

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Sealed With a Wave

A harbor seal in the Maurice River captures the fancy of our columnist

By J. Morton Galetto

It had been eighteen years since I had received a similar call from a Maurice River neighbor. This time, to be more specific, it was a texted video of a harbor seal next to a mooring float, to which a partially sunken sea kayak was tied off. Perched upon it was a harbor seal enjoying the low-profile buoyancy of the craft. Once before, in 2008, a seal managed to boost itself on and off a floating dock; more recently the tipsy nature

of the sea kayak demanded remarkable balance on the part of the intrepid seal.

I visited our neighbor to check out the situation for myself. Upon an unidentifiable white object lay a harbor seal in its iconic banana-shaped pose. As a few weeks passed more people called to report it to me, making all kinds of references to the kayak... with none recognizing it as a watercraft. Their comments included "Honestly, I've never seen a seal this far up river." "It's on a sunken log or something." "I can't tell if it's injured." "No, no, it's not a kayak, I'm sure of that." But indeed it was a kayak, and indeed it was a seal.

My husband and I went out in our boat to observe it for a half hour to see if it appeared healthy. It surfaced, seemingly to show off an 18" catfish it had captured, leading us to decide that it was clearly a successful hunter. The seal was very curious about us too, and surfaced a number of times to watch us with its oily-looking saucer-shaped eyes. When I observed it from the shore, it seemed to enjoy tossing the kayak around and it waved a flipper at me a few times, as if sending its regards.



*Recent seal visitor greets the author with a wave of the fin.
Photo: J. Morton Galetto.*

Over the years I've had many odd reports of river creatures. On two different occasions people reached out to me to say they had seen a manatee in the Maurice River. It seemed mighty improbable for a manatee to have made it north up the river into downtown Millville. However, on a lark I checked a website that tracks wayward

manatees, and much to my surprise I found one reported not too far from the Delaware Bay at about the same time of the year as one of the recent people's reports. So however unlikely, I suppose it is possible.

Aquatic mammals like seals, sea lions, and walrus are pinnipeds. The word pinniped derives from the Latin pinna meaning 'fin' and pedis or 'foot,' thus "fin-footed." Although sea lions are pinnipeds they are not seals. Sea lions have a visible fleshy outer ear, while seals do not. Although harbor seals are sometimes mistakenly identified as sea lions, these pinnipeds' pelvic bones are fused, so they are unable walk about on their hind flippers like sea lions. People often misinterpret harbor seals' typical caterpillar-like locomotion as a sign of injury or distress. And by the way, sea lions are a Pacific coast species, not found in our area.

(please scroll down)



The banana shape assumed by harbor seals is an identifying feature of the species. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

The harbor seal's visit to the upper Maurice lasted a few weeks, as did the previously viewed seal in 2008. This time the seal was first reported to me on March 26 and seemed to depart by April 10th. These mammals are primarily seen in New Jersey from November to mid-April, when they begin to travel to their nursery areas. But clearly it is rare to hear of seals being reported up the Maurice River into Millville!



The last time observers reported to the author that a harbor seal had been spotted in the Maurice River (upstream of Maurice River Cove) was in January of 2008, when it hung out on a dock in Millville. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

Possibly the seal sought an area where it could hunt without a lot of competition. If catfish is a favorite it came to the right place. In addition to fish their diet consists of crustaceans, mollusks, and squid – they are strictly carnivores. When eating they take bite-sized pieces and swallow them whole.

The harbor seal is the smallest and most common member of its family. Adult males are typically larger than females, measuring 5 to 6 ft in length and weighing 176 - 375 lbs. Females measure about 5.2 to 5.5 feet long and weigh 132 - 320 lbs. An adult harbor seal eats 6-13 pounds of food a day

to maintain its girth, while a layer of subcutaneous fat provides them with both insulation and energy.

Harbor seals have the largest geographic distribution of any pinniped species, but as individuals they tend to live out their lives in a specific region. Their territory doesn't usually exceed 125 miles from where they raise their young, although they may expand their travels if food is scarce or there is a disruption in a crucial environmental factor.



Harbor seals have the largest geographic distribution of any pinniped, but as individuals they tend to live out their lives in a limited region. Globally there are five subspecies of harbor seal. Map: NOAA.

On a daily basis they stay about 30 feet from land, which allows them to escape predators like killer whales and great white sharks. In fact, they spend half of their time “hailed out” on a shore point. Some terrestrial animals like coyotes have been known to eat

a seal pup, and these creatures are also on the polar bear's menu. They are wary and seldom venture much more than 160 feet from their "haul out" site.

Seals are communal at nurseries while raising their young, but unlike some other pinnipeds they are generally solitary the rest of the year.

It is not unusual to see seals in the Delaware Bay; in fact seals frequent Brandywine Lighthouse's rocks in the winter. Lewes, Delaware evidently even has a breeding colony and New England's coast is frequented by these marine mammals. Other year-round sites that are south of New England include Sandy Hook, New Jersey; Cupsogue Beach, Long Island, New York; and some as far south as Lewes, Delaware and Virginia.

In late spring and early summer the males look for females, fighting for mating rights. They are also very vocal during mating season and show off their diving skills. They mate in water and give birth on land. Males may mate with multiple females, but females are primarily considered monogamous.

Gestation lasts about 10.5 months. Pups are weaned and independent in 4 to 6 weeks, while they become sexually mature by 4 to 5

years of age. Since they live an average of 40 years it is not inconceivable that this was the same seal that visited in 2008. However in some photos the 2026 seal appeared to have nipples while they were not apparent in the 2008 photos; on the other hand the earlier photos' quality leaves much to be desired. Since nipples are the definitive determination of sexual identification the animal's belly needs to be visible, and because it is recommended that you stay 50 yards away, a good set of optics would be in order as well.

Our neighbors dubbed the seal "Sammy," declaring the name to be gender-neutral. Sammy and his or her species have many interesting attributes. Those oily tears protect their eyes and their large flattened corneas allow them to absorb more light, permitting them to see in dark waters. They can dive an average of 300 feet but are known to submerge as far as 1400 feet, and they can remain immersed for thirty minutes. Their auditory acuity is 14 times better than a human's underwater and they detect high pitched sounds beyond the range of human hearing.



Harbor seal whiskers are able to detect prey so that they can hunt in total darkness. The whiskers acoustically detect sound waves allowing them to sense the wake left by fish up to 100 meters away. In fact, blind seals seem to be able to hunt and feed despite their handicap. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

Seals were once commonly hunted. I can remember as a child I had a stuffed seal toy made from real seal fur, and seal outer garments were popular attire at one time. Since 1972 all marine mammals have been safeguarded under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. While the Act is U.S. law, import provisions on seafood nonetheless require other nations to follow its regulations. Some nations do not conform to these protective measures and as a result are denied seafood import to the U.S.

Japanese sea lions were hunted to extinction in the 1970s. Fisherman perceived them as pests competing for fish and damaging nets. In 2019 Washington and Oregon obtained federal permission to kill them below the Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River because of their impact on threatened and endangered salmon. Michael Milstein, a spokesman for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries, noted "Because of the way the fish gather, they become easy marks for the sea lions, so we're trying to strike a balance and manage this unfortunate situation that has evolved."

Native communities in Alaska, Canada and Greenland are still permitted to hunt seal for food, handicrafts, and clothing. Although controversial it is generally considered a sustainable practice.

The greatest threat remains diseases which have been known to wipe out a region's population. Furthermore, as a coastal species, they are exposed to concentrations of pollution from land sources. Bycatch (unintended capture) in fishing nets also kills seals.

Their economic contribution to people today is primarily in the form of ecotourism. People

simply love watching the antics of seals with their large endearing eyes.

One never knows what surprises our rivers have in store for us, but unless we pay attention and look carefully we are sure to miss out on nature's wonders.



Sources

“Harbor Seal,” and “Fun Facts About Surprising Seals,” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, [fisheries.noaa.gov](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov)

“Phoca vitulina, Harbor Seal,” Animal Diversity Website, animaldiversity.org

Seattle Times February 7, 2019 – “Sea lion shootings surge around Seattle, prompting \$20,000 federal reward for tipsters”