

Harp Seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*)

Adult harp seals are known for their dark body markings and are sometimes referred to as saddlebacks, although as newborns they are often called whitecoats for their long, woolly, white fur, which disappears through molting.

Harp seals are considered Arctic species and are closely associated with pack ice. They undergo extensive spring and fall migrations to and from summer feeding grounds in sub-arctic and arctic waters. Harp seals give birth on ice floes off the coast of Canada from late February to mid-March.

Over the past decade, juvenile harp seals have become regular visitors off the northeastern coast of the US, especially during the winter months. More recently adults as well as juveniles have been found in the Gulf of Maine and as far south as North Carolina.

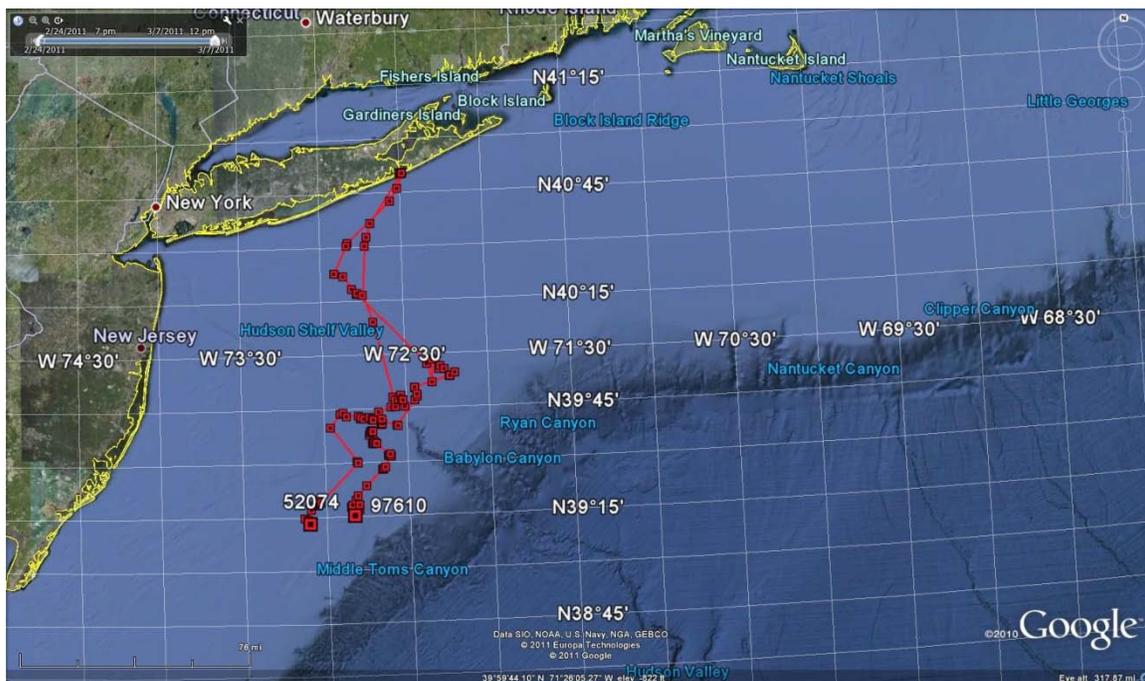
Harp seals spend the majority of their life in the water, diving for up to 20 minutes at a time to maximum depths of up to 1,200 feet. In February of this year, two juvenile harp seals recovered from New York beaches by The Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation were fitted with satellite tags and released. As of March 7, these animals were reported to be in the deep waters of Hudson Canyon, having travelled distances of 213 miles and 155 miles respectively.



Adult harp seal
Photo credit: The Riverhead
Foundation for Marine Research and
Preservation



Harp seal pup (whitecoat)
Photo credit: Maine
Department of Marine
Resources



2011 Harp seal satellite tracking data provided by The Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation

Harp seals will haul out on beaches to rest. Resting seals should not be approached or disturbed. A disturbed seal can bite and even transmit diseases like distemper virus or rabies to humans and pets. In other instances, a disturbed seal may abandon its pup to flee an approaching human or dog. Human interaction is a hazard to a young seal pup's survival. Every year, a large number of seal pups that are recovered each season have been unnecessarily separated from their mothers because of illegal pickups or other type of harassment. Please do not approach seals on the beach. Only authorized organizations/agencies are allowed to handle stranded marine protected species. Trained volunteers and biologists will monitor a seal pup or adult seal from a safe distance and intervene, under the direction of attending veterinarians, only when necessary.

Under federal law, it is illegal and punishable by law to pick up, handle or interact with free-swimming, dead or beached marine protected species. This including seals, whales, dolphins, porpoise and sea turtles. Penalties for harassing these animals can be up to \$50,000 and a year in jail.

What to do when encountering a sick or abandoned seal on a beach:

- Stay at least 150 feet away from it. Pup's mothers may be just around the corner.
- Don't handle it, and keep other people and dogs away.
- Call NOAA Fisheries Service's stranding hotline at 1-866-755-NOAA (6622), or a local marine mammal stranding network member or visit NOAA's Northeast Region website (http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/stranding) for local contact information. To report violations or for more information on NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement call the toll-free number: 1-800-853-1964.

For more information on harp seals and to learn more about NOAA Fisheries Service seal research in the Northeast region, please visit our website:

<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/seals/index.htm>

For more information on NOAA and its role in managing marine resources, please visit us at <http://www.noaa.gov> or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/usnoaagov>.

