

Seal SITTING

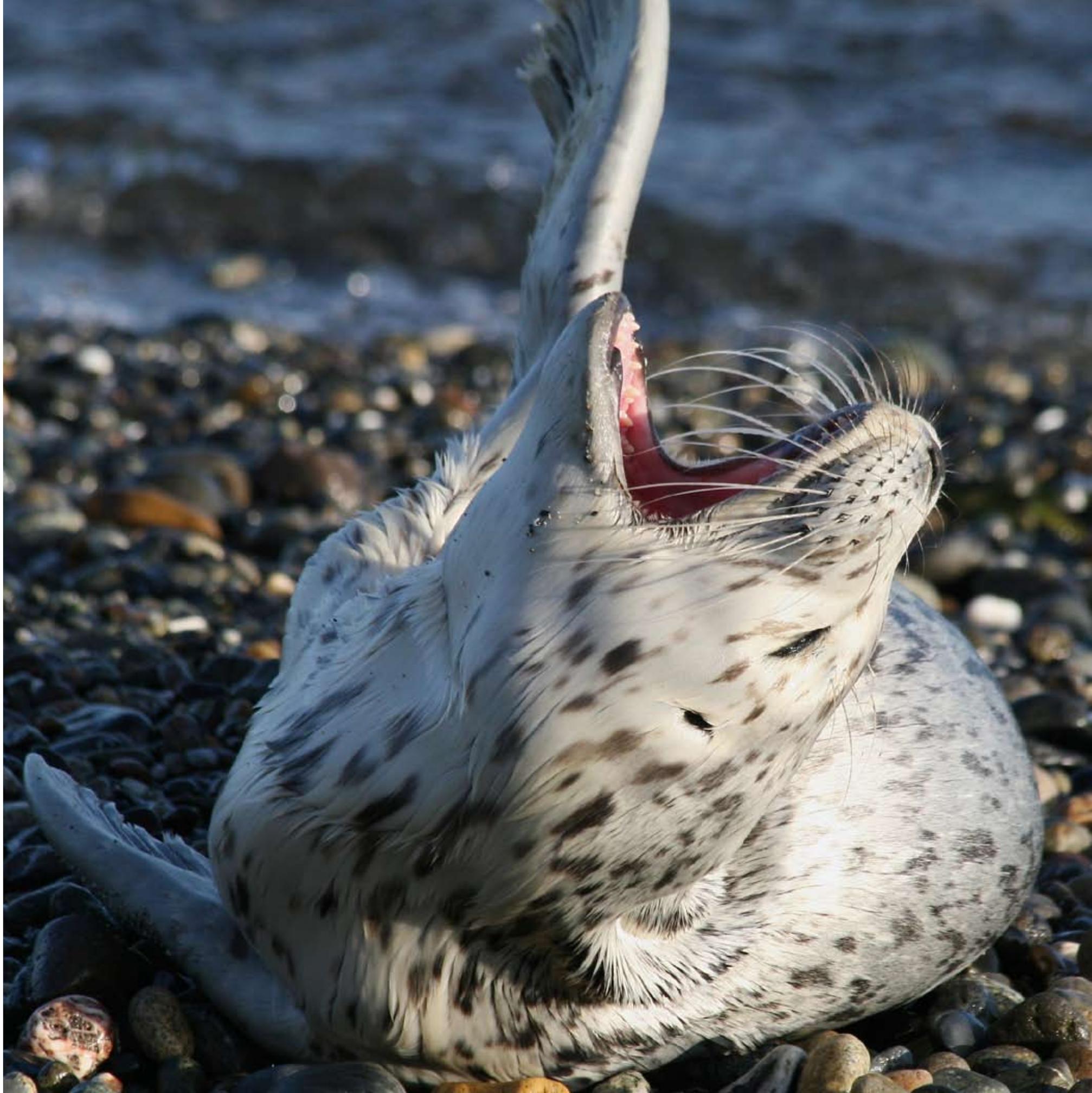
ON BEACH PATROL IN SEATTLE

“Come quick,” crackles Robin’s voice over my cell phone. “A seal pup is in trouble.”

Every year, from spring to September, mother harbor seals park their pups on the Salish Sea beaches in the Pacific Northwest. That is also when my neighbors gather for what we call “seal sitting”—keeping vigil over the vulnerable pup while the mother is far out to sea fishing.

We volunteers sit together, watching from a respectful distance, binoculars trained on the pup’s every move, scanning for bullet holes, orca bites, or behavioral signs of internal injuries or distress. In 4- to 6-hour shifts for up to 48 hours, we politely keep people and dogs 100 yards away from the seal pup, as recommended by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA). We explain seal conservation to beachcombers and invite them to join us.

STORY BY BRENDA PETERSON
PHOTOS BY ROBIN LINDSEY



Most Seattle city beaches—as along so many coastlines around the world—are lined by concrete sea walls. Ours is a natural beach, one of the few haul-out sites left in the city where harbor seals can give birth, rest, molt their silver-gray spotted coat, and spend time in community with one another. The seal's speckled fur is camouflage against rocky beaches. I've watched joggers and clam diggers pass unaware within ten feet of a resting seal.

But the seal on shore notices everything: The hoarse *caw* and the flap of a great blue heron lifting on dinosaur-bird wings, the laughing of schoolchildren at the bus stop, the digging of people for razor clams, the spiraling down into the surf of a fierce osprey hungry for fish, even the hip-hopping down the beach of a young girl tuned into her iPod.

"Is the pup plump?" I ask Robin, to check for the first sign of a healthy seal. "How's his breathing?"

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"He's very plump, probably still nursing," Robin shouts over the din of boat traffic and a dock that is teeming with tourists boarding the Elliot Bay Water Taxi. "I'd say he's about two feet and maybe twenty pounds. Adorable . . . but he's panting heavily and very agitated."

Robin is calling in her seal alert from Seacrest Park, Seattle's most popular dive site and a very crowded public beach a few miles farther north in our Alki Beach neighborhood. It is not the best beach for seal napping. Perhaps the animal is not there to rest, but to die.

"You know, I think our pup is foaming at the mouth," Robin adds. "Bad sign, right?"

I grab my tide chart, binoculars, rain slicker, water bottle, and a sandwich—it might be a long stay. "I'll call some other seal sitters," I say, before speed-dialing more volunteers.

Fortunately, Seacrest is across the street from a contingent of seal sitters who call themselves the "Condo Brigade." While working from home offices, these volunteers help keep close watch from their windows via telescopes trained on the seal pups. They also dispatch and send out email alerts to other seal sitters.

Our neighborhood group was trained by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA). We work closely with the Seattle Parks Department, which promptly responds to a newborn seal on the beach by cordoning off the animal with red cones and yellow "Marine Mammal

Protected" tape. They also post signs with seal conservation guidelines.

Federal law prohibits touching, feeding, or disturbing harbor seals. Dogs and too much human commotion are the biggest dangers for seals on their haul-out beaches. Still, many well-meaning beachcombers mistake a resting pup for an abandoned one. Improper human attention or curiosity can do more to harass than help. If the mother seal returns to find her pup surrounded by people, she may truly abandon it. "Okay," Robin shouts over her cell phone, as a foghorn blasts from a Seattle-bound ferryboat. "I'll get you some photos to send to NOAA."



"Watch to see if the pup's breathing steadies or if he has any discharge from his nose and mouth," I tell her.

This year, we've lost several pups to a respiratory virus called lungworm, or pneumonia. Robin's photo documentation will be invaluable not only for evaluating and tracking the pup's health, but also to help NOAA monitor disease and injury among the seal population. NOAA advises that if a pup has been unattended for 48 hours or is clearly in distress, people should contact the local Marine Mammal Stranding Network for help.

When I call Kristin Wilkinson, NOAA's full-time marine mammal stranding specialist for the Northwest, she responds promptly. "Their veins are close to the surface of the skin in the

Harbor seals haul out on beaches to give birth, rest, and molt their silver-gray spotted fur. In Seattle (above, three pups resting on Seacrest Park beach), there are only a few natural beaches left for the seals. A mother seal often leaves her pup on the beach (pages 36–37, a yawning pup shows his baby teeth) while she goes fishing at sea.

fore and hind flippers, allowing the seals to regulate their overall body temperature. Seals haul out daily to rest, interact with other seals, and thermoregulate,” Kristin reminds me, at once affable and informative. “Seals do not have the ability to produce sweat like we do, so this is their way of cooling down. Watch to see if the animal raises his front or hind flippers to cool off.”

“So you think we may have a healthy seal?” I ask.

“Well, time will tell as you keep watch. It’s a good sign that there is no discharge from the seal’s nostrils or mouth. Washington State has a healthy seal population . . . but you know, fifty percent of harbor seal pups do not survive their first year. It’s rough out there.” Kristin adds a reassuring, “Every beach needs neighborhood volunteers like your group. Keep me posted.”

When I reach the wharf at Seacrest, Robin, Janette, Jane, Diane, and Nancy are outside the barrier tape, sharing their binoculars and NOAA seal conservation flyers with passersby. Joggers, walkers, and picnickers are all rapt, watching the pup stretch and yawn, his baby teeth clearly visible.

“Good news,” Jane reports. “No more foaming at the mouth. No obvious signs of injury. We think the pup is settled in waiting for mom.”

We seal sitters settle in, too. The Seattle sun—never very dependable—burns through the violet-gray mists. In the sunlight, the pup folds his fore-flippers around his blubbery chest and lets out a contented snuffle. Then he lies on his back, revealing a nicely healed umbilical on his blazing white, speckled belly. Newborns are too little to fear people or predators. After being weaned at four to six weeks they become more wary. But for the first few weeks, seal sitters can help prevent injury and ensure the pups enjoy the deep rest they need to thrive.

“I think of these pups as my grand-seals,” says Diane. She and her husband, Carl, just moved here from Maui to be near her grandchildren. Now, she sits on the beach with them, offering “daycare” for seal pups and teaching a new generation about sharing our shores with seals.

A rumbling garbage truck startles the pup from his slumber. He raises his head, glances around, wide-eyed. One of the seal sitters sings a soft lullaby, which elicits a sigh and a quick return to sleep.

“He looks just like an aquatic puppy,” Nancy remarks fondly. She is a schoolteacher.

Nancy adds that when her next-door neighbor Susan watched from her living room as a seal pup struggled vain-

ly to climb atop driftwood floating in the waves, “It broke my heart that that pup never found a place to rest.” So she asked her husband to build a six-foot by six-foot floating platform for the seals off their private beach. Now, seal mothers come to nurse their pups, and the pups nap without threat of predators on this “life raft.”

We all watched a pup we named Sunny lie on that platform for days, bleeding from a boat propeller gash on its neck. We thought we would lose the pup, but a week of sun healed it. Susan also witnessed on this float what few people, even marine biologists, ever see: the birth of a seal pup.

Meanwhile, on Seacrest Park beach, our newborn seems comfortable enough within our respectful circle to descend into a deep sleep for eight hours. By sunset, the tide has risen very near the seal’s whiskers. As the surf begins to lap him awake, we hope his mother will return soon and call him back to sea.

“There she is!” At last, the exultant cry goes up from a seal sitter.

Sure enough, a sleek seal head pirouettes in the surf. She gives a soft cooing call, and instantly our pup is alert, tiny fore-flippers flopping as he scoots and hops down the beach and into the waves. Soon, there are two heads bobbing in the water, looking back at shore. A cheer rises from the crowd, and the children wave wildly as the mother and pup swim away. A day at the beach will never be the same for many of them.

Anyone along our coasts can volunteer to become “citizen naturalists,” as I like to think of our seal sitters. It only takes a phone tree or an Internet contact list. If a seal is injured, it’s easy to link with a local NOAA or stranding network. Sea creatures can use all the vigilance and care we can give. We seal sitters hope that as long as we keep vigil, the harbor seals will stay healthy and thrive. They will not go the way of so many other species—not on *our* watch.

Brenda Peterson is the author of 15 books, including Sightings: The Gray Whale’s Mysterious Journey (with Linda Hogan, National Geographic, 2002). For more information about seal conservation, visit www.sealsitters.org.

A pup that volunteer “seal sitters” have named Leopard finds his first haul-out spot (opposite). From a respectful distance (right), beach visitors enjoy watching a pup while learning about seal conservation from the volunteers. For advice, the seal sitters can call on marine mammal scientist Toni Frohoff (top, on right, with the author).



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