

SAVE THE BAY'S 2023 Rhode Island Seal Report

FEBRUARY 2024



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

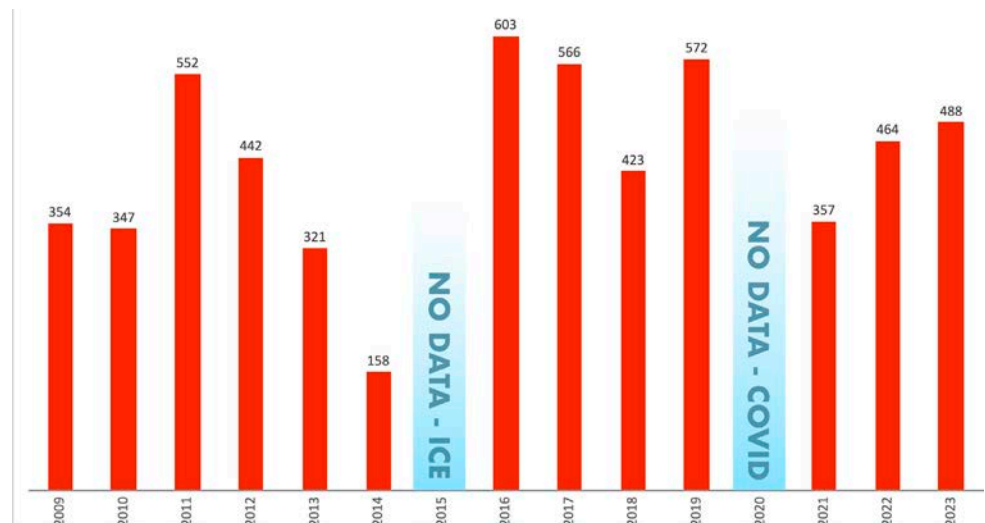
To better understand the habits and numbers of seals in Narragansett Bay, Save The Bay staff and volunteers began monitoring seals in 1994. Monitoring consists of regular volunteer observations at known haul-out sites throughout the seal season. Since 2009, an annual Bay-Wide Seal Count has been held 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.

SEALS ABOUND!

The 2022-2023 seal monitoring season in Narragansett Bay and Block Island was a strong one. 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. The total from the Bay-Wide count (488, all harbor seals plus one gray) was slightly higher than the average of 434 seals over the 15-year history of the project. In our Block Island-Wide count, volunteers observed 135 seals (34 harbor, 101 gray), which is a record for this more recently established count.

See below (and inside) for details.

BAY-WIDE SEAL COUNT



There were two years where we were unable to hold the Bay-wide count:

In 2015, extensive late-season ice and poor weather conditions made it impossible to hold the Bay-wide count. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to disruptions in the seal monitoring program in March 2020 and we were unable to complete the survey.

SAVE THE BAY®

NARRAGANSETT BAY

While seal counts in the Bay fluctuate from year to year based on weather conditions, we do not see any indication of any clear trends in population. While this may seem confusing, it actually indicates that our seals are in balance with their environment in Narragansett Bay. The Block Island count is a more recent effort, and as we have established our monitoring program, seal num-

bers would appear to be increasing. However, this may easily be due to the process of establishing a new program, recruiting and training new volunteers, and becoming familiar with the best haul-out sites around the island. We look forward to collecting more data in Narragansett Bay and Block Island in the years to come!



ABOUT COMMUNITY SCIENCE DATA



The Rhode Island 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 NARRAGANSETT BAY

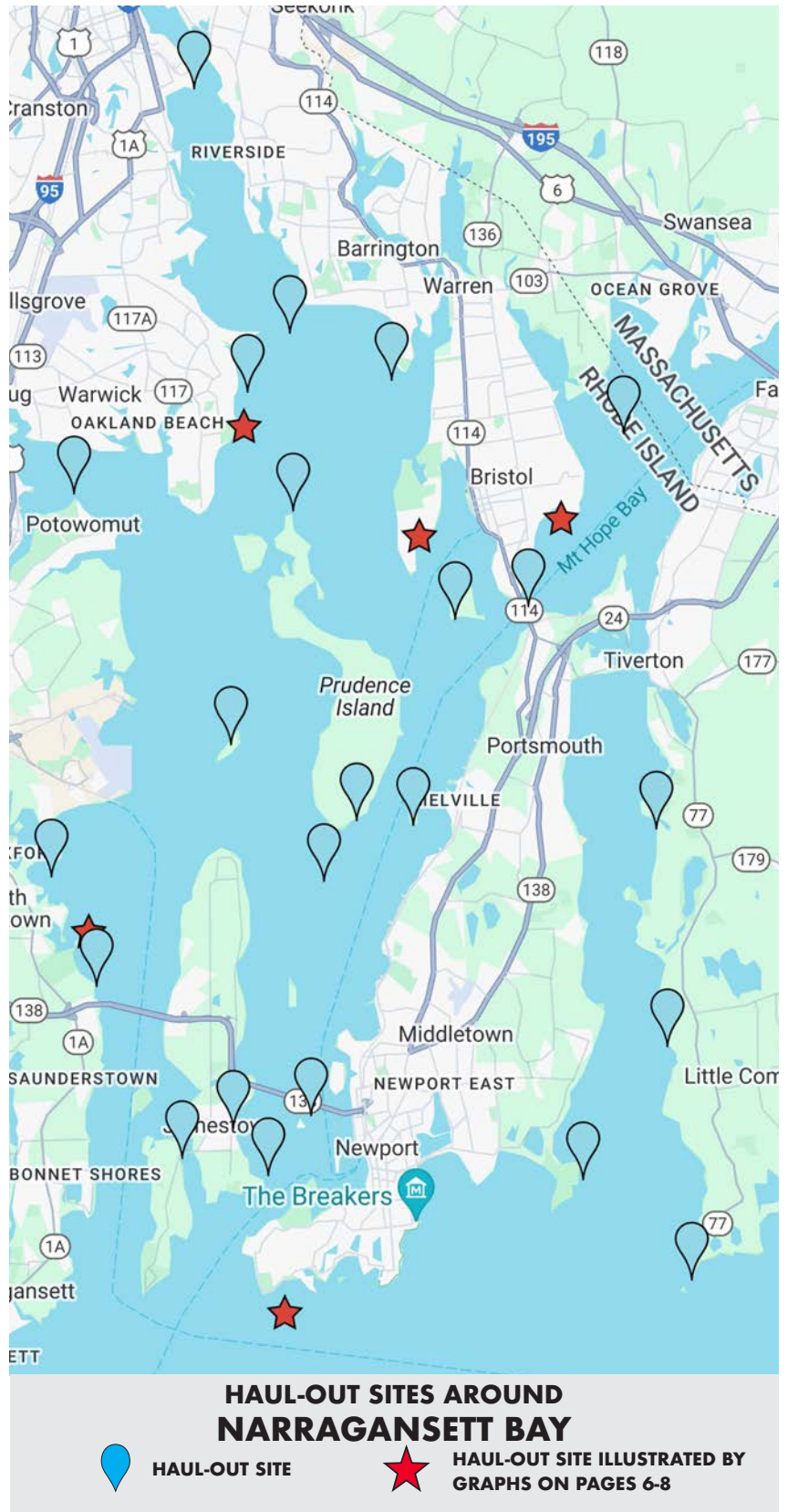
Harbor seals are seen from the mouth of the Bay at Brenton Point to as far north as Providence. Seals “haul out” on rocks for a variety of possible reasons, including regulating body temperature and rest.

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.



BAY-WIDE SEAL COUNT RESULTS

March 20, 2023 | Low Tide: 1:25 p.m. | Temperature: 45 F | Weather: Sunny
Winds: 4-5 on the Beaufort Scale

MONITORING SITE	TOTAL # OF SEALS SEEN
Barren Ledge	1
Brenton Point	93
Church Cove	50
Citing Rock	67
Coddington Cove	25
Coggeshall Cove	0
Coldspring Rock	9
Dyer Island	2
Field's Point	0
Green Point	2
Halfway Rock	34
Hog Island	5
Hope Island	1
Mackerel Cove	0
Providence Point	9
Prudence Island T-Wharf	34
Rocky Point	5
Rome Point	113
Rumstick	0
Sachuest	0
Sakonnet Point	34
Sally Rock	0
Seapowet Rock	0
Spar Island	0
Usher Cove	4
TOTAL:	488

SEAL MONITORING ON BLOCK ISLAND

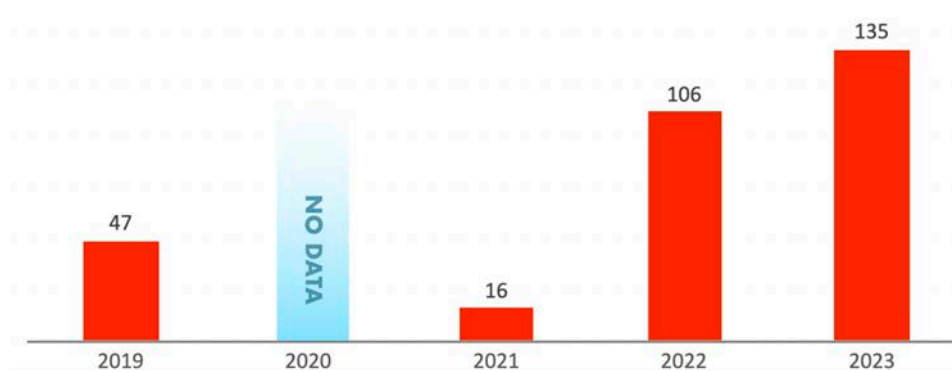
In partnership with The Nature Conservancy, we have established a seal monitoring program on Block Island.

While gray seals are an unusual sight in Narragansett Bay, they are frequently sighted on Block Island.

While the monitoring program is still in its early stages, we had great participation in 2023 as we learned more about the local seal population, haul out sites, and behavior patterns.

An Island-Wide Count was held on Tuesday, March 20 2023 in conjunction with the Bay-Wide Count, with 34 harbor seals and 101 gray seals sighted. This is by far the most seals we have seen so far in this volunteer monitoring effort.

BLOCK ISLAND SEAL COUNT



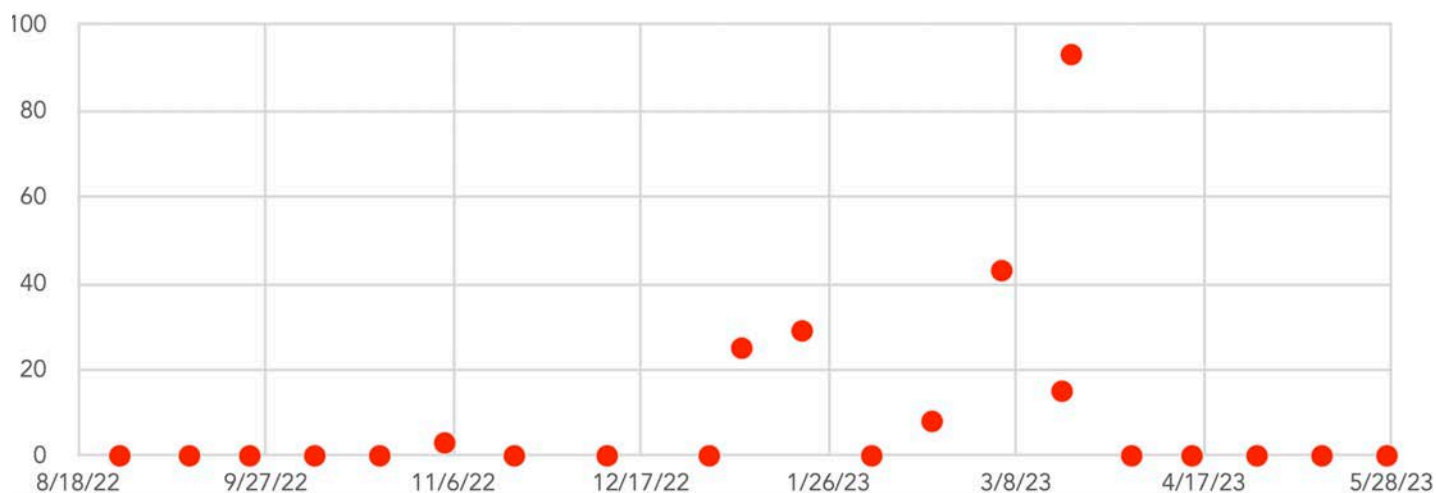
SEASONAL SEAL MONITORING

The following graphs illustrate the numbers of seals sighted at specific Narragansett Bay haul out sites throughout the 2022-2023 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

2022-2023 SEAL OBSERVATIONS

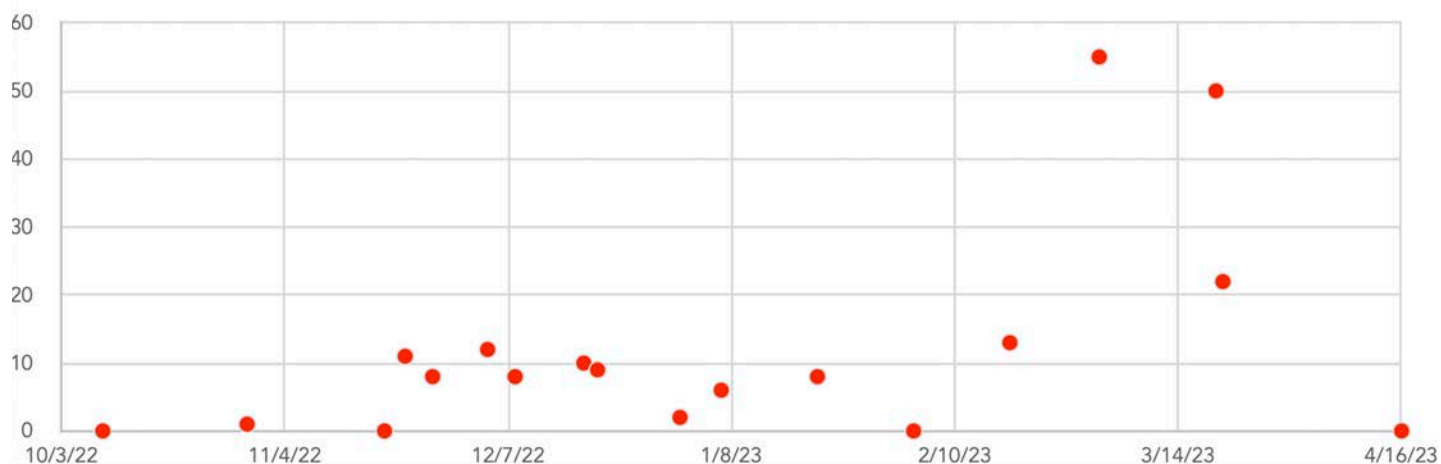
Total Number of Seals Seen



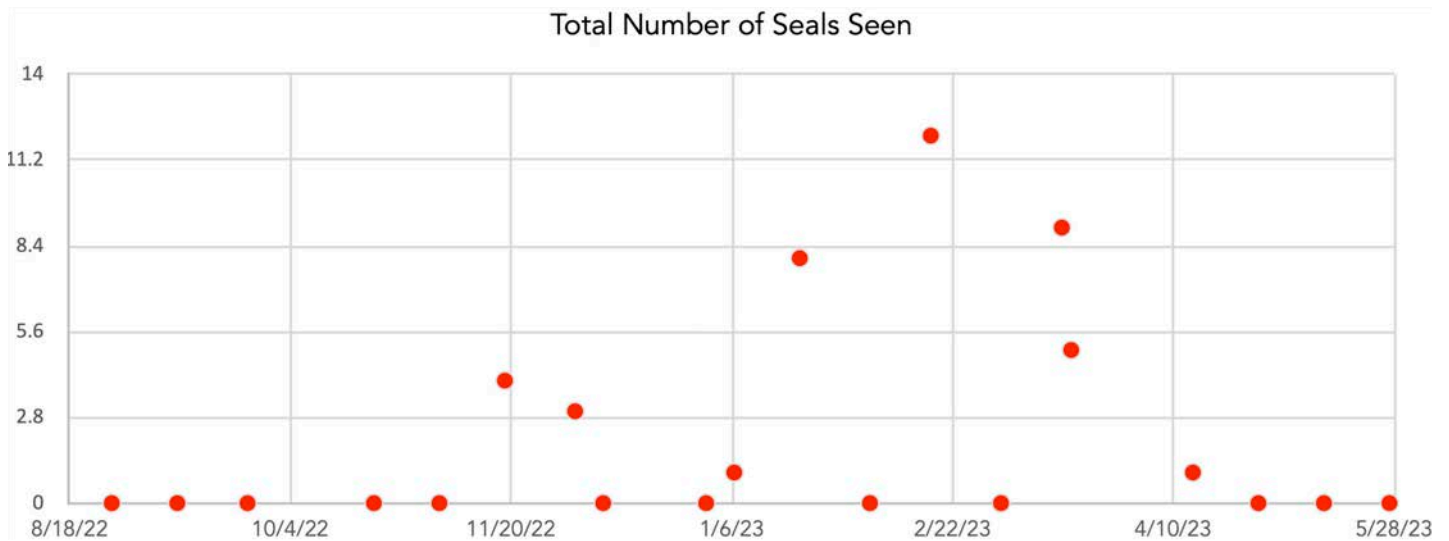
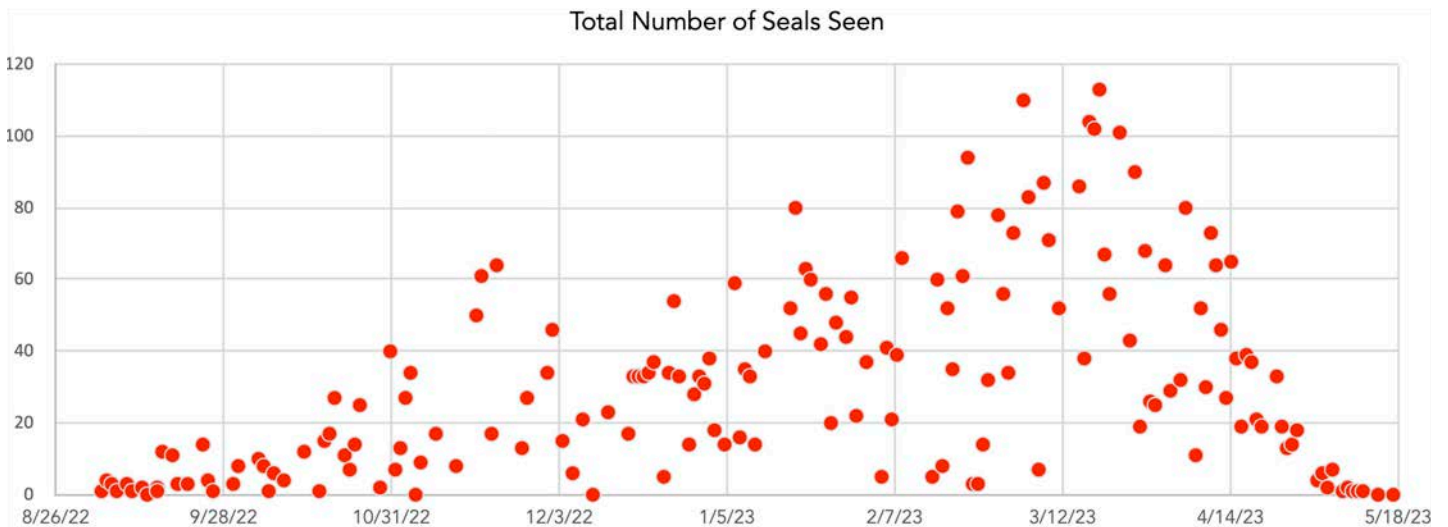
CHURCH COVE, BRISTOL

2022-2023 SEAL OBSERVATIONS

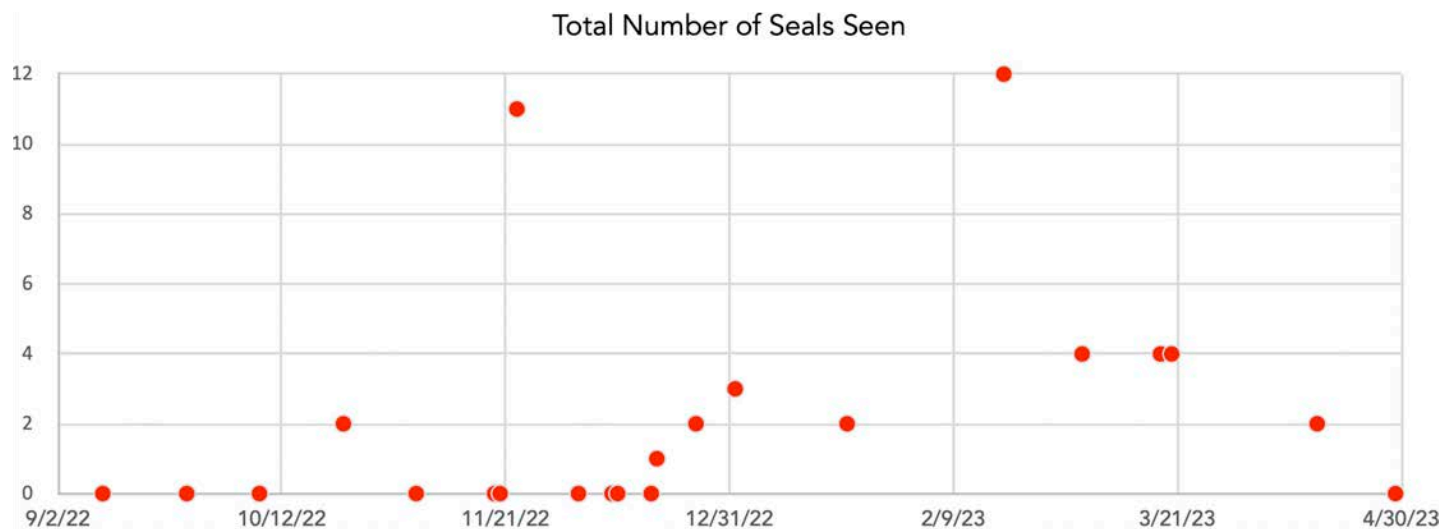
Total Number of Seals Seen



SEASONAL SEAL MONITORING, CONTINUED

ROCKY POINT, WARWICK**2022-2023 SEAL OBSERVATIONS****ROME POINT, NORTH KINGSTOWN****2022-2023 SEAL OBSERVATIONS**

SEASONAL SEAL MONITORING, CONTINUED

USHER COVE, BRISTOL**2022-2023 SEAL OBSERVATIONS**

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

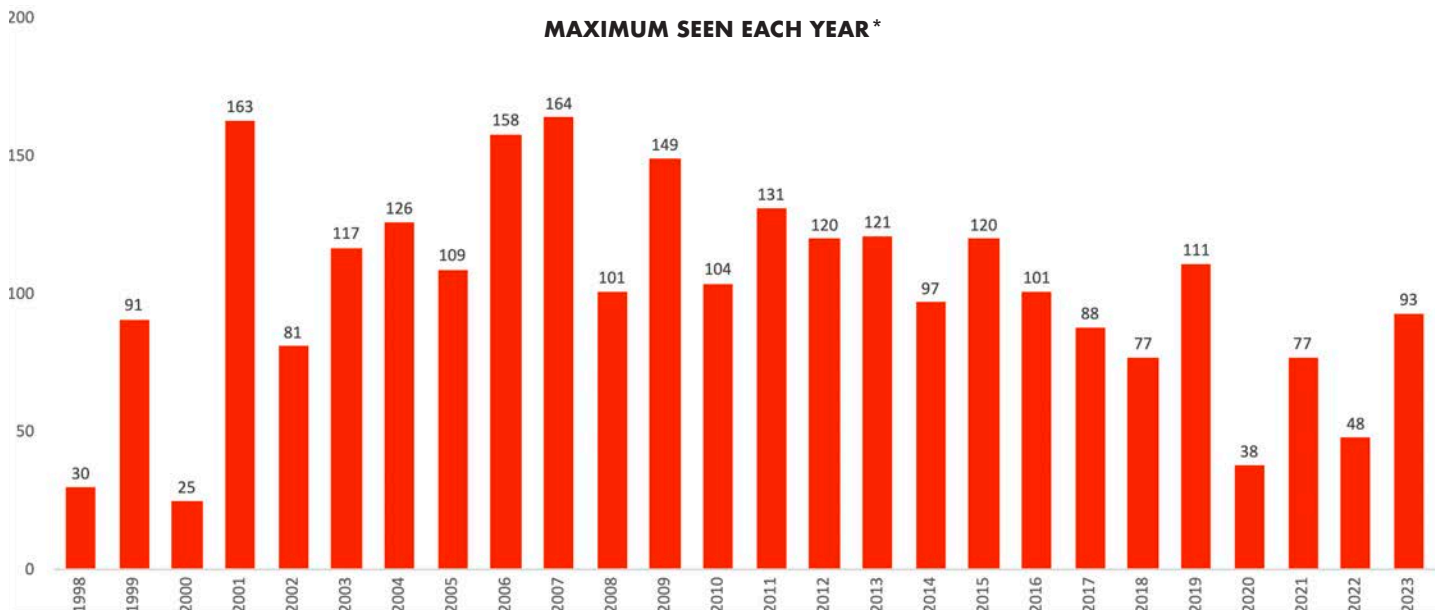
bars indicate the highest number of seals seen at each haul-out site for each year.

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.

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.



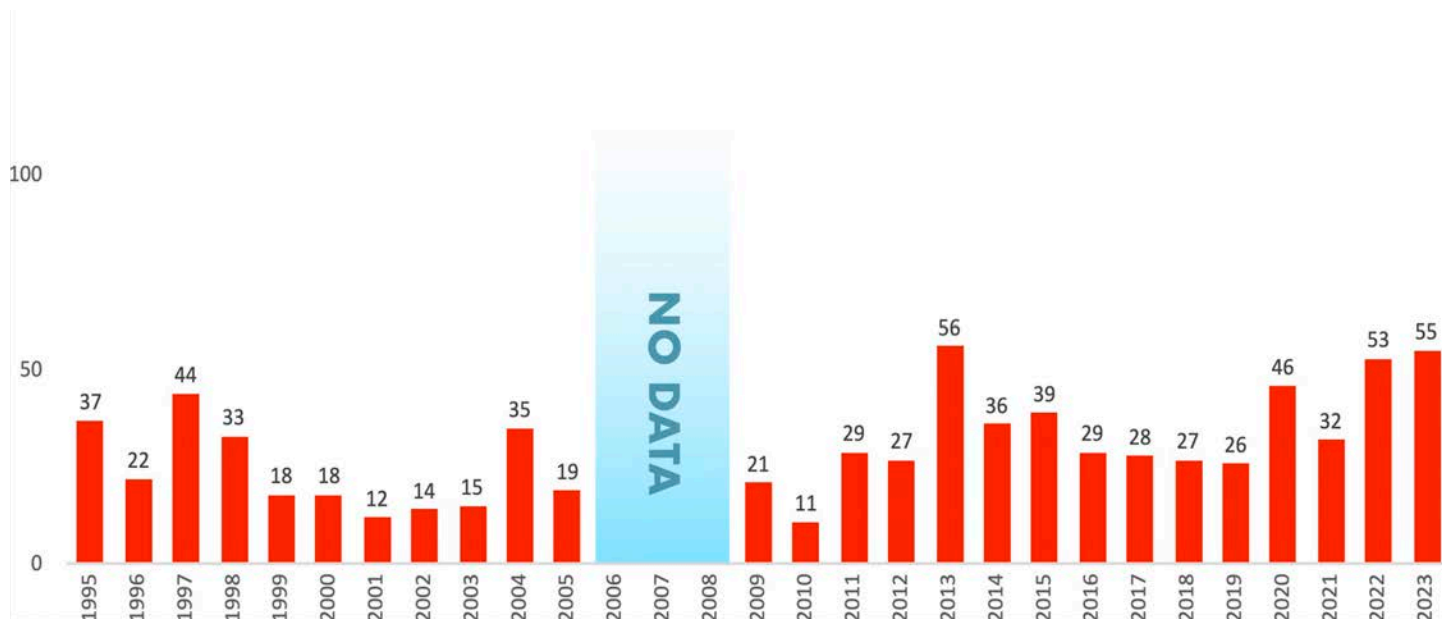
BRENTON POINT SEALS MAXIMUM SEEN EACH YEAR*



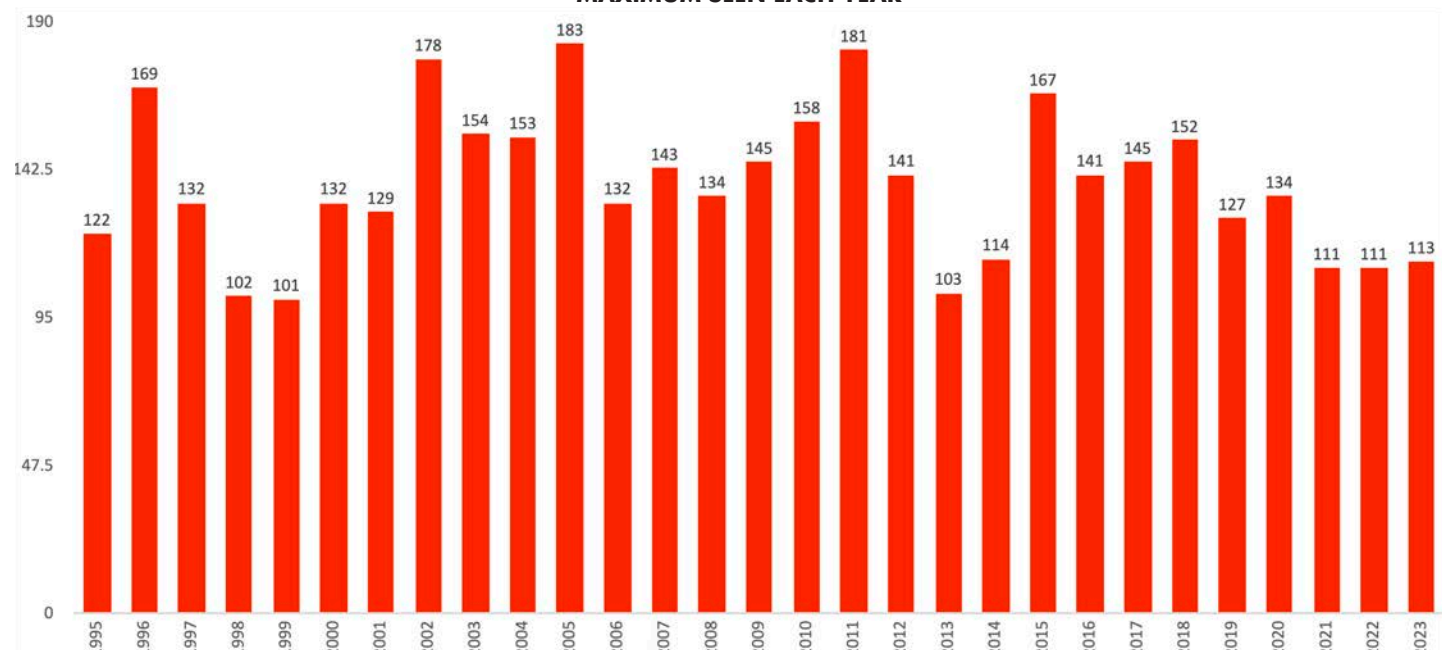
HISTORICAL SEAL MONITORING BY LOCATION, CONTINUED

CHURCH COVE SEALS

MAXIMUM SEEN EACH YEAR

**ROME POINT SEALS**

MAXIMUM SEEN EACH YEAR

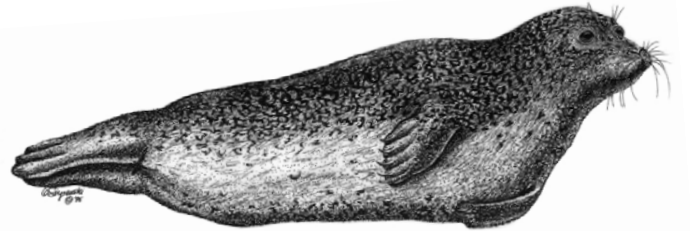


THE SEALS OF NARRAGANSETT BAY

HARBOR SEAL

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

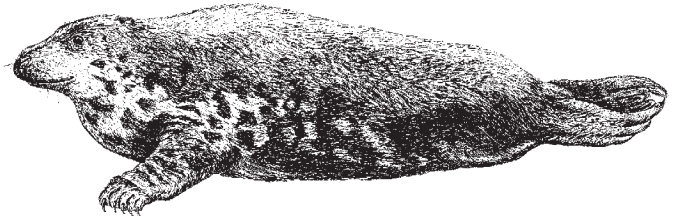
Description: Tan to dark gray with fine dark spotting on the back. As seals dry, their coat changes color. Harbor seals have small heads and large eyes. From a profile view they have a short muzzle and a concave forehead, much like a dog's head. They are the most common marine mammal in New England.



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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