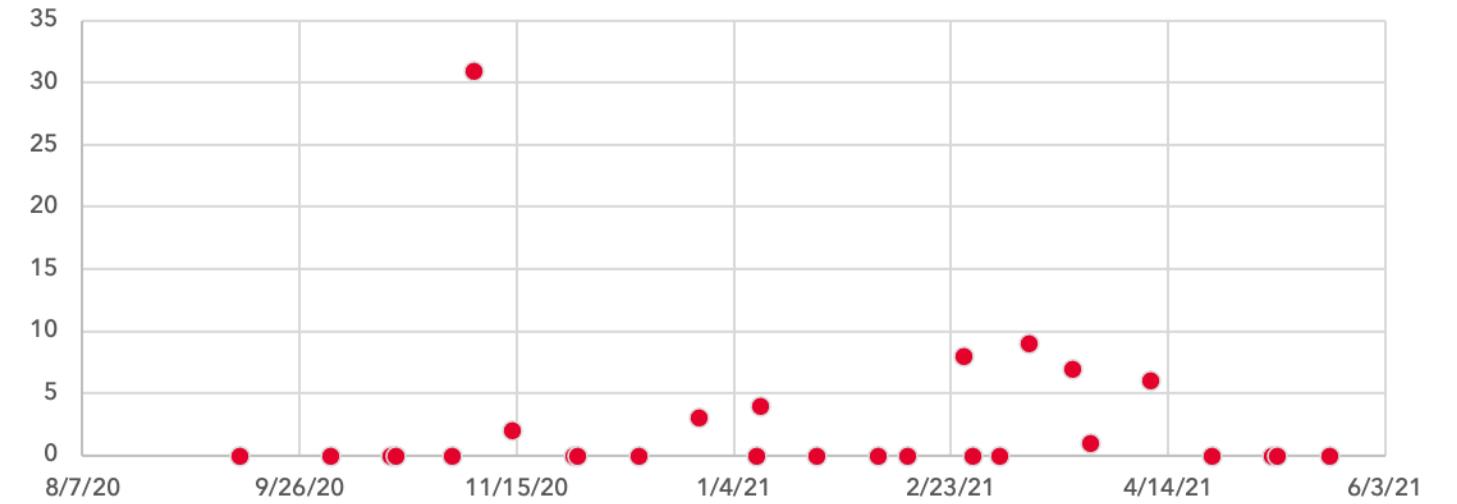


SEASONAL SEAL MONITORING, CONTINUED

ROCKY POINT, WARWICK

2020-2021 SEAL OBSERVATIONS

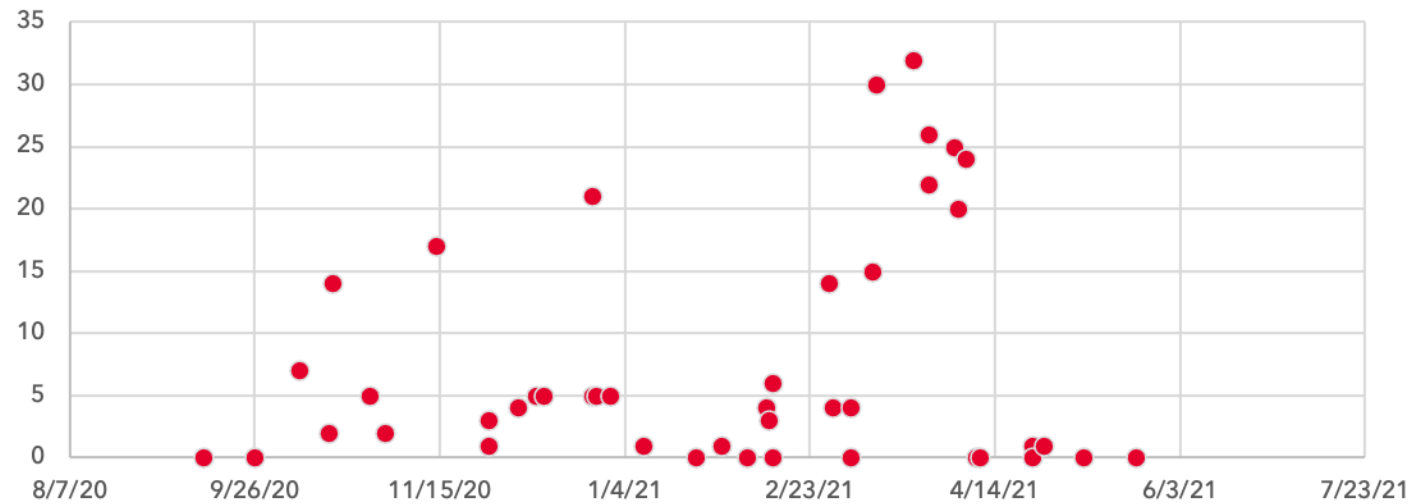
• Total Number of Seals Seen



CHURCH COVE, BRISTOL

2020-2021 SEAL OBSERVATIONS

• Total Number of Seals Seen



ROME POINT, NORTH KINGSTOWN

2020-2021 SEAL OBSERVATIONS

• Total Number of Seals Seen

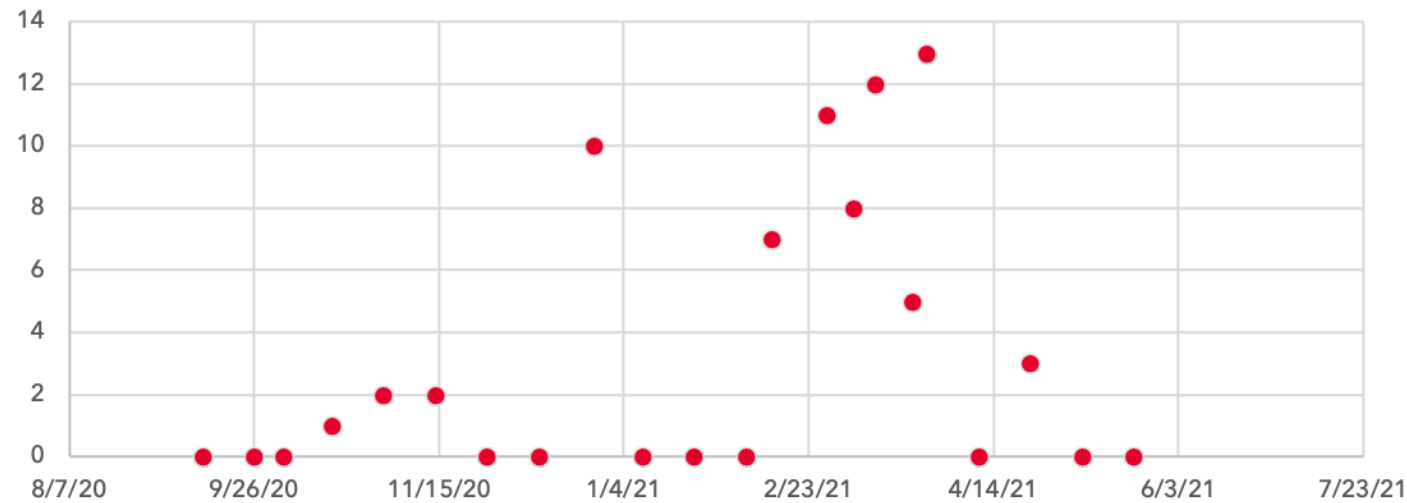


SEASONAL SEAL MONITORING, CONTINUED

USHER COVE, BRISTOL

2020-2021 SEAL OBSERVATIONS

• Total Number of Seals Seen



HISTORICAL SEAL MONITORING DATA BY LOCATION

The following haul-out sites have had detailed, consistent monitoring for many years. In the following graphs, the red bars indicate the highest number of seals seen at each haul-out site for each year. In addition, the month and day that the maximum number was sighted is indicated by the green line.

Since each seal season straddles two years (September-May) seal seasons are represented on the X-axis by the year in which they end. Therefore, 2018 refers to the 2017-2018 season.



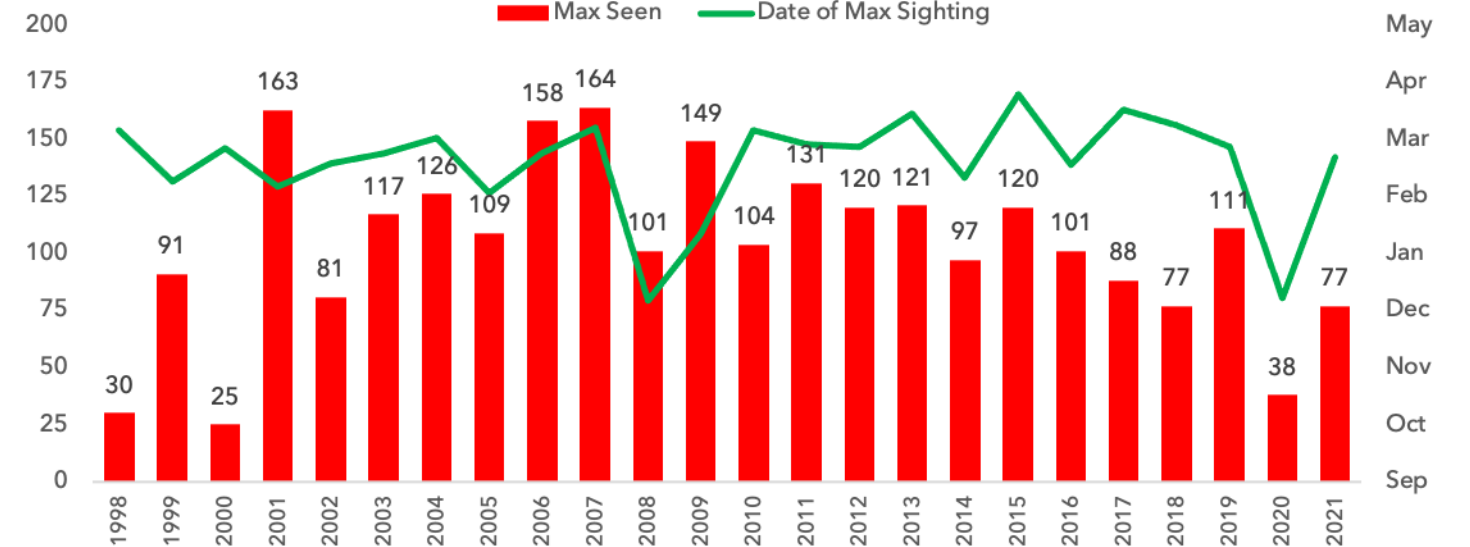
Note that the secondary Y-axis displays the months of the seal season: September through May. Dips in the green line represent an early maximum, and peaks represent a late maximum.

Looking at long term trends may help us be alert to changes such as impacts from nearby development at a particular site, or the effects of climate change on seal migration.

BRENTON POINT SEALS

MAXIMUM SEEN EACH YEAR*

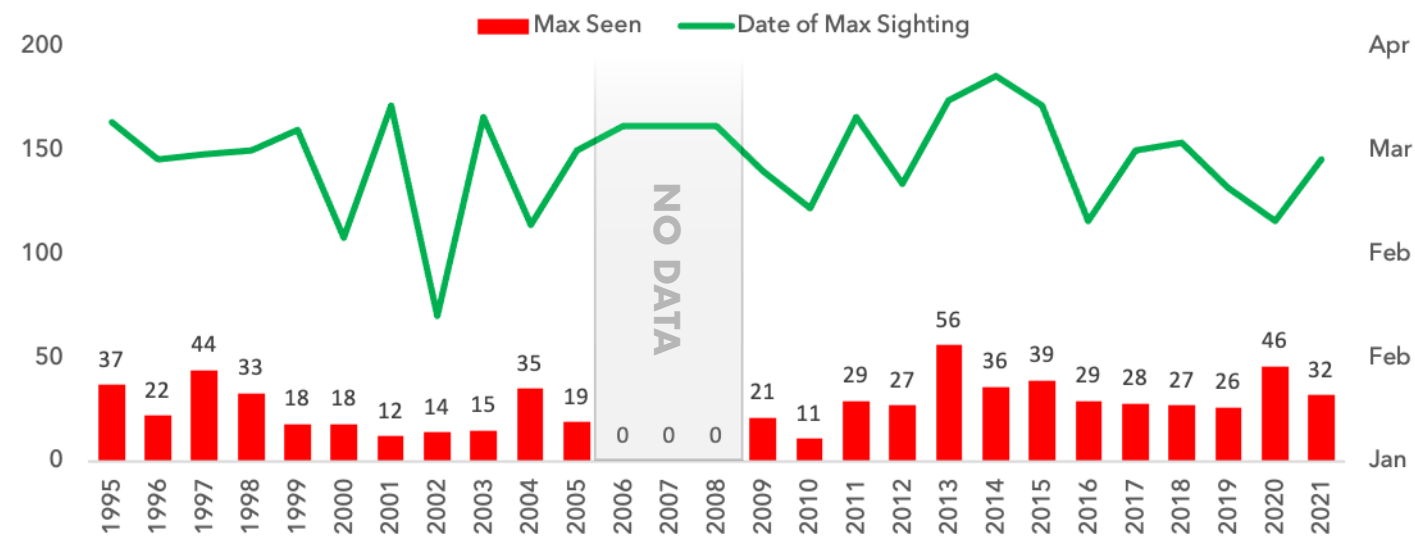
■ Max Seen — Date of Max Sighting



HISTORICAL SEAL MONITORING BY LOCATION, CONTINUED

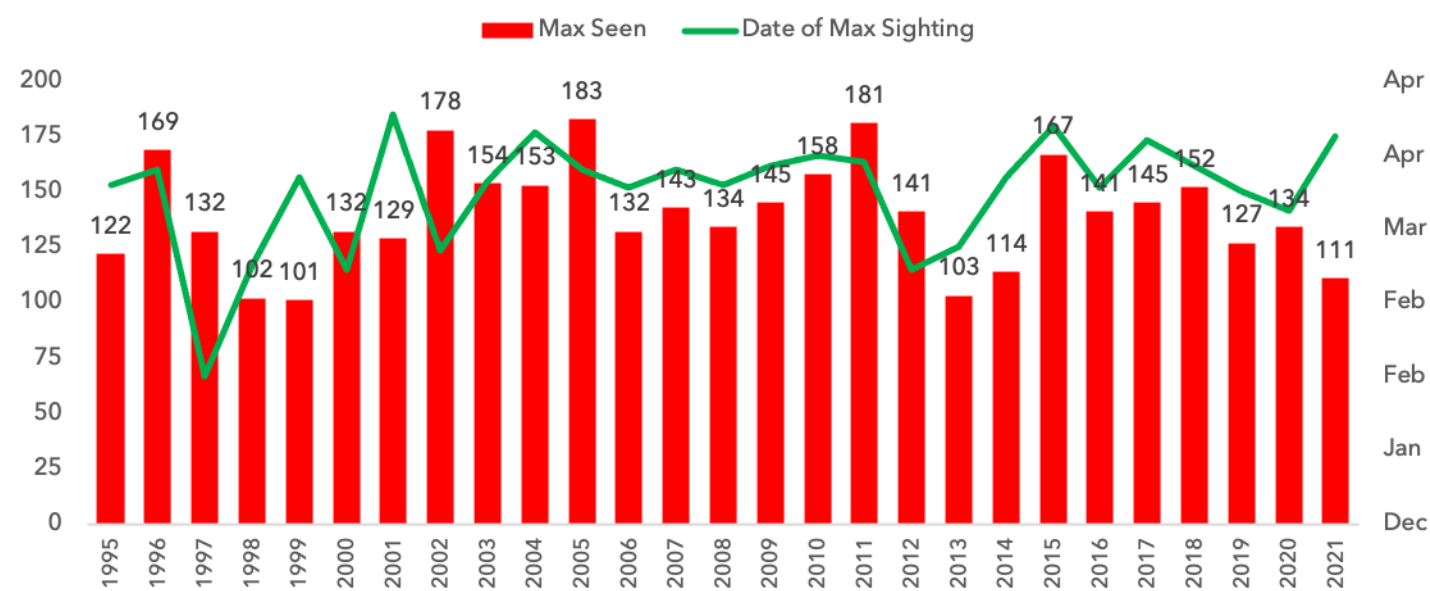
CHURCH COVE SEALS

MAXIMUM SEEN EACH YEAR



ROME POINT SEALS

MAXIMUM SEEN EACH YEAR



THE SEALS OF NARRAGANSETT BAY

HARBOR SEAL

Size: Males: 5-6 feet, 250 lbs. Females: 4.5-5.5 feet, 175 lbs.

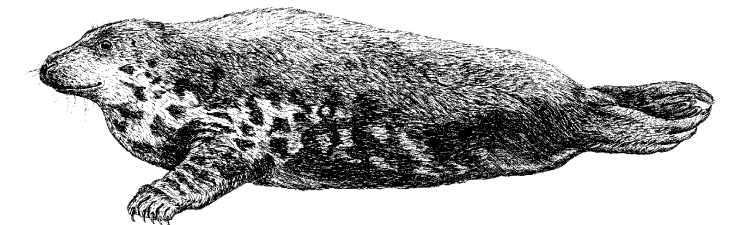
Description: Tan to dark gray with fine dark spotting on the back. As seals dry, their coat changes color. Harbor seals have small heads and large eyes. From a profile view they have a short muzzle and a concave forehead, much like a dog's head. They are the most common marine mammal in New England.



GRAY SEAL

Size: Males up to 8 feet and 800 lbs; females up to 7 feet and 400 lbs.

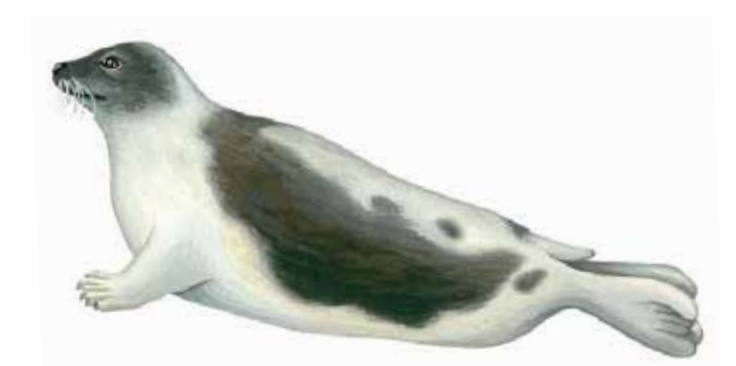
Description: Very large seal; long and broad snout resembles a horse head. Juveniles can be confused with harbor seals. Their coat is brown, gray or black with spots and blotches on the neck and sides. Males are darker than females. They live in colonies on sandy island beaches, and are occasionally seen on Rhode Island's south shore.



HARP SEAL

Size: At weaning, 65 to 80 lbs. Adults 5-6 feet, 250-400 lbs.

Description: White pups born on pack ice in the Canadian sub-Arctic. Juveniles are gray to dark tan with dark spots. In older harp seals the black spots converge on the back into a harp-shaped design. Some harp seals retain their spotted pelage ("spotted harps"). Of the seals that retain their spots, some have dark gray streaks, creating a completely gray pelage ("sooty harps"). Some adults and juveniles may wander south of their range into New England during winter.



HOODED SEAL

Size: At weaning, 110 lbs. Adult males up to 9 feet and 900 lbs; females smaller.

Description: Juveniles are called "blue-backs" due to the steel-blue color of the top half of their back; no spots. Adult seals have blue-gray pelage with black spots over the body. The front of the face is black. Their limbs are rather small in proportion to their body. Hooded seals get their name from the inflatable "hood" on the top of the heads of adult males. When the hood is deflated, it hangs down over the upper lip. Males inflate this red, balloon-like nasal septum until it protrudes out of one nostril. Juveniles may wander south of their range into New England after weaning.





SEAL WATCHING TIPS

Many people enjoy watching seals at their haul-out sites. However, sometimes observers can put stress on the seals and frighten them off their resting spots, causing them to lose precious energy. What might seem like a minor disturbance may be one of many they experience throughout the day and is, in fact, a violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Follow these tips to get the most out of your seal-watching experience and keep seals safe.

WHEN TO WATCH

Best times are February-early April, at low tide, on a calm day.

HOW TO WATCH

- From at least 50 yards away with binoculars or a telescope.
- Leash or control your dog.
- *From a Boat:* Maintain a parallel course at least 50 yards away, which is less threatening than a direct approach. Avoid sudden changes in course or speed, or circling the animals. Kayaks and canoes, with their low profiles and quiet approach, can actually be more threatening than motorboats.

BE ALERT FOR SIGNS OF DISTURBANCE

Seals stretching their necks, moving toward the water, looking at you or increasing their vocalization indicate that the seals are preparing to flee. Back off immediately.

DO NOT FEED THE SEALS

Feeding encourages seals to approach boats, increasing the likelihood for propeller injuries. Seals also bite, carrying infectious diseases.

LEAVE STRANDED SEALS ALONE

If you find a seal that is dead, being harassed, or stranded in the same area for more than 24 hours, please contact Mystic Aquarium at 860-572-5955.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibits disturbing, feeding or harassing seals.

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NARRAGANSETT BAY