



Alaska Harbor Seal Guide

Your Complete Guide to Seeing One of Alaska's Most Common Marine Mammals



Harbor seals are among the most frequently seen marine mammals on an Alaska cruise. Whether they're relaxing on floating icebergs, swimming alongside your ship, or curiously popping their heads above the water to investigate passing boats, these playful animals are a favorite with travelers.

Unlike sea lions, harbor seals are smaller, quieter, and spend much of their time resting on rocks, beaches, or floating glacial ice. Glacier-filled fjords provide ideal habitat, making Alaska one of the best places in the world to observe them in their natural environment.

Although they may appear sleepy and relaxed, harbor seals are excellent swimmers and skilled hunters that spend much of their lives beneath the surface.



Quick Facts



Scientific Name: *Phoca vitulina*

Length:

- 5–6 feet

Weight:

- 180–300 pounds

Lifespan:

- 20–30 years

Diet:

- Salmon
- Herring
- Cod
- Squid
- Octopus
- Crustaceans

Harbor seals can dive hundreds of feet below the surface and remain underwater for up to **30 minutes**.

📍 Where Can You See Harbor Seals?



Harbor seals are found throughout Alaska's coastal waters.

Some of the best places to see them include:

- Glacier Bay National Park
- Tracy Arm Fjord
- Endicott Arm & Dawes Glacier
- Kenai Fjords National Park
- Prince William Sound
- Resurrection Bay
- Valdez
- Seward

Glacier fjords are especially popular because floating ice provides safe places for seals to rest and raise their pups.

★ Why Do Harbor Seals Love Glaciers?



One of the most iconic Alaska wildlife scenes is a harbor seal resting on a small iceberg.

Glacial ice offers:

- Protection from predators
- Quiet places to rest
- Nursery areas for pups
- Easy access to food-rich waters

As your cruise ship approaches a glacier, watch the floating ice carefully—you'll often spot seals lounging on the larger pieces.

👶 Harbor Seal Pups



Harbor seal pups are born during late spring and early summer.

Within hours of birth they can:

- Swim
- Dive

- Follow their mothers

Young pups often rest on floating ice while their mothers search for food nearby.

Seeing a seal pup resting peacefully on an iceberg is one of Alaska's most memorable wildlife experiences.



Can You See Harbor Seals From a Cruise Ship?

Absolutely!

Harbor seals are one of the easiest marine mammals to spot from your ship.

Excellent viewing opportunities include:

- Glacier Bay
- Tracy Arm
- Endicott Arm
- Hubbard Glacier
- Kenai Fjords
- Prince William Sound

Simply watch the floating ice and nearby waters as your ship approaches glaciers.



Photography Tips



For the best photographs:

- Keep your camera ready as your ship nears glaciers.
- Use a zoom lens.
- Look for seals resting on isolated icebergs.
- Include the glacier in the background for scale.
- Early morning often provides beautiful lighting.

Harbor seals usually remain still long enough for excellent photos.



Best Time to See Harbor Seals

May

Excellent.

Pups begin arriving.

June

Outstanding.

Many mothers are caring for young pups.

July

Outstanding.

Seals are abundant around glaciers.

August

Excellent.

Large numbers remain throughout Alaska.

September

Very good.

Seals continue feeding before winter.



Interesting Behaviors

Harbor seals are known for:

- Resting on floating ice
- Curious "spyhopping," where they raise just their heads above the water to observe their surroundings
- Diving hundreds of feet for food
- Excellent underwater agility
- Spending many hours each day resting

Unlike sea lions, harbor seals move on land by wriggling with their bodies because they cannot rotate their rear flippers beneath them.



What to Bring

Bring:

- ✓ Binoculars
- ✓ Camera
- ✓ Zoom lens
- ✓ Waterproof jacket
- ✓ Sunglasses

Harbor seals are often easier to spot than whales because they spend more time resting on the surface.



Premium Travel Group Tip

As your ship slowly approaches a glacier, don't focus only on the towering wall of ice. Spend time scanning the floating icebergs nearby. Many harbor seals blend into the ice surprisingly well, and once you spot one, you'll often discover several more resting quietly in the area.



Continue Exploring Alaska

Continue planning your Alaska adventure with our other guides:

- Alaska Wildlife Guide
 - Sea Otter Guide
 - Steller Sea Lion Guide (*future guide*)
 - Humpback Whale Guide
 - Orca Guide
 - Glacier Bay National Park Guide
 - Tracy Arm Fjord Guide
 - Endicott Arm & Dawes Glacier Guide
 - Kenai Fjords National Park Guide
 - Hubbard Glacier Guide
-



Fun Facts

- Harbor seals can dive **more than 1,500 feet** in search of food.
 - Their whiskers are extremely sensitive and help detect fish moving through the water.
 - They can slow their heart rate while diving to conserve oxygen.
 - Harbor seals are excellent swimmers but move awkwardly on land.
 - Each seal has a unique pattern of spots, much like a human fingerprint.
-



Why Are Harbor Seals So Special?

Harbor seals are an important part of Alaska's marine ecosystem and one of the easiest wildlife species for cruise travelers to observe. Their peaceful nature, playful curiosity, and close association with glaciers make every sighting memorable. Whether you're watching one nap on a floating iceberg or peek curiously above the water, harbor seals add another unforgettable chapter to your Alaska adventure.



Joe's Logbook

Harbor seals are one of those animals that many people don't realize they're seeing at first. You'll hear someone point toward a floating iceberg and say, "I think that's a seal." A quick look through your binoculars, and suddenly you notice there are several of them scattered across the ice.

One thing I enjoy is watching how relaxed they seem. While everyone on the ship is excitedly taking pictures, the seals often look completely unbothered, stretched out on the ice as if they own the place—which, in a way, they do.

The next time your cruise enters a glacier fjord, spend just as much time watching the floating ice as you do the glacier itself. Some of Alaska's best wildlife moments are resting quietly just a few hundred yards away, waiting for someone to notice them.