

Visitors from the North

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For three days the wind had blown hard out of the northeast. Wave heights had maxed out at around fifteen feet or so, and temperatures had dropped into the low 30s with God knows what as the wind chill factor. Driving along the foreshore next to the ocean, debris laden flotsam that was washing in with the storm presented a continuous obstacle. Winds were still coming onshore at around twenty and the sand took on the feel of drifting snow. Up ahead I could make out two figures on the beach huddled close for warmth. With so much moisture being driven in off the ocean during these sorts of blows, the cold seems to cut right through your body, chilling you to the bone.

Between my truck and the half frozen couple, lay a creature on the beach not typically associated with the South. Undulating its body across the sand, this animal was more or less flopping its way up further from the waters edge. Roughly three feet long, and with body curled into the tell-tale “banana” like pose when it stopped, a harbor seal had hauled itself out of the tumultuous winter seas and onto the beach in Kill Devil Hills.

Now if this was Massachusetts, no one would think twice about a harbor seal pup on the beach. But this is North Carolina, where seals were almost unheard of just a decade ago. Over the course of the last ten years however, seal sightings have been on the increase with the 2009-2010 season bringing in at least 3 unique sightings a week. From around Christmas right on through till April there was over 60 seal sightings from Corolla to Ocracoke. All of this activity has not only sent the Marine Mammal Stranding Network into overdrive, but has also left some penniped researchers scrambling to keep up.

The seals that have been wintering along the Outer Banks these last few years are all primarily first and second year pups. This fact alone sends up a few red flags for most folks, which is one of the many questions I had for Karen Clark of the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission who heads up the Marine Mammal Stranding Network (MMSN) here on this wispy strand of barrier islands. Since Karen was busy with a dolphin stranding elsewhere on the beach, she had asked me to check out this seal sighting, and if possible, being that I am a wildlife photographer, bring her back some images.

As I climbed out of my truck to get my camera gear together, the couple I had seen while driving up the beach immediately began walking over. These were MMSN volunteers who had come out to educate any beach goers who happened along about the seal and to help keep the animal safe from human harassment while it was resting here on the beach.

The thing about juveniles of pretty much any species of mammal is that they all tend to be, well, cute. With short faces, heart shaped noses, big whiskers, and large searching eyes that seem to pierce right through you, seal pups are one of those animals that make people all over the world just feel warm and fuzzy inside. There is something striking about these pups, something familiar, something human. Kneeling down to get on the same level as the seal I could see its large ink black inquisitive eyes following me. From the moment I had arrived, it had yet to take its gaze off of me. Of course, this is the other thing, that inquisitive nature that all children seem to exhibit. Add to this to the fact that seal pups look very much like big puppies – hence the name pup – and you have a recipe for disaster when people happen upon them on the beach.

When people find these seal pups like this they want to interact with them. Everybody wants to pet them. Children want to name them. Fishermen try and feed them. I even saw one instance where a family had taken a shovel and built a large four foot wall of sand around the seal to block the wind for it, leaving a small opening so that the seal could get in and out. This well intentioned family signed their names in the sand next to the wall – quite proud of their “good deed” they had done for the day. Others tell stories of people who have put blankets on the seals and of how a man in Connecticut tried to take a seal pup home with him like a stray kitten.

The problem with this sort of interaction is multifaceted and there is a grocery list of harmful effects that can come out of this for both the seal and people. For starters, the seals really are on the beach to rest. It’s a tough world out there in the winter ocean off the Outer Banks. There is a reason we are known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. The seals energy supplies are wasted, they are hundreds of miles from their natal grounds, and they are hauling out to rest in a desperate attempt to survive. Approaching a seal pup on the beach only causes stress to the animal and will often result in forcing the seal back into the ocean – an act that can very well be a death sentence as the number of dead seal pups that wash up on the Outer Banks each winter attests to.

When I was finally able to meet up with Karen Clark, I asked her about this sort of human interaction and the role of the MMSN. As it turns out, keeping people away from the seals has become one of the largest tasks of the network here. A virtual army of volunteers must be maintained from Corolla to Ocracoke in order to respond to these sightings. “People and pets,” she told me, are the primary threats to these seals when on the beach.

The question that was still nagging at me however was why where we seeing the pups to begin with? Adults would seem to be more adapt to such a long distance voyage from their summer feeding grounds. The fact remained though, that North Carolina has rarely seen one of these mature seals until the last couple of years.

Long distance travel, research has shown, is often times a matter of pushing and pulling. For an animal to undergo such a costly expedition as this, there are usually environmental factors

that both push them out of where they are, and factors that also pull them to where they end up. Speculation is running rampant as to why these pups are beginning to frequent the Outer Banks, but most likely it has something to do competition. Obviously the adult seals have an edge when it comes to hunting and therefore in areas with a high population density, it's advantageous for the juveniles to wander further from their summer grounds when pickings get slim in the colder months.

According to Amy Ferland, president of the organization Southeastern New England Marine Educators and long time harbor seal researcher, the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 is to thank for all of this. Once it became illegal to hunt and kill seals in the United States, these animals began to rebound in numbers which may be well beyond a hundred thousand in the New England area now. As this population has grown, those few areas where seals could still be found prior to 1972, have become heavily populated and therefore suitable habitat is hard to come by.

In 1981 aerial counts were started along the coast of Maine – considered to be the primary breeding grounds of these seals. The first year the study counted around ten thousand seals. By 2001 however, this number had increased nearly tenfold to around one hundred thousand seals. 2001 was the last comprehensive aerial seal survey done in the US. And even though we know there were around one hundred thousand during the survey, this was only conducted along the Maine coast and therefore does not include other New England or even Canadian breeding sites. With a 10 fold increase in the population in just 20 years, we can only guess as to what the numbers might look like now-a-days.

Harbor seals were exterminated throughout most of the New England area in the early 1900s. Labeled as pests, seals experienced a wholesale slaughter in the US as they were deemed to be competition for commercially viable fish. Numbers remained dangerously low for the entire Western Atlantic population until their protection in 1972. Since then, numbers have simply grown exponentially and here along the coast of North Carolina, we are most likely beginning to experience the historical patterns of these marine mammals once again.

As pupping areas have become overcrowded up north seals, have begun to search out new areas to colonize such as Long Island Sound which historically harbored large numbers year round. Long Island Sound, give or take a few, is roughly three hundred miles north of the Outer Banks. According to the available guidebooks and texts on seals, three hundred miles just so happens to be the agreed upon range for which seals are known to travel. This fact alone may very well account for why there has been a sudden increase in seals down as far south as North Carolina – or maybe not.

Putting a cap on seal migration at three hundred miles leaves much to be explained. Our understanding of migration in birds is still considered by many to be in its infancy. When it comes to marine species, data is practically non-existent. Were lucky we have charts that no longer depict sea monsters. So when researchers finally got around to affixing tracking devic-

es to seals and numbers started rolling in, the results basically blew the top right off of what little we thought we knew about the migratory habits of these guys. Guide books can't keep up.

Case in point: Hastings the Seal. Hastings was brought into the National Aquarium in Baltimore for rehabilitation and was released back into the Atlantic on May 13, 2010. Before his big bon voyage however, he was outfitted with a tracking device so that researchers to get a glimpse into the movements of a harbor seal pup. Hastings of course did what we would expect any good seal pup that time of year to do, and that was head north to colder and more productive waters of the Gulf of Maine. Instead of making a b-line up the coast however, Hastings decided to make a few detours logging 1,175 miles before making it up to Maine where the satellite lost his signal. This is nearly 4 times the distance that was expected of a seal pup.

The year before, another seal, this one nicknamed Hamilton, was also outfitted with a tracking device by the National Aquarium. Hamilton had originally been picked up on a beach in Bermuda. Once released in Delaware, he kept to his plans for some sun and fun by heading to Daytona Beach Florida – which he reached in just 16 days. After a few days in Daytona, he decided to head back north and traveled right up the coast from Florida to the Gulf of Maine in just a couple of weeks. This is the sort of stuff that was not really supposed to be happening.

Even if seals are beginning to breed in the Long Island sound, as Hamilton and Hastings both showed us, seals are more than capable of leaving the common breeding areas of New England and making their way down to North Carolina and points beyond for the winter. Amy Ferland believes that what we are seeing is a distinct pattern of migration in these seals. Though some may argue that this behavior does not constitute true migration, we know that in those animals that are considered migratory, depending upon the species, some individuals leave, while others do not. Furthermore, when animals migrate, they are not always going to the same place, or even in the exact same direction. Therefore, we may very well be seeing a migratory pattern, which Ferland claims is one of the unique traits of the Western Atlantic population of harbor seals.

One thing that is agreed upon when it comes to migration is that resources are the driving force. Be it food or sex, these are two of the most powerful and demanding of needs at work in the world. What else could be so pressing as to cause an individual to undergo such a costly and statistically deadly undertaking?

In the summer of 2000, a study of the dietary habits of harbor seals was conducted by the Marine Environmental Research Institute. This study found that 75% of harbor seals diet in the Western Atlantic was made up of whiting, red hake, Atlantic herring, and redfish. Species such as winter flounder also found their way into the bellies of these seals with regularity. Even though some might argue that seals are not migratory, it is accepted that these species

of fish on the other hand make annual migrations from the Gulf of Maine to North Carolina. If migration is all about food, and the primary summer food sources of seals migrate to North Carolina, it's quite possible then that these seals are simply following their food source that they spent all summer feeding upon.

Harbor seals are without a doubt the most common seal to come ashore in North Carolina today. This does not mean that they are the only species though. The Outer Banks is beginning to play host to even the rare and exotic species that are normally found on the pack ice of the frozen north such as harp and hooded seals. Study after study has shown that the ice loving seals like these, have survival rates that are inextricable from the quality of that year's pack ice. Everything is timed to coincide with the spring break up of the ice: mating season, gestation length, pupping months, and how long it takes a harp seal for instance to wean from its mother. With three decades of significant warming in the arctic and a subsequent effect on the pack ice and its spring break up, researchers are now watching entire age classes of seals perish. Some of these seals are beginning to adapt by transitioning over to Greenland where a more stable pack ice still exists than in the Gulf of St. Lawrence off of Canada. Others are left wandering to try and find new suitable pupping and feeding grounds elsewhere. In 2011, 3 adult harp seals were reported in the same day on the Outer Banks. All three were at different locations and one was found by the author hauled out on someone's dock in the Currituck Sound!

Since the seals started showing up, pups have always been the norm with only a handful of adult seals making an appearance from time to time. That was until I got a phone call telling me that fishermen were reporting some seals out on one of the dredge spoil islands at Oregon Inlet. Jurisdiction over that area is mixed between several agencies – including Cape Hatteras National Seashore and NC Wildlife Resource Commissions. At the time, no one had been able to get out to the island to investigate the reports however. So, with it being February and the water temps in the low 40s, I did what I thought would be the most logical thing to do: I launched my sea kayak head first in the tidal currents of one of the most dangerous inlets in the world hoping to spot a few seals.

Nearing the island, I pulled out my binoculars to glass the sandy shoreline. Just as I had expected – nothing but a bunch of washed up logs and debris from the recent nor'easter. Or at least that's what I thought until one of those logs turned around and slid itself into the water. Deciding that this was not the typical behavior of a log, I pulled my kayak in closer to the island for a better look.

I had originally seen logs in place of seals simply because my brain was not prepared to see what I was looking at. Like the story of the Arawak Indians not seeing Columbus' ships for several days though they looked right at them, nothing like this had ever been recorded before in North Carolina. Instead of logs, I counted 37 full grown adult seals hauled out onto the edge of the island sunning themselves. In the waters around me, another 4 popped their heads up in what is called bottling, to get a better look at me. A quick survey of the rest of

the area also confirmed several more hauled out along the edge of another island. I was convinced I'd gone through some sort of wrinkle in the universe and was now off the coast of Maine.

Within a couple hundred feet of the island, the seals bolted into the water at the site of my kayak. This is normal healthy seal behavior. This is what we expect to see from the adults. This is what we see from many of the pups on the beach, especially those on the Cape in the National Seashore and the inlet spits. Those seals that need volunteers to help keep people from disturbing them are obviously in need of some serious R&R.

For whatever the reason, the fact remains that each winter these odd yet fascinating little pennipeds haul out onto the beaches of the Outer Banks, and with each year, we are finding more and more. The uniqueness of the North Carolina coast, with its barrier islands, and the collision of the Gulf Stream with the Labrador Current along the Outer Banks, cannot be overstated. The sight of a seal resting itself just above the foreshore of the beach only drives this point home these days. Even locals here are still taken back when they hear of the seals. When the word goes out that a seal is on the beach, people leave work to come out and see these strange creatures of the northern seas much like they do when the humpback whales are feeding just outside of the sandbars.

One thing does seem to be certain; the seals are here to stay. Each year, the frigid waters of our winter ocean offer up a new batch of seals. They hang out at some of the better breaks with surfers, they hunt fish and haul out onto our beaches to sun and rest. Whether returning to historical patterns like the harbor seals, or bravely venturing into uncharted waters of a new world with warmer winters and ice free springs like the harp seals, seals are a fact of life on our beaches now. The Outer Banks is world renowned to beach goers and vacationers. After the crowds of summer have gone, these seals have become the new visitors that many of us have come to anticipate. Lucky for us, they are a lot more interesting to find than pasty white summer tourists donning Hawaiian shirts and socks in sandals.