

Ocean City has become a popular resting spot for migrating seals



Look who came
ashore last week

**THEY MAY
BE CUTE BUT
STAY AWAY!**

Sometimes visitors to Ocean City can be lucky enough to spot a seal on the beach. Often this is just a resting spot as they migrate. Also there are times when the Beach Patrol has been able to participate in the release of rehabilitated seals or turtles. Jennifer Dittmar, stranding coordinator for the National Aquarium in Baltimore usually brings a team and some volunteers to help free the animals after their rehabilitation in Baltimore.

Dittmar works closely with the agencies in Ocean City,

especially the Beach Patrol and the Police Department. The police help escort a vehicle that carries the crates that house the rehabilitated animals. Once in Ocean City, The Beach Patrol will meet the Aquarium staff and moved the crate to a Beach Patrol vehicle. The seals are placed on the beach and gradually make their way to the ocean. It is always an emotional scene for many of the Aquarium staff members that played a part in the rehabilitation of the seal to see them set free. It is always a crowd pleaser as well.

Ocean City has become a popular resting spot for migrating seals in the winter. We actually have a small colony in the Assawoman bay that have been becoming more prevalent each year. There are often sightings of seals that come ashore to rest or sun bathe. "It's perfectly normal for seals to come into our area," said Dittmar, "The beginning of seal season is usually the end of December, and typically will go through April, but we may see a couple into May." Seals spend half their life in the water and half on land, Dittmar said, so when they need a break from swimming they "haul out" onto the beach for a rest. If the seas are particularly rough, they may also take a break until the weather calms down again. The National Aquarium advises that when beach patrons see a seal or any marine animal on the beach they should keep their distance for various reasons. Sometimes seals come up onto land when they are sick or injured, so Dittmar said anyone who sees an animal on the beach should report it to the local animal control office or the Maryland Department of Natural Resources hot-line. Local volunteers, MARP or DNR employees will be dispatched and sent to assess the animal and make sure people keep their distance.

"Nine times out of 10 it is a healthy animal just migrating and come up on the beach to rest and sleep and they return to the water in about 24 hours," Dittmar

said.

Usually a 24-hour watch will be kept on the animal to take note of its behavior and to minimize the human interaction with it. Most seals will continue on their way after their brief stay in the resort. The main goal is to protect them from the elements around them while they're trying to rest and sleep on the beach.

The Beach Patrol has worked numerous times with the Baltimore aquarium training members and volunteers of the aquarium's Marine Animal Rescue Program (MARP). The animals they work with are extremely strong and injuries in the water can occur. The beach patrol has trained them in the neck back stabilization technique in case someone working with an animal gets injured. In turn the Beach Patrol has been trained by the National Aquarium on proper techniques to use when a marine animal is beached. For example, a whale that came ashore a couple of years ago had to be constantly hydrated and protected from the sun.

There have been many rehabilitated seals that have been released in the past. Four types of seals can be found in Ocean City in the winter: harp, harbor, gray and hooded seals. Although they are all cute creatures, Dittmar warns that people should not to get too close.

"Seals actually have teeth like a dog, and they can be very aggressive if provoked. A lot of people don't realize that, they think it's just a cute, furry, cuddly animal. But if you see one on the beach, you definitely want to stay away from it," she said.

The seals, along with other marine mammals including dolphins, porpoises and sea turtles, are protected by law when they wind up on land. The Marine Mammal Protection Act requires people to stay at least 100 yards away from any of these animals on the beach and report it to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

Important Reminder Regarding the Correct Handling of Marine Mammal Strandings-Dead or Alive

Never attempt to return the marine mammal to the ocean. Marine mammals are not stranded by accident. They are in crisis and will need help.

- 1. Do not touch, pick up, or feed the animal** unless part of a coordinated rescue effort. These are wild animals and can bite. Furthermore, many marine animals harbor a variety of potentially harmful organisms, some of which can infect humans. If it is a porpoise or dolphin, and it is safe to approach, trained rescuers will place wet towels over the mammal and keep pouring water over the animal, while assuring that the blowhole remains clear. You may be asked to assist with bringing towels or water, but wait to be asked.

2. **Observe the animal from a distance of at least 50 feet.** Keep people and dogs away! Establish and maintain a safe boundary around the animal.
3. **Note the animal's condition**, such as observable strength, weight, and condition (open wounds, etc.), as well as other physical characteristics such as size, distinguishing features, tags, or markings. This **observed** information will help the rescuers identify the animal so that the correct rescue equipment can be deployed.
4. **Determine the exact location of the animal**, in order to provide accurate directions for the rescuers.
5. **Call Headquarters** so that the Dispatcher can alert DNR and the other necessary authorities.

Citizens can learn more about the Maryland Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding program at <http://www.dnr.state.md.us/fisheries/oxford/research/fwh/strandingprogram.html>.