

SHORE STEWARDS NEWS

May 2006 Island County, Washington

Issue No. 19

Marine Mammals on Your Beach

When considering the Shore Stewards guideline titled "Respect Intertidal Life", most of us immediately think of crabs, clams, anemones, sea stars, urchins, and the other animals that inhabit shoreline tide pools. These are the types of living creatures that we most often encounter on our beach walks. There is another type of marine animal that is encountered on the beach and in the water near the shoreline, though, and that is the marine mammal. This edition of the Shore Stewards News covers the marine mammals you will most often encounter when boating or beach walking and what to do if you encounter a marine mammal that is on the beach, whether it is resting, sick or dead.

Throughout this newsletter will be references to marine mammals that are "stranded". According to the NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal Stranding Handbook, a stranded marine mammal is one that is dead, on the beach or in the water within 200 miles of the coast. Or alive, and on the beach or shore and cannot return to the water. It also includes marine mammals that are in water so shallow that the animal is unable to return to its natural habitat under its own power, such as a beached whale.

The most common marine mammals you will encounter will be the pinniped, which includes our seals and sea lions. Pinnipeds divide their lives between foraging at sea and coming ashore to rest, thermo-regulate, mate, give birth, suckle their young, and/or molt (shed their old hair). Northwest pinnipeds are classified in two families. Otariids (sea lions and fur seals) have external ear flaps and can rotate their hind flippers under their pelvis to walk on all fours on land. Phocids (seals) have no external ear flaps. They drag their hind limbs, moving like an inchworm on land.

Cetaceans in Puget Sound

Cetaceans include whales, dolphins and porpoises. The ones you will most often find stranded are the Odontocetes, or toothed whales, dolphins and porpoises. These include the Harbor porpoise, the Dalls porpoise, and the Orca (Killer Whale).

Mysticetes are whales that use baleen rather than teeth, and include the Gray whale and the Minke whale. These are less frequently stranded, but the Gray whale often gives the appearance of being stranded in shallow waters where the sandy beach has a high ghost-shrimp population. The whale will come into shallow waters, scooping a large amount of the sand into its mouth and filtering out the shrimp using its baleen. Beaches that are frequented by Gray whales will often have very large divots in the sand. Gray whales usually come into Puget Sound during their migration, using their prolonged stay as a time to feed and rest.



Seals You May Encounter

Though you may occasionally find a Northern Fur Seal or an Elephant Seal on the beach, the seals you will find most often on the beach or in the waters of Washington State are our Pacific Harbor Seals. These are also the only seals that give birth to pups in our area, from late May through August. The pups remain with their mothers during the 4-6 week nursing period, and are abruptly weaned when they reach a weight of 50-60 pounds. The color of the harbor seal can range from white (Lanugo, premature) to black, and it is the only local seal with spots. The male will grow up to 6.3 feet long with a weight up to about 370 pounds, and the female will grow up to about 290 lb and 5.7 feet long. (Folkens)

When the mother gives birth to a pup, she will often leave it alone on the beach while she goes out to find food. Like any baby, the pup will sleep and thermo-regulate. The most frequently reported encounter with seals out the water involve pups that are too young to have developed protective wariness (escape response). Well-intentioned humans may bring fish for the pup, pour water on it, or in some instances take it home. If the mother sees humans, human activities, or dogs on the beach, near her pup, she will flee to the water, and may leave the pup behind. She returns to reclaim her pup once the disturbance near the pup goes away. If activity continues near the pup, the female may eventually give up trying to return. The best thing to do when you find a pup on the beach is to keep your distance (100 yards.) and to make sure other people and dogs stay far away. This will help ensure that mom will come back for the pup, nurse it, and take it back out to the water.

California Sea Lions

The large Steller Sea Lion is occasionally found in northern Puget Sound, but is pretty rare to find in Island County. The sea lion most often found here is the California Sea Lion, males. Ranging in color from dark brown to black, the male is most often found in Puget Sound, and can get up to 7.10 feet in length with a weight up to 860 pounds. They have a dog-like snout and have a distinctive bark. The males develop a large bump (Sagittal Crest) on their forehead at about five years of age. Sea lions walk on all four flippers, and sometimes rest on the surface of the water with their flippers exposed (to conserve heat), giving the appearance that they are "waving" to you. (Folkens)

When Marine Mammals Are Sick, Injured or Dead

If you see any marine mammal on the beach, keep your distance, but note details. It may be a mother or pup, or it may merely be resting. If it is sick, make note of details (description, size, etc) and report it immediately, especially in high traffic areas. Seals may have Brucella or other diseases, so keep your children and dogs away. Some diseases are infectious to both dogs and seals, and may pose a risk to humans as well if they come in direct contact with an infected animal. Seal pups can die from infections caused by dog bites. Sometimes a seal may be dead from a transient Orca bite. (Puget Sound orcas eat salmon. Transient orcas who are visiting from the Pacific Ocean and coast will eat seals.) Boat propellers may cause injuries or death to marine mammals, and they can also die from drowning if they get caught in fishing or crabbing gear. Many seals and sea lions die from gunshot wounds.

If you encounter any sea lion on the beach, get away quickly. It may be resting, but if it is injured or sick it can be a real danger to your well-being. A sea lion can move much faster than you. It is as large as a bear in size and weight, and could cause serious injury if provoked or angry.

Marine Mammal Stranding Network

The Northwest Marine Mammal Stranding Network was established by NOAA Fisheries / National Marine Fisheries Service under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. It is designed to respond to marine mammal stranding events along the Washington and Oregon coasts and is part of a nationwide network. The network is composed of cooperating scientific investigators and institutions, volunteer individuals and organizations, wildlife and fisheries agencies, and state and federal enforcement agencies. These participants are experienced and knowledgeable in the methods of handling beached and stranded marine mammals and volunteer to either respond directly or provide expert advice to those at the stranding on how to handle the incident. Data are collected from such events and entered into a national database that is used to establish baseline information on marine mammal communities and their health.

(From the website of the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. Website may be seen at: http://olympiccoast.noaa.gov/living/marine_wildlife/marine_mammals/strand.html www.nwr.noaa.gov – Office of Protected Resources)

The Central Puget Sound Marine Mammal Stranding Network was formed in 2002 as the Island County Marine Mammal Stranding Network, and consists of a group of trained, local volunteers who respond to and investigate reports from the public about stranded marine mammals, dead or alive. The majority of these volunteers are WSU Beach Watchers. As the WSU Beach Watchers have spread throughout seven counties in north Puget Sound, other counties have also trained volunteers, or plan to do so in the near future.

The Central Puget Sound Stranding Network is authorized by NOAA Fisheries, under the umbrella of the WSU Beach Watchers in Island County and the Orca Network. The official letter holder for Whidbey Island is Matt Klope, Wildlife Biologist, Susan Berta Orca Network, and Sandy Dubpernell, Beach Watcher. Official letter holder for Camano Island is Sue Murphy, Wildlife Technician, Pilchuck Wildlife Center.

When dead marine mammals are found, they are measured and the cause of death is determined, if possible. Samples are taken, and occasionally necropsies are done. Carcasses are usually left where found, to be reclaimed by the sea or nature. On rare occasions these will be disposed of, often at cost to the property owner at their request, though there are no funds or obligations for any responders to do so.

Marine Mammals are protected by the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. It is a violation of this law to harass, touch, move, feed or kill any marine mammal. You should not remove any marine mammal bones that you find on the beach. Fines can range up to \$10,000 per violation. If you are in a boat, it is also a violation to harass any marine mammal. Guidelines require that you do not approach whales within a 300 foot zone. If you see any person or boat harassing a marine mammal, you should get a description of the violator (boat registration number) or take a photo of the incident (as good as a witness), and report them to authorities. The NOAA Fisheries Service Enforcement Hotline number is 1-800-853-1964.



Who Should You Contact in Island County?

If you see a seal or sea lion the beach, or is in distress, contact the Central Puget Sound Marine Mammal Stranding Network. Also contact them if you find a dead marine mammal. On Whidbey Island, you can contact Susan Berta with Orca Network at (360) 678-3451, or you can also contact Sandy Dubpernell at (360) 678-3765. On Camano Island, contact Sue Murphy at (360) 387-8299. Due to high human traffic areas on Camano beaches, Sue wants to be contacted on first sighting of any stranded marine mammal. You can also report a stranding to 9-1-1.

For Additional Information

Soundwatch Boater Guidelines: Best Practices for Viewing Marine Wildlife:

http://www.whale-museum.org/downloads/soundwatch/SWguidelines_02.pdf

Orca Network: <http://www.orcanetwork.org/>

Calendar of Events

Saturday, July 29, 2006. Day on the Prairie! WSU Extension will be hosting this afternoon and evening program on Whidbey Island that includes farm visits, historical tours, agricultural and natural resource classes, kids activities and games, BBQ supper, and a barn dance with the Wild Coyote Blues Band! All proceeds from this fund-raising event will go to support your WSU educational programs in Island County. Further details in the June newsletter.

To view archived copies of past Shore Stewards Newsletters, go to www.shorestewards.org

Island County Shore Stewards is a program of the WSU Beach Watchers, and is supported by the Washington State University Extension in Island County and the Island County Marine Resources Committee, with grants from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Puget Sound Action Team, the Salmon Recovery Funding Board, Northwest Straits Commission, the Washington State Department of Ecology, and the Camano Island Watershed Management Program.

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