

**Seals: Harbor Seal** (*Phoca vitulina concolor*),



**Gray (or Grey) Seal**  
(*Halichoerus grypus*)



Until hunting and other human impacts made them locally extinct by the end of the 1800's, Harbor and Gray Seals were common in the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary. Recently though, these two native species have staged a come-back. Colonies of these seals, along with the non-native Harp Seal, have been spotted from December through April basking in the sun along the coast of Staten Island, Long Island, Governor's Island, Manhattan, Sandy Hook and Jamaica Bay, and, most recently, on Hoffman and Swinburne Islands, two small artificial islands off the coast of Staten Island. The seals use the coastal waterways and shallow areas in these locations to feed. Exposed rocky areas on uninhabited islands or sandy beaches in these same locations are used for resting and giving birth. Since the Harbor and Gray Seal do not like to eat fish from polluted waters, their return to our area can be seen as a sign of improved water quality and healthy fish.

The Harbor Seal summers from the Canadian Arctic to southern New England including New York. In winter, they might roam as far south as the Carolinas. Loosely translated, the Harbor Seal's scientific name means "sea dog." This could be because the Harbor Seal's head looks like a dog when it pops out of the water. Male Harbor Seals grow to about 5 - 5 ½ feet in length and can weigh up to 200 - 250 pounds. Females are smaller, reaching about 4 ½ to 5 feet and 150 - 200 pounds. Harbor Seals are thought to live to at least 25 years. Males mature at 4 - 6 years with females maturing a bit earlier. Pups, weighing 12 -20 pounds and measuring about 2 ½ feet, are born in the spring. Unlike many other seal pups, Harbor Seals are able to swim from birth, although they are dependent on milk from the mother for 3 - 6 weeks before they venture out on their own. While tending their young, Harbor Seal mothers are very protective and will sometimes push the pup beneath the surface or carry it on her shoulders to avoid danger. The Harbor Seal's coat is made up of a variety of shades from silver-gray to black or dark brown and is usually spotted.

The Gray Seal also can have a wide variety of coloring. Males tend to have a dark brown-gray to black coat with a few light patches. Females are generally light gray-tan in color with a lighter color on the chest along with dark spots and patches. The Gray Seal has a long nose with wide nostrils and is sometimes called "horsehead." Its scientific name translates into "hooked-nose pig of the sea."

Females become mature at ages 4 to 7 with males at over 10. Gestation lasts 11½ months including a delay of implantation of 3 months. Female live, on average, nearly twice as long as males (46 years compared to 26).

Both seals gather in small groups to haul-out or rest on shore on a regular basis. Haul-outs include beaches, rocky areas, logs, ice and other floats. Time spent on haul-out is essential for survival. This is where they rest, dry out, interact, and regulate body

temperature. In addition to resting, Harbor Seals give birth to and nurse their pups while on haul-out, and undergo an annual molt of their pelage or fur. Generally wary of humans, Harbor Seals have been known to follow fishing boats, feeding on the scraps thrown overboard. Occasionally, Harbor Seals will haul out on someone's dock or even in a boat.

Aside from humans, the only predators of seals are Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) and large sharks. Many of the fish species that these seals eat are commercially valuable, and so, in a number of areas, seals can be in conflict with fishermen. In the United States, the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972 made it illegal to hunt or harass any marine mammal, including seals, in US waters. The only exception is Alaska where seal hunting is still permitted by native peoples.



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