

## Watchable Wildlife: Harbor Seals

By Bob Garrison

Early summer is a great time to travel to the coast in search of the harbor seal. California's most common marine mammal, the harbor seal is often missed at first glance. Unlike their noisy relatives, the California and Steller's sea lions and northern elephant seals, harbor seals make little noise and their mottled fur allows them to practically disappear against the rocks and sand. The key to finding the seals is knowing a little about their lifestyle.

### Natural History

Harbor seals spend their entire lives along the same stretch of coastline. To guard against California's cold water temperatures, seals maintain a thick layer of fat beneath their skin, giving them a thick sausage shape. They spend many hours during low tide hauled out on a favorite sandbar or rocky island soaking in the warm sunshine. The seals tend to hunt for fish, crabs, and shellfish during high tide. Harbor seals are the most vulnerable when out of the water and will quickly swim off if you get too close.

Harbor seals give birth to one pup in the spring. The dark-colored pups can be born on land or in the water, and the nursing period lasts about six weeks. After nursing is complete, the adult seals mate. Pregnancy lasts nine months, but the fertilized egg does not begin to develop for three months, aligning birth dates to the same time each year.

### Viewing Tips

-- use binoculars from an elevated cliff or pier to scan the shoreline at low tide for groups of seals. Once you spot a group of harbor seals, you can expect to see them at the same location on future visits.

-- if the seals are watching you from their haul-out area, you're too close. Back off quietly and watch from a hidden spot.

-- look for group interactions between the seals hauled out on shore. The most dominant seal is usually the one found in the driest (and warmest) spot. Watch what happens as the tide rises.

-- do not approach or touch harbor seal pups that seem to be abandoned. Pups are often left alone on the beach while the female hunts. If you or other humans are too close to the pup, the female will not return to the beach.

-- look for harbor seals silently watching you from the water just beyond the wave line. Seals will magically appear with just their head poking up from the water for a few moments and slip away before you know it.

## Other Marine Mammals to Watch For

The last of the northward bound California gray whales may still be seen off the coast. California and Steller's sea lions also haul out along the shore. Listen for their loud barking calls. The northern elephant seal breeds on the channel islands in Southern California, the Farralon Islands off San Francisco and at Ano Nuevo north of Santa Cruz. Solitary elephant seals can occasionally be seen on mainland beaches near breeding islands.

## Watching Wildlife in California

The Department of Fish and Game has joined forces with the Defenders of Wildlife and fifteen other organizations and governmental agencies to produce The California Wildlife Viewing Guide. Written by Jeanne Clark, the guide identifies 150 of the State's premier wildlife viewing locations. Included are detailed descriptions of each viewing site, map and access information, helpful viewing tips and more than 90 color photographs.

### Harbor Seal Viewing Locations in California

Lake Earl Wildlife Area  
Patrick's Point State Park  
MacKerricher State Park  
Sonoma State Beach  
San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge  
San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge  
Elkhorn Slough Ecological Reserve  
Montana de Oro State Park  
Carpenteria State Beach  
Crystal Cove State Park

---

You can purchase a California Wildlife Viewing Guide which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting [www.CAWatchableWildlife.org](http://www.CAWatchableWildlife.org).

Reprinted courtesy of Outdoor California, California Department of Fish and Game ([www.dfg.ca.gov](http://www.dfg.ca.gov))



[www.naturetourismplanning.com](http://www.naturetourismplanning.com).