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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 21, 2011

Time to Watch Gray Seals on Nantucket's Great Point But Keep Your Distance

People can get excellent views this summer of the nation's southernmost – and growing -- colony of Atlantic gray seals at Nantucket National Wildlife Refuge on Great Point in Massachusetts, where the seals like to haul out of the water. Wildlife officials say, however, that it's not safe to get too close to the animals and it's also against the law.

One reason it's so easy to see a gray seal now is that the colony has grown substantially in recent years.

"A few years ago we typically saw about 100 animals around Great Point in June, last year we saw about 200 animals and this year that number was even higher," said Libby Herland of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Service's primary mission is wildlife conservation, and it manages national wildlife refuges for wildlife first. It is their job to minimize disturbance to seals on Nantucket National Wildlife Refuge while providing opportunities for people to enjoy wildlife and the natural beauty of the refuge.

"While it's exciting to see these wild animals in their natural habitat, we hope that people will watch from a distance and not risk a bite or a fine," added Herland.

Visitors are urged to keep at least 150 feet, half a football field, between themselves and resting seals, to operate their boats safely and slowly when seals are present in the water, and to not feed the seals. A disturbed seal may bite, and bites can transmit diseases like distemper virus or rabies to humans and pets. Observing the animal from a distance is the best way to avoid disturbing it or being injured.

“We want residents and visitors to enjoy their visit to this special place,” said Diane Lang, property manager, Nantucket Management Unit of the Trustees of Reservations which owns and manages the Coskata-Coatue Wildlife Reserve which abuts Great Point. “The beach provides a wonderful opportunity for visitors to experience nature while helping us to protect and preserve it at the same time. Responsible wildlife watching is a big part of that experience.”

Another important reason not to get too close is because gray seals, like other marine mammals, are protected by federal law. Harassing, hunting, killing or collecting these animals can result in fines of up to \$100,000 and one-year in jail.

Gray seals can be more aggressive than other species commonly found in waters around the island, although all seals can be aggressive if provoked. Last year, an unusually aggressive gray seal surprised a number of anglers by chasing fish on their lines as they were reeled onto the beach. That animal was later found dead of gunshot wounds in waters off Hyannis, Mass.

“We encourage people to report incidents involving people or pets disturbing or attempting to force a seal from the beach,” said Mendy Garron, Marine Mammal Stranding Coordinator for the Northeast Region of NOAA Fisheries Service. “We also want to know if visitors encounter unusually aggressive animals,” she said.

Reports about aggressive animals or of harassment can be made to the NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement at 1-800-853-1964. Reporting helps the agencies improve outreach and education to visitors about safe wildlife watching. Also, reporting these incidents or overly aggressive animals to NOAA officials helps the organization better monitor and evaluate if they are ill, injured and may need veterinary attention.

If you encounter a seal on the beach, or just want to watch safely, here are the key things to do:

- Keep a distance of at least 150 feet between you and the animal
- Help keep other people and pets away
- Don't touch or handle the animal, even if it seems docile or dead
- Don't attempt to feed the animal
- Report injured or stranded seals to The New England Aquarium Stranding Hotline at 617-973-5247; or
- Visit NOAA's Northeast Region website (http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/stranding) for more information.

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