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Seal Appeal

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Seal Appeal

Peg Van Patten

There are many ways to watch seals in Long Island Sound, some of which are constrained to winter and some not seasonally restricted at all. If you'd like to observe these amazing animals you can visit either The Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk, which has up-close and personal harbor seal feeding observations three times a day, or the Mystic Aquarium and Institute for Exploration, where outdoor seals of many sorts, as well as sea lions, abound. Couch potatoes or those trying to save on fuel can see Scott Tucker's Expedition New England seal watch episode #43 from home (see <http://expeditionnewengland.com>). Tucker shows a birds-eye view of more than 60 seals in the Sound. But if you want to see them first hand in nature, you might take one of Project Oceanology's seal watches in late winter, as my family did in March.



P. Van Patten

How do you recognize a seal when you see one? This was a question faced by the passengers aboard Project Oceanology's seal watch cruise on a blustery day in March. "If you're a seal, you scooch along like an inchworm," explained Megan Barker, one of the educators preparing the assorted eager passengers for the experience.

"Harbor seals have a squishy face with puppy eyes," she said.

"What do they like to eat?" asked a youngster.

"They eat fish and crustaceans," answered Ian Morrison, a second Project O educator, "they have powerful jaws, like a Rottweiler."

Ian and Meghan further informed the group that seals can dive as deep as 1000 feet, propelling themselves with their tails and steering with their front flippers, moving at speeds up to 20 miles per hour. The clumps we spotted at Fishers Island, however, didn't seem so ambitious. As you see in the photo, they were mostly hauled out on the rocks, soaking up sun, looking like 5-foot-long, 200-pound, gray bananas.

We couldn't get too close; the harbor seals like their privacy and there are laws in place that you can't get closer than 200 yards by boat, or 100 yards on shore. Luckily we had binoculars to accompany our healthy curiosity. Despite the big, liquid, sentient eyes that have all the appealing pathos of the boot-clad cat in the *Shrek*® movie, it's their keen senses of smell and hearing that helps seals catch their prey, the passengers learned, rather than their vision—and yet they have no external ear flap. Seal skulls are shaped to channel underwater soundwaves to the brain. Their "whiskers," sense subtle motion in the water, such as fish swimming. That's not to say their vision is poor – it's actually quite good in low light situations such as murky water.

Now and then the face of a swimming pinniped would pop up from the water during the cruise, but you had to be vigilant to spot these emergings before they moved on. As each group contemplated the world of the other, most of the chilly seal watch passengers bundled in thick parkas, hats, and mittens aboard the *Envirolab II* had to envy the seals the padding of blubber beneath their skins.

These seals are used to the cold; they come from further north and are winter visitors to Long Island Sound. They tend to show up around Halloween and stay until April or May, with pregnant females giving birth from April to June. The secret of their amazing deep-diving abilities, said Meghan, is the way their bloodstream grabs onto oxygen and holds it. They can stay underwater for 20-25 minutes.

Next time you get the blahs, consider peeping at the pinnipeds. They may be shy, but never critical!



Mystic Aquarium & IFE

The appeal of seals: "squishy faces with puppy eyes." This one is a harp seal.