



PACIFIC HARBOR SEAL

(*Phoca vitulina*)



DESCRIPTION

Harbor seals are commonly seen “hauled out” (resting) on sandy beaches or rocky islands all along the Oregon coast. They have no external ear on their rounded head and cannot turn their hind flippers forward or use their fore flippers to walk on land. They are brown, tan, or silver-gray with spots, have V-shaped nostrils, and a dog-like face. Unlike sea lions, harbor seals have short flippers and cannot “walk” on land.

OVERVIEW

- **Oregon Conservation Strategy Species**
- **Federal Listing Status:** Protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act
- **Length:** Up to 6.1 ft. for males, 5.5 ft. for females
- **Weight:** Up to 375 lbs. for males, 313 lbs. for females
- **Lifespan:** Up to about 36 years for females and 31 years for males
- **Primary Strategy Habitats:** Estuaries, Nearshore
- **Similar Species:** Northern elephant seal, California sea lion, Steller sea lion, northern fur seal,

FUN FACTS

- **Favorite Food:** Fish
- Harbor seal pups can swim only minutes after birth and can dive underwater for up to 2 minutes when they are only 2 to 3 days old.
- Harbor seals can sleep both on land and in the water.
- Groups of harbor seal mothers and their young are called “nurseries.”
- Harbor seals mate in the water and male harbor seals stake out the area just offshore of the nurseries seeking opportunities to mate with females that are coming and going to and from the nursery when foraging while they are still nursing their pups.
- Harbor seals can dive to depths over 1,500 feet and to stay underwater for up to 35 minutes!

RANGE AND DISTRIBUTION

In Oregon: Found along the entire coast and in estuaries.

Everywhere Else: Harbor seals are the most widespread pinniped species and are also known as the common seal. There are three subspecies. The Pacific harbor seal is found in the Pacific Ocean from Baja California, Mexico all along the west coast of North America and up into the Bering Sea,



PACIFIC HARBOR SEAL

(*Phoca vitulina*)

throughout the Aleutian Islands, the Commander Islands, the southern Kamchatka Peninsula and Kuril Islands in Russia down to Hokkaido, Japan. The Atlantic subspecies is found from the Canadian Arctic to New Jersey, and sometimes as far as the Carolinas, around Iceland, the northern coasts of Europe, and the southern coast of Greenland. The third subspecies called the Ungava harbor seal is only found in the extensive freshwater lake and river system of the Ungava Peninsula in northern Québec, Canada.

LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY

Harbor seals are shy but curious animals that spend about half of their time on land and half in the water. They like to “haul out” (rest) on beaches, rocks, mudflats, or drifting ice. They often haul out in large groups which affords them better protection from predators while some in the group sleep and others watch. They are not territorial. Movement patterns vary widely. While most harbor seals stay within 10s of miles from their primary haul out sites, others may routinely make foraging trips of 120 miles, and some have traveled to other haul out sites over 300 miles away.

Mating occurs in the water. Pregnancies last for about 10 months, and females give birth to a single pup in the spring or summer, depending on location. The pups weigh about 24 pounds at birth, and can swim within minutes. Pups may ride on their mother’s back when they get tired. They are weaned after 4 to 6 weeks after doubling or sometimes even tripling their birth weight. Harbor Seals become sexually mature between 3 and 7 years old. Males grow slightly larger than females.

Known predators of Pacific harbor seals include sharks, killer whales, Steller sea lions, eagles, ravens, gulls and a variety of shore based predators such as bears and coyotes. Humans are also a predator of harbor seals. Both Oregon and Washington offered a bounty for harbor seals and Oregon even had a state-hired seal hunter, but both states ended those bounty programs and harbor seals have been protected since the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972.

DIET AND FORAGING

Harbor seals eat a wide variety of prey. They feed mainly on fish like cod, hake, herring, sand lance, sculpin, flat fish, and small salmon, but they also eat shellfish, squid, octopus. Harbor seals in Oregon have been found to eat 21 different taxonomic orders of prey with flat fish occurring in about 93% of the samples examined. Although dives to over 1500 feet have been recorded, foraging dives for harbor seals in most areas appear to generally be much shallower at about 330 feet or less.

Foraging occurs in both shallow and deep waters, depending on prey availability.

HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Harbor seals favor nearshore coastal waters and are often seen hauled out (resting) on sandy beaches, rocky islands, as well as bay and estuary shorelines.



PACIFIC HARBOR SEAL

(*Phoca vitulina*)

CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

Threats: Entanglement with fishing gear, illegal feeding and harassment, habitat loss and degradation, collisions with ships, and chemical pollution

Population size/trend: Most populations are stable or slowly increasing, except for a small stock in the Gulf of Alaska.

REFERENCES

- Berta, A. and M. Churchill. 2012. Pinniped taxonomy: review of currently recognized species and subspecies, and evidence used for their description. *Mammal Review* 42(3):207-234.
- Carretta, J. V., E. M. Oleson, K. A. Forney, M. M. Muto, D. W. Weller, A. R. Lang, J. Baker, B. Hanson, A. J. Orr, J. Barlow, J. E. Moore, and R. L. Brownell Jr. 2021. U.S. Pacific Marine Mammal Stock Assessments: 2020, U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-SWFSC-646.
- Steingass, S. 2017. Dietary composition of four stocks of Pacific harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina richardii*) in the Norther California Current Large Marine Ecosystem as synthesized from historical data, 1931-2013. *Northwest Naturalist*. 98:8-23.
- Teilmann, J. and A. Galatius. 2017. Harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*). In B. Würsig, J. G. M. Thewissen, and K. M. Kovacs (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of marine mammals* (Third edition, pp. 451-454). Burlington, MA. Academic Press.
- Eguchi, T. and J. T. Harvey. 2005. Diving behavior of the Pacific harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina richardii*) in Monterey Bay, California. *Marine Mammal Science* 21(2):283-295.
- <https://www.dfw.state.or.us/MRP/mammals/species.asp>