



# SEAL CONSERVANCY

P.O. Box 2016 • La Jolla, CA 92038  
[www.sealconservancy.org](http://www.sealconservancy.org)

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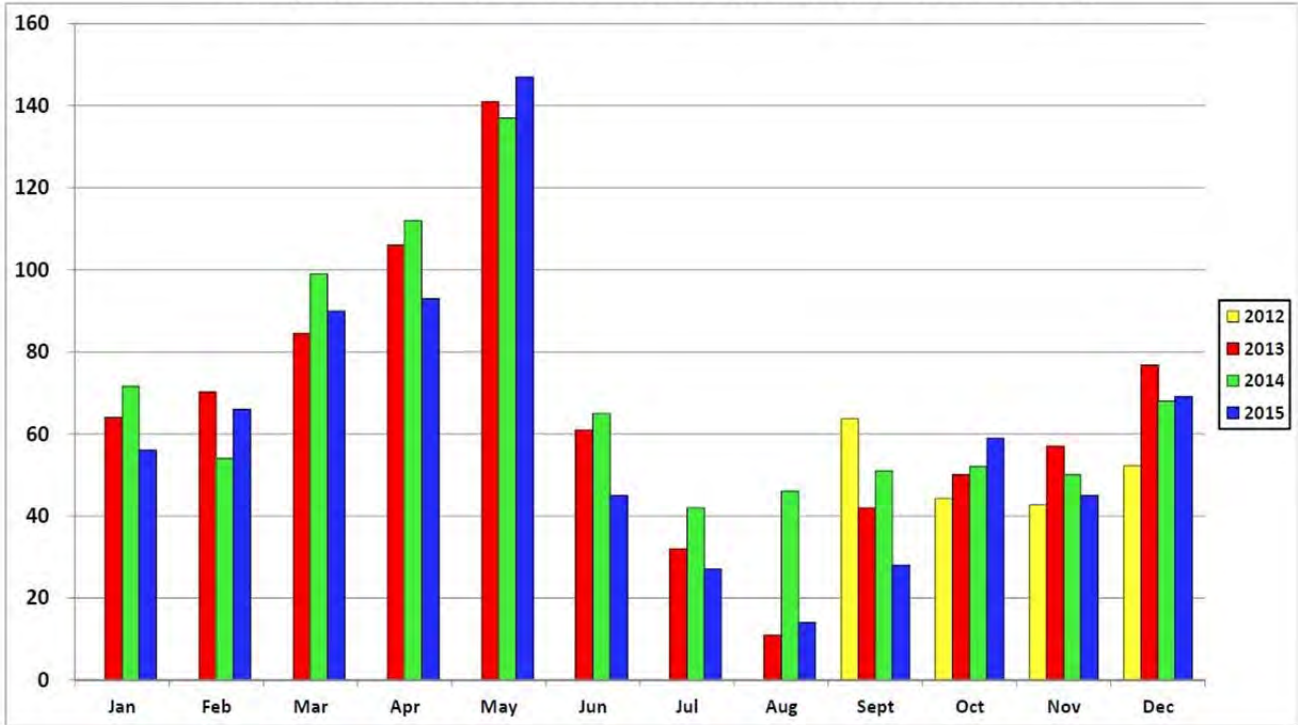
## Harbor Seal Facts

- Harbor seals are pinnipeds. They are true seals, that is they do not have visible ear flaps.
- They inhabit the Northern Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the Baltic and North Seas but generally stay close to the coast.
- Harbor seals tend to be site faithful, which means that they stay with the same resting, haulout, and birthing site.
- They are generally 5-6 feet long and weigh up to 300 pounds, with males being slightly larger than females.
- There are approximately 40,000 harbor seals along the California Coast — 9,000 in Southern California.
- The La Jolla colony has about 200 seals who use the site at Casa Beach as a haul out location year-round.
- They also use the beach during the winter and spring as their rookery and place to rear their young.
- Over a million visitors come to La Jolla every year to view this unique harbor seal rookery, the only one of its kind in such an urbanized setting, and the only mainland rookery in Southern California south of Ventura, over 160 miles to the north.



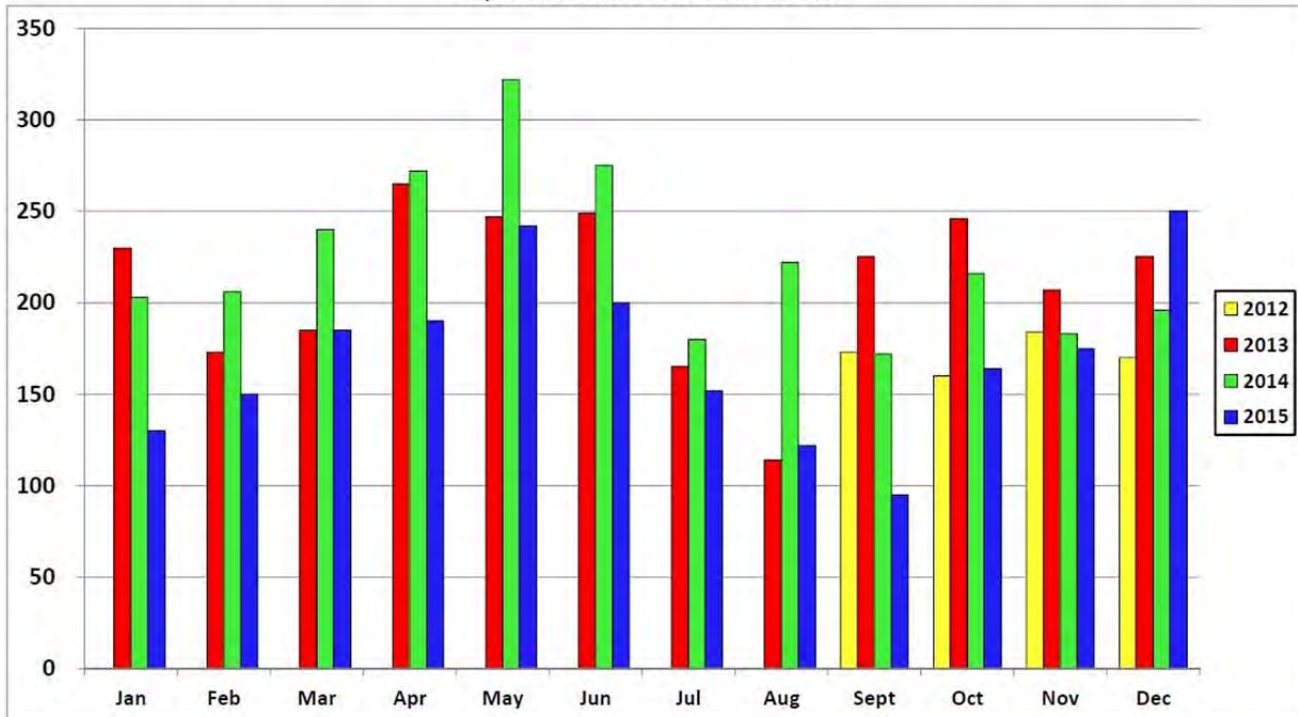
- Harbor seals can vary widely in color – from white or silver-gray to black or dark brown. Almost all harbor seals have spots, although the spots are more noticeable on some seals than others. Colors and spots are unique to the individual and can be used to identify individual seals.
- They can dive down to depths of 1,500 feet and are capable of staying under water for up to 40 minutes.
- The average dive of a harbor seal lasts between 3 and 7 minutes.
- Their hair does not provide insulation. There is a thick layer of blubber (fat) which insulates the seal.
- In cold water, blood vessels constrict, slowing the flow of blood to the skin and reducing heat loss. When hauled out, the process is reversed and blood vessels expand, allowing heat to be released to the environment.
- Although they haul out in (sometimes quite large) groups, harbor seals do not like to touch each other. This is in direct contrast to sea lions, who are commonly seen piled on top of each other on the off-shore rocks at the La Jolla Cove. If you watch the harbor seals closely, it is interesting to observe how they go to great lengths to avoid touching each other. The exception to this rule is the bonding between a mother and her newborn pup, when they “nose” each other frequently.
- Each year after the breeding season, Pacific harbor seals experience a “catastrophic molt” during which they lose their hair in sheets over a period of only one to two months. During this catastrophic molt, their ability to retain heat is greatly reduced. Thus, when they are molting, harbor seals will spend considerably less time in the relatively cold water and considerably more time hauled-out on land.
- The seals who live at Casa Beach experience their annual “catastrophic molt” between late April and early June each year. This is why both the number of seals hauled-out, as well as the duration of time hauled-out, increases dramatically during this time period.

Average Number of Seals on the Beach, September 2012 - December 2015



Year to Year Comparison of Monthly High Counts of Seals on the Beach

September 2012 to December 2015



- Harbor seals are mammals. The females bear a single pup which they care for alone.
- Pups can swim within hours of birth.
- The gestation period is one year but there is a period of delayed implantation so the actual development time is 9 months.
- Courtship and mating occur underwater—we don't know much about the mating system but harbor seals are believed to be polygamous.
- Mating usually occurs after weaning of the pups.
- The harbor seal pupping season can start as early as December 1 and extend to June 1. At the Casa Beach rookery, the official pupping season begins each December 15 and ends 5 months later on May 15.
- At La Jolla's latitude, pups are mostly born in February and early March.
- Each year, about 40 seal pups are born at the Casa Beach rookery.
- Pups are usually born on shore.
- Mothers typically nurse their pup for 4 to 6 weeks.
- The average weight of a newborn harbor seal pup is 20 to 24 pounds.
- Pups are well-developed when born and can swim and dive within hours.
- Harbor seals are a coastal, nearshore species of marine mammal of the order of pinnipedia, and are an integral part of the marine environment.
- At Casa Beach, the seals haul out year round.
- Harbor seals communicate with each other using body postures and are the most docile and least vocal of all pinnipeds.
- Pup mortality is high: up to 50%.

- Pups can be born on land or in the water, but most births take place on land.
- Seal pups have been born on the Casa Beach at least since the mid-1990's.
- Harbor seal pups nurse on their mother's milk for 4 – 8 weeks, after which they are weaned.
- In their early weeks of life, a mother harbor seal may carry her pup on her back while swimming and diving.
- The average lifespan of a harbor seal is 20 – 25 years.
- Harbor seals do not drink water; they metabolize water from their food.
- Seals can rest underwater. Their lungs collapse when they dive, their heart rate slows dramatically, and blood flow to some organs is restricted. In this way their bodies conserve oxygen and prevent the "bends."
- Although seals are highly adapted to their aquatic way of life, there are still aspects of their life cycle for which they have to come ashore. The annual molt—during which the seal loses and then regenerates all of its fur — is one such event.
- Molting is of crucial importance because a seal's skin and fur are essential for waterproofing and temperature control.
- The true seals, such as harbor seals, molt their fur relatively quickly about one month after the breeding season.
- For the seals at Casa Beach, this annual molt occurs between late April and early June.
- At this time of the year, the seals spend a particularly large amount of time ashore and spend little or no time feeding in the water. By staying ashore, they minimize heat loss and maintain a relatively high temperature, which encourages blood flow close to the skin, thus accelerating the molting process.

- Contrary to popular belief, the seals, when hauled out, are not simply “basking in the sun”. We know this because seals in temperate regions haul out regularly even on the coldest winter days, and seals in polar regions remain hauled out on the ice, even during the most ferocious storms.
- Seals are a natural part of the marine environment. This stretch of local coastline is actually polluted by humans – that means us! Frequent sewage spills and storm drain run-off are the most serious threats to the health of the oceans and the countless life forms therein.
- Harbor seals spend their entire lives along the same stretch of coastline.
- They are opportunistic feeders who tend to hunt for fish, cephalopods, and other invertebrates during high tide.
- Harbor seals are most vulnerable when out of the water and will quickly return to the ocean if a threat is perceived.
- Harbor seals can be seen year round at Casa Beach and Seal Rock at the foot of Jenner St. and Coast Blvd. in La Jolla.
- It is very rare for harbor seals to choose a haul out site so close to humans, making the rookery at Casa Beach a rare natural treasure, indeed.



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## Facts About the Casa Beach Harbor Seal Rookery

- There is no beach access allowed during harbor seal pupping season (December 15 through May 15) per San Diego [Municipal Code 63.0102\(e\)\(2\), Ordinance 20360](#) (see page 8).
- Between May 16 and December 14 each year, the City's viewing guideline rope helps visitors to view the seals from a safe distance.
- Casa Beach in La Jolla is the only NOAA-recognized mainland harbor seal rookery between the Mexican Border and Ventura, 160 miles to the north.
- The sea wall was built in 1931 with funds donated by Ellen Scripps. At that time, the State granted a tideland trust to the City of San Diego. In 2009 the State Senate passed SB428, which added an additional use to the Statutes of 1931: to allow Casa Beach to be used as "a marine mammal park for the enjoyment and education of children."
- Harbor seals began hauling out at Casa Beach in the early 1990's. The first births were documented in 1996 (Yochem and Stewart, 1998). Soon thereafter, Casa Beach was officially recognized as a rookery by NOAA.
- Federal Law prohibits harassment of seals. This includes flushing them, touching them, chasing them, feeding them, swimming with them, or engaging in any other action which causes the seals to alter their natural behavior.
- The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has recommended a 50-foot distance be maintained between humans and seals because this is the distance needed to prevent harassment.







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## Seal Viewing Tips for Visitors to Casa Beach

### General Tips

- You are most likely to see a live birth of a harbor seal pup between February 4 and March 4 of any given year.
- You are most likely to see the greatest number of seals on the beach between April 24 and June 6.
- You are least likely to see any seals on the beach between 8am and sunset during the months of July, August, and September.

### Pupping Season (December 15 to May 15)

- The sandy beach is closed to the public by City Ordinance between December 15 and May 15 each year. To watch the pregnant seals and their newborn pups, stay on the mid-landing behind the chain, or you can observe from the sea wall or the sidewalk above Casa Beach.

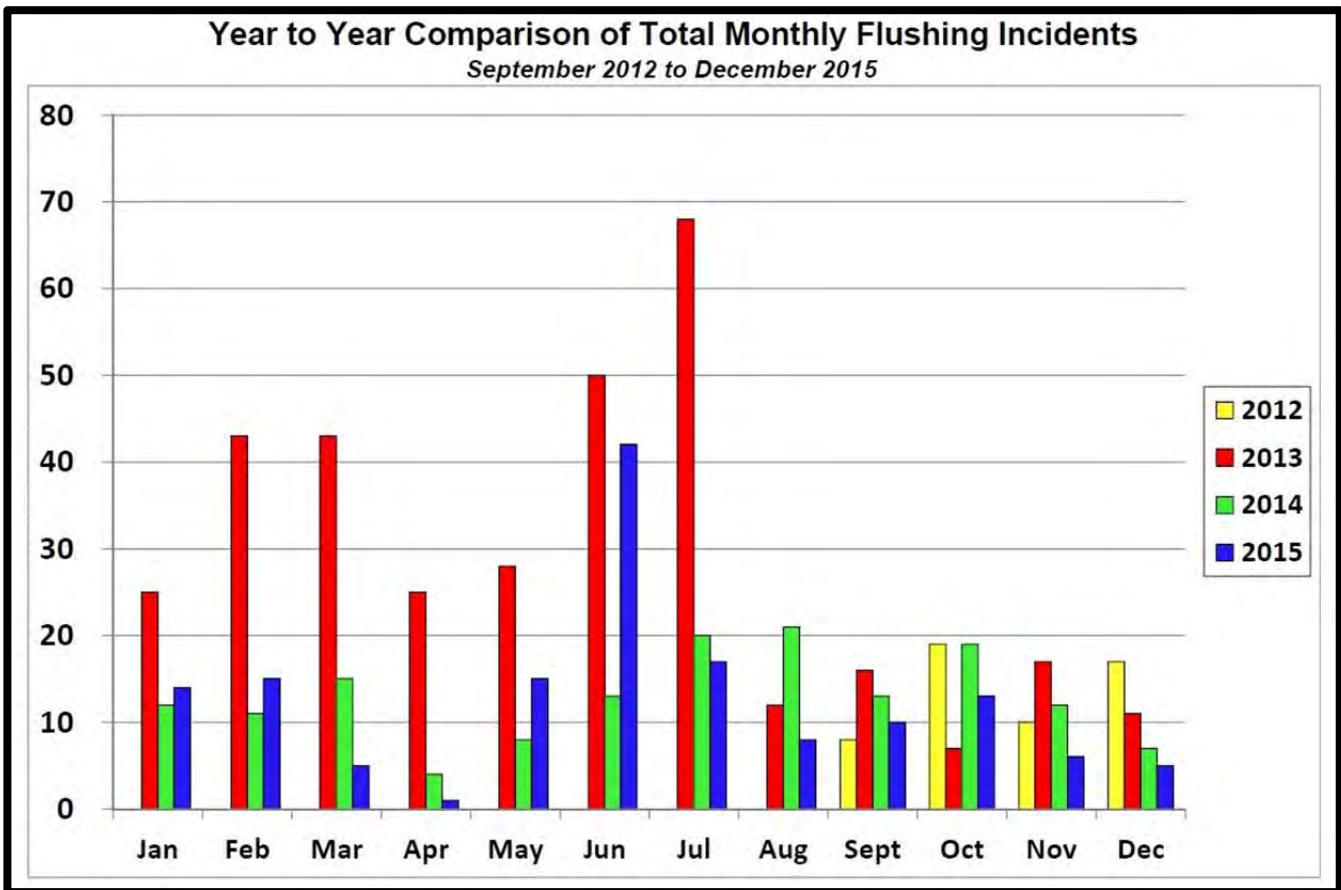
### Non-Pupping Season (May 16 to December 14)

- If you choose to go on the beach (May 16 – December 14), and there are seals on the beach, please stay behind the City's guideline rope.
- When it's hot and sunny, the seals typically leave the beach each morning by 7:00 or 8:00am at the latest. They'll gradually return to the sand in the late afternoon or early evening, once the shade and/or tide has cooled off the sand. Seals need to rest a minimum of



10-14 hours per day to replenish their oxygen supply and restore their body temperature after diving for fish as deep as 1,500 feet.

- In the summer, starting at sunset, seals will be ready to return to the beach to haul out after a day of fishing. Most likely you will see a lot of bobbing heads in the water. This is a sign that the seals want to come ashore, because they need to rest. As long as people are by the water's edge on the beach, the seals will be too scared to leave the water. Although you're not required to do so, if you find yourself in this situation, the best thing for the seals would be for you to move back behind the City's guideline rope – or leave the sandy beach entirely and observe from the mid-landing or the sea wall.



- Please remember that it is always a violation of the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act to disturb the seals' natural behavior. The harbor seals are also protected by State Law as well as the City of San Diego's Municipal Code.