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Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary Cautions Public to Avoid Seal Pups on California Beaches

SAN FRANCISCO - It's now harbor seal pupping season, and NOAA's Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, and non-profit partner Farallones Marine Sanctuary Association, advise Bay Area beachgoers against interacting with any seal pups they may find on the beach. Newborn harbor seal pups, born in late winter and spring, could suffer permanent harm if someone not authorized for marine mammal rescue were to move them. Seals are federally protected animals under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and to interfere with one could incur legal penalties.

Each year, healthy harbor seal pups are separated from their mothers by people who mistake them for orphans. Harbor seal mothers normally leave their pups unattended on beaches while feeding at sea. They will later rejoin and nurse them. The presence of humans or dogs near a seal pup could prevent a mother seal from reuniting with her young one.

Such disturbance can result in pup deaths, and if persistent around a seal rookery, could contribute to overall lowered birth rates, reduced habitat use and eventual abandonment of seal haul-out sites. Although some wildlife experts recommend keeping 300 feet from any seal pups, even at that distance disturbance can occur.

"The rule of thumb is, if a seal reacts to your presence – you're too close," said Jan Roletto, sanctuary marine biologist. "Avoid eye contact and back away slowly until they no longer notice you."

The San Francisco-based Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, which manages sanctuary waters from Bodega Head south to Point Ano Nuevo, advises concerned beachgoers to report suspected orphaned or injured pups to a park ranger, or to one of the following facilities to assess the need for rescue:

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| -- The Marine Mammal Center | 415-289-SEAL (7325) (24 hrs.) |
| -- Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary | 415-561-6622 x200 |
| -- Pt. Reyes National Seashore | 415-464-5170 (24 hrs.) |
| -- NOAA Enforcement Hotline | 800-853-1964 (24 hrs.) |

Approximately one-fifth of the state's harbor seals live in the Gulf of the Farallones sanctuary. The largest breeding grounds are in the Pt. Reyes National Seashore. Drake's Bay, Bolinas Lagoon and Tomales Bay are prime spots. In San Mateo County, the rookeries are mainly at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve and Bean Hollow. Harbor seals haul out in groups ranging from a few to several hundred. Females generally give birth on sandy beaches or rocky reefs to a single pup, which nurses for three to four weeks.

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The mission of the Farallones Marine Sanctuary Association is to protect the unique ocean environment beyond the Golden Gate, in partnership with the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, through education, outreach and stewardship. For more information on sanctuary wildlife and programs, visit the sanctuary and sanctuary association's web sites (see below) or call 415-561-6625.

Designated in 1981, Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary encompasses nearly 1,300 square miles of ocean and coastal waters beyond California's Golden Gate Bridge. The sanctuary supports an abundance of species including the largest breeding seabird rookery in the contiguous United States, white sharks, and endangered blue and humpback whales.

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On the Web:

Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary: <http://farallones.noaa.gov>

Farallones Marine Sanctuary Association: www.farallones.org

NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries: <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov>