Marine Mammal Sightings on the Rise

After being largely absent for a century, our marine mammal populations were restored with help from these environmental regulations:

- **The Clean Water Act (1972)** improved water quality over the years, providing a rich feeding area for sea life to make a comeback.
- **The Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972)** prevents hunting, capture and harassment of marine mammals in U.S. waters.
- **The Endangered Species Act (1972)** protects threatened species and their habitats.

Ongoing Threats

According to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), plastic debris kills an estimated 100,000 marine mammals annually, and millions of birds and fish. Other pollutants, such as sewage and industrial waste, can make animals sick and degrade the ecosystems where they feed. Fishing nets and line can entangle sea creatures, causing them to drown or suffer serious constriction injury. Collisions with ships and boat propellers can be fatal or cause large wounds.

If You See an Injured Marine Mammal…

Please call the Marine Mammal Stranding Center at 609-266-0538. This non-profit organization has federal authority to help stranded or sick marine mammals and sea turtles. Wildlife experts, with the help of trained volunteers, will determine if an animal needs medical attention or to be moved from a populated area, or just needs time to rest.

Monmouth County
Board of Chosen Freeholders
Board of Recreation Commissioners

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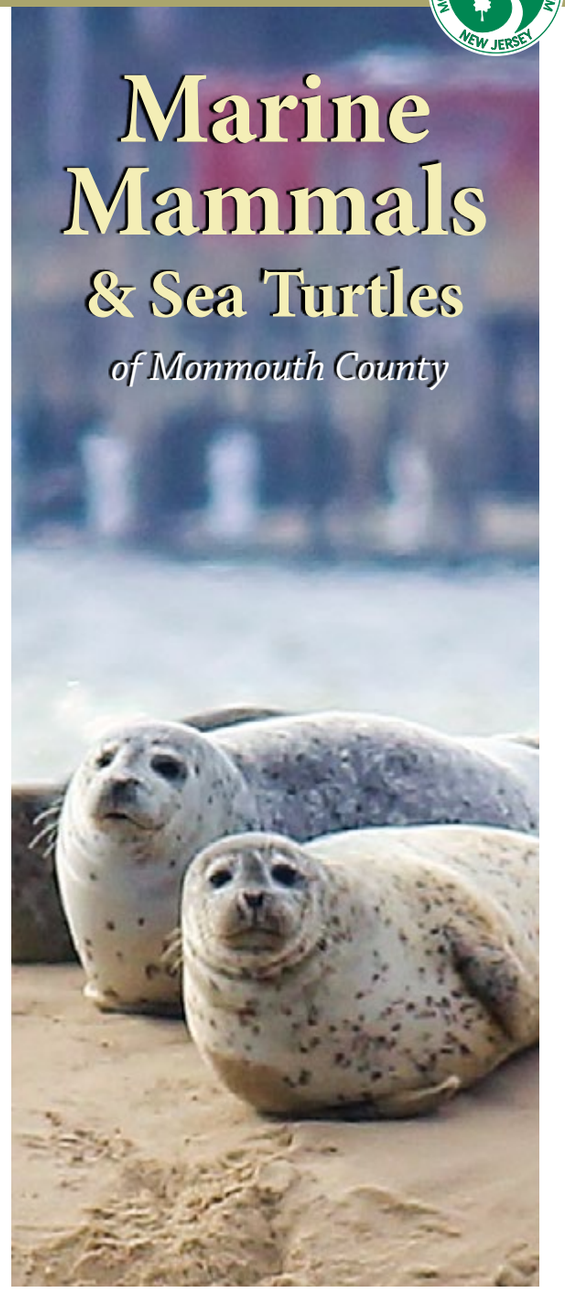
Marine Mammals & Sea Turtles

of Monmouth County



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What is a Marine Mammal?

Marine mammals spend all or part of their lives in the ocean. While some depend on the ocean for all stages of life, others are 'part-timers' who feed in the ocean but breed on land. Common marine mammals of Monmouth County are whales, dolphins, porpoises and seals. Sea turtles, although not a marine mammal, are another common species seen along our coastline.

Marine Mammals vs. Fish

People usually label anything that swims in the water as a fish, but that isn't true. Some of the largest and most popular animals living in and around the ocean are actually mammals. One very obvious difference is that marine mammals that live in the water (such as whales and dolphins) have lungs and must rise to the surface and breathe air; whereas fish (such as sharks) have gills which they use to get oxygen from the water.

	Marine Mammals	Fish
Breathing	Lungs/O_2 from air	Gills/O_2 from water
Blood/Temperature	Warm blooded; body temperature is self-regulated	Largely cold blooded; body temperature determined by the environment
Body Covering	Fur (very sparse or only when young), whiskers	Scales (or rough skin)
Birth	Live babies who drink milk	Eggs
Swimming	Tail moves up and down	Tail moves side to side

Marine Mammal: Dolphin
Photo Credit: NOAA

Fish: Striped Bass (Juvenile)

Dolphins, Porpoises & Whales: The Cetaceans

Named from the Greek word *ketos*, which means "large sea creature," this category has two subgroups: toothed and baleen. Using teeth to catch aquatic prey, members of the first group have a single blowhole, tend to be social animals living in groups, and are highly vocal and/or use echolocation or sonar like bats to detect objects in the environment. Local toothed cetaceans are:

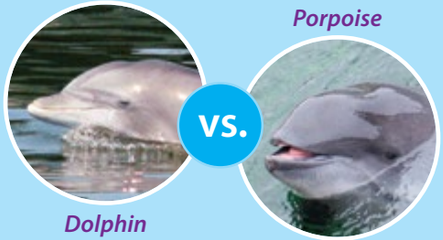
- **Common dolphin**
- **Bottlenose dolphin**
- **Striped dolphin**
- **White-sided dolphin**
- **Harbor porpoise**

Dolphins prefer warmer waters off the coast of NJ to forage for fish and give birth, and are therefore commonly seen during the summer months.

*A group of **dolphins** frolic in the surf.*

Dolphin vs. Porpoise

Dolphins have a lean, sleek body with an elongated "beak," pointy curved dorsal fin (the one on top), and vocalize in a range that's audible to the human ear. Porpoises have a round-ish body and blunt nose, a triangular dorsal fin, and vocalize at a much higher range that humans cannot hear.



Baleen cetaceans include whales with hundreds of rows of baleen plates instead of teeth. Made of keratin, the same substance we have in our hair and fingernails, baleen plates are used to strain out small fish and plankton from the water for food. They feed by taking in large mouthfuls of water with their food—mostly krill, copepods (shrimp-like plankton) or small fish—then use their tongue to push the water out between gaps in their plates.

Humpback Whale

Photo Credit: NOAA

Most whales seen in coastal Monmouth County waters are baleen. They are generally larger than toothed whales and have two blowholes. Included in this group are:

- **Fin whales** - among the fastest and largest (35mph, >70 feet long)
- **Minke whales** - one of the smallest (30 feet long)
- **Humpback whales** - an acrobatic species known for breaching, tail slapping, and flipper waving (around 50 feet long)

Whales can be seen year-round along the Jersey shore, though more likely between spring and fall as they migrate between breeding locations in the tropics and primary feeding areas off the coast of New England.

The Abundant Seal: Pinnipeds

Seals are classified as *pinnipeds*, which literally means "fin or flipper-footed." They are carnivores and feed in the ocean, eating primarily fish, shellfish, squid and crabs. Unlike whales and dolphins, seals come ashore to mate, give birth, moult or rest. Several species inhabit our local waters, generally November through April. They migrate here from breeding sites in northern New England and Canada to rest and feed.

Harbor seals- most frequently seen in harbors, bays, inlets, coves, bayside breaches, and even marinas. They have a spotted brownish black, tan or grey coat (see cover) and distinctive "V" or heart-shaped nostril.

Pictured left: Harbor Seal, Juvenile

Gray seals - large (10 feet long, 500-850 lbs.) and are known as "horse-heads" because of their head shape and straight profile.

Pictured left: Grey Seal, Juvenile

Harp seals - silvery grey with a darker saddle shape pattern on the adult back. True arctic animals, they spend breeding season on pack ice and prefer swimming the chilly waters of the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans.

Pictured left: Harp Seal, Juvenile

Hauling Out for Seals

Seals are social animals and will sometimes 'haul out' of the water by the dozens, even hundreds onto secluded beaches, sandbars or remote islands. They need a safe place to rest, reheat and digest their food (particularly important since harbor seals swallow their food whole or tear into large chunks).

Seals *at a haul out site in Sandy Hook Bay*

Sea Turtles

Sea turtles are large, air-breathing reptiles that can sometimes be seen offshore when waters are warm. They will travel here to forage for food such as jellyfish, seaweed, crabs, shrimp, sponges, snails, algae and mollusks.
Sea turtles seen along the Jersey shore include:

- **Loggerhead** - one of the most common, as it migrates between foraging and nesting sites; it has a reddish-brown back with three knobby ridges.
- **Green** - a swift moving turtle that can swim over 15mph
- **Kemp's Ridley** - currently the most endangered of all sea turtles
- **Hawksbill** - named for its narrow, slightly hooked beak
- **Leatherback** - the largest and one that travels the farthest of all the sea turtles

Loggerhead

Photo Credit: Wiki Media Commons

Green

Photo Credit: NOAA