



ARTICLE

# Elephant Seal Monitoring Season Summary: Winter 2017-2018

Point Reyes National Seashore (<https://www.nps.gov/pore/>)

## Season Overview

- Continuing the trend of yearly population increase, the highest ever number of total elephant seals, **2411**, was recorded on January 30<sup>th</sup>. Last year's peak number was 1824.
- The season had a late start with the first pup born December 26<sup>th</sup>. Last year's first pup was born December 16<sup>th</sup>.
- Minimal winter storms resulted in very low pup mortality. The highest pup count of the year was **1020**, last year's highest pup count was 726.
- The colony on Drakes Beach is growing and moving farther down the beach, resulting in an expanded closure of the beach.



Alpha male engaged in a fight with a sub-adult male

NPS / Marjorie Cox, NMFS Permit No. 17152-00



Harem on Drakes Beach  
*NPS / Marjorie Cox, NMFS Permit No. 17152-00*

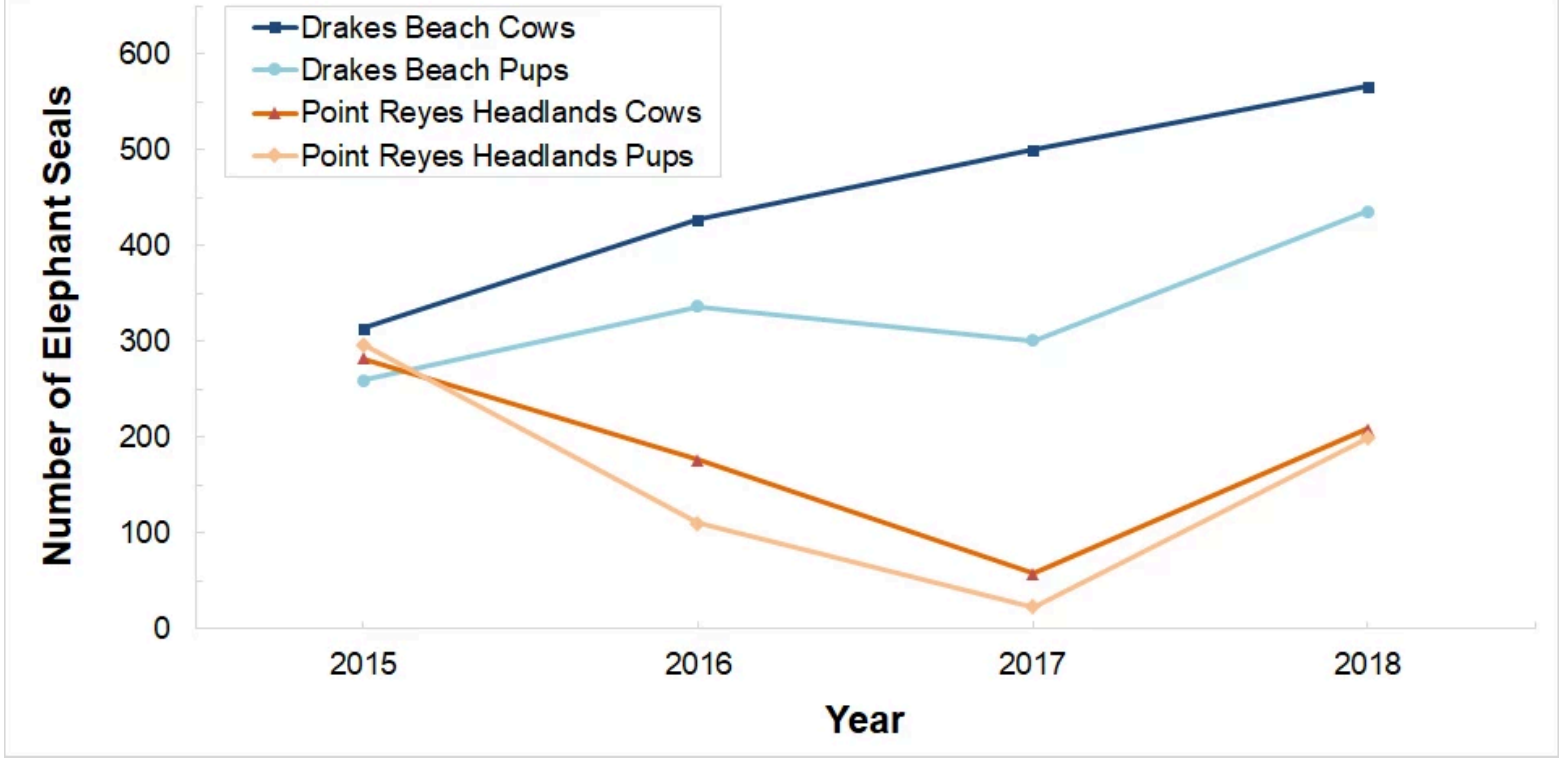


Weaned pups swimming in a tide pool near Chimney Rock  
*NPS / Sean Pickton, NMFS Permit No. 17152-00*

# Dynamic Drakes

The elephant seal colony on Drakes Beach is growing in size, and moving farther down the beach. The original colony on Drakes was established on the beach below the overlook and is now expanding down the beach towards the visitor's center. Concerned about the safety of visitors and seals, the park closed the entire stretch of beach from the cliff directly to the right of the visitor center parking lot to the elephant seal overlook. Researchers speculate that seals are moving from the Point Reyes Headlands colonies into the more protected Drakes Bay

## Seasonal Peak Elephant Seal Counts, 2015-2018



Cow and pup counts at the peak of the breeding season at the Drakes Beach and Point Reyes Headlands colonies for 2015 - 2018.



Drakes Beach colony from above  
NPS / Marjorie Cox, NMFS Permit No. 17152-00

## Research Goals

Monitoring the elephant seal population at Point Reyes is hard, but rewarding work. Researcher's primary goal is to document the actual number of seals in the park, this is achieved by conducting bi-weekly counts over the approximately 3 month breeding season. This year researchers had good luck with the weather, and were able to complete almost all of the planned surveys. In addition, adult male seals were dye marked at the start of the season, to track their movements around the park and their status within the colony. Flipper tags also play an important role in the park's elephant seal work. Tags are re-sighted throughout the season, allowing researchers to learn the history of specific animals. New flipper tags are applied to weaned pups in the park, in order to track their movements over the years. A record was set this year with 406 unique animals tagged!



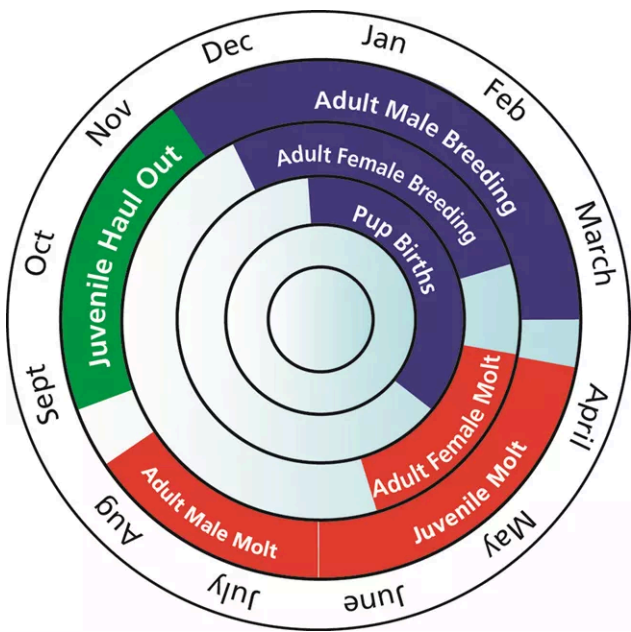
Researcher applying a dye mark to an adult male  
*NPS / Sean Pickton, NMFS Permit No. 17152-00*



Researcher applying a flipper tag to a weaned pup  
 NPS / Sean Pickton, NMFS Permit No. 17152-00

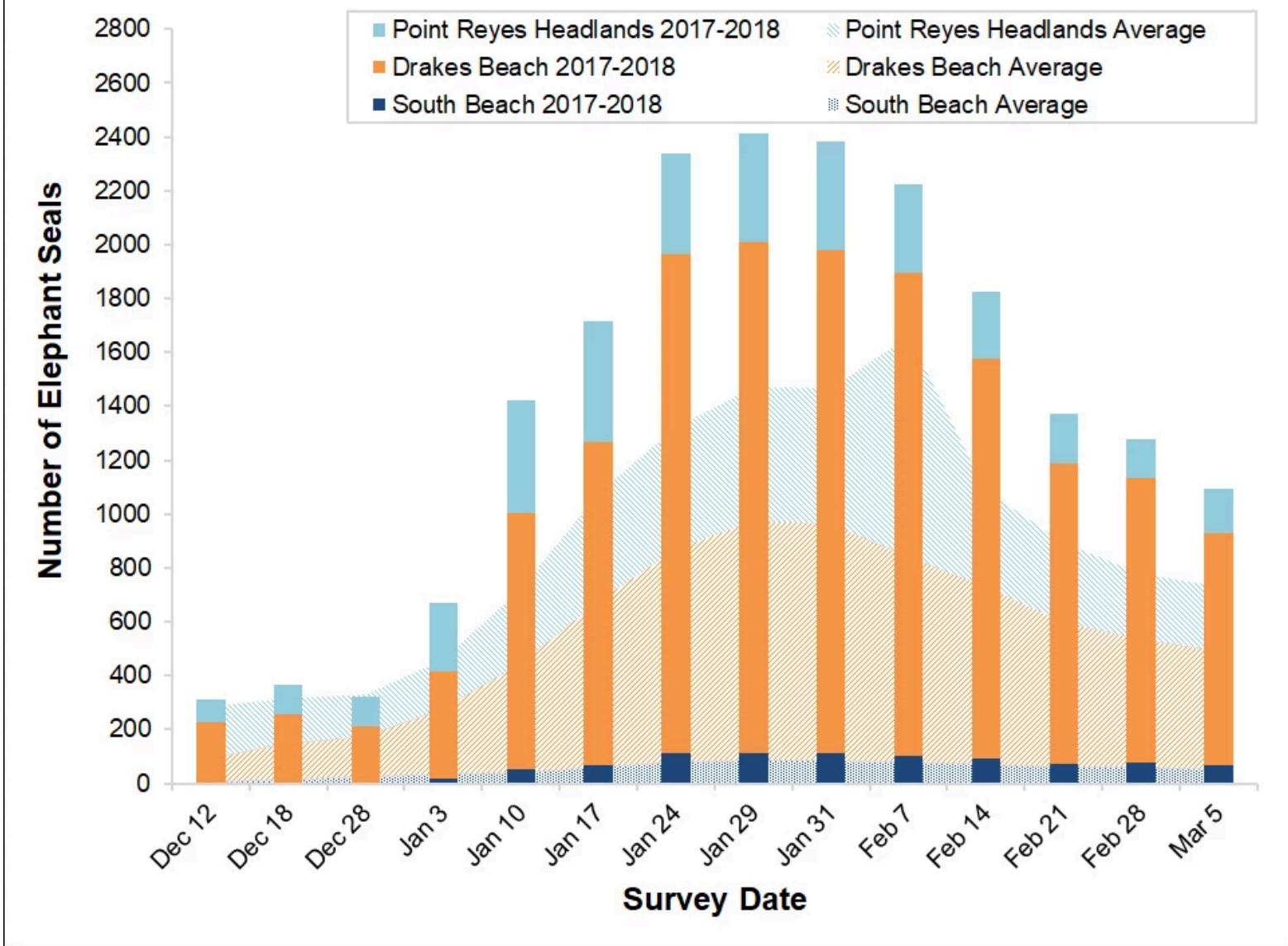
### Seasons of the Seal

After the breeding season weaned pups will remain on the beach until April, and at that time the molting cycle for other age-classes will begin. Elephant seals and monk seals go through a “radical” or “catastrophic” molt, and are the only pinniped species to do so. This type of molt not only sheds hair, but also a layer of skin. Catastrophic molts require a lot of energy, and elephant seals will once again fast and remain on the beach for 3-4 weeks until the process finishes.



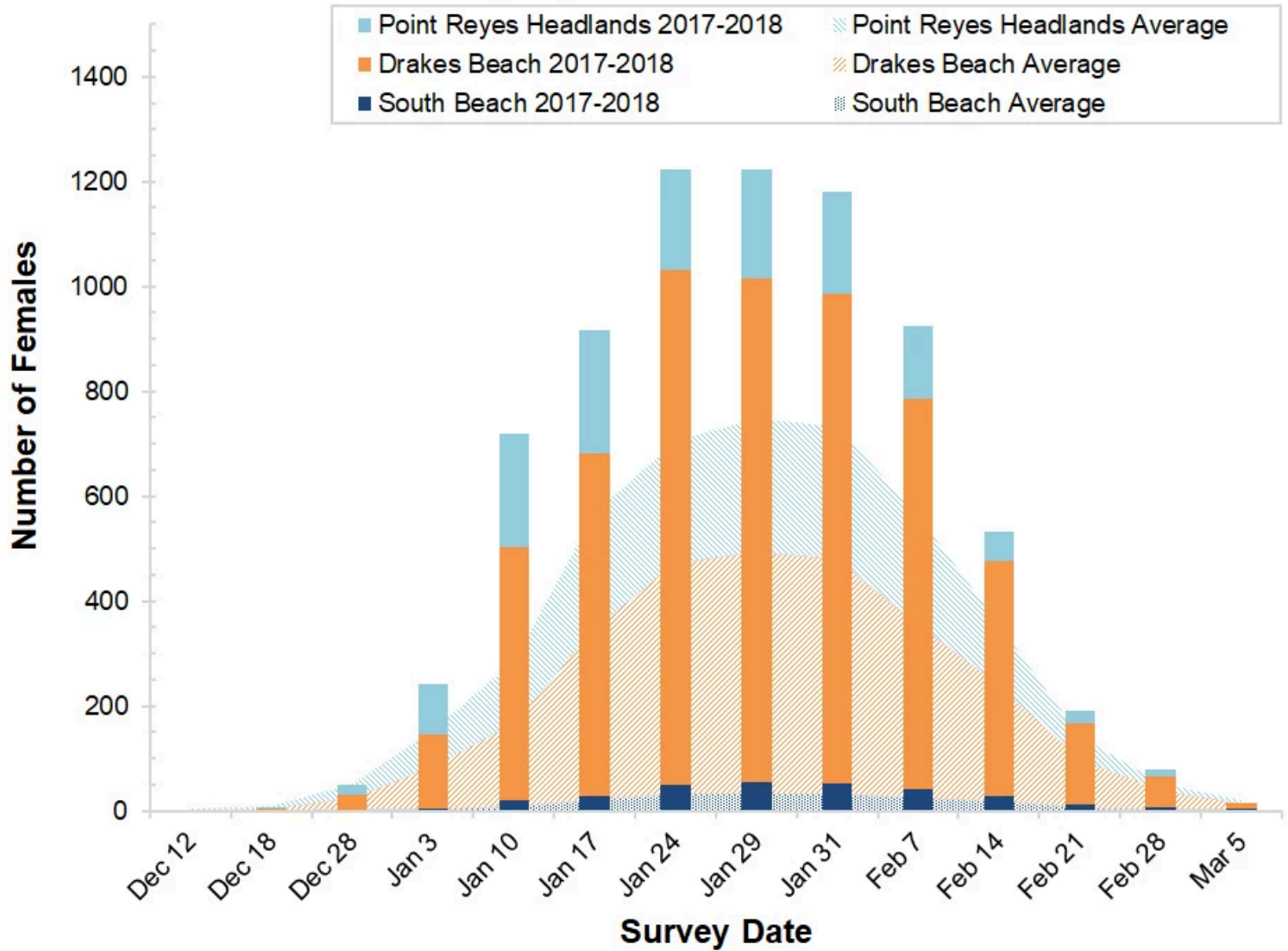
## Preliminary Data

Total Elephant Seal Counts, Winter 2017-2018



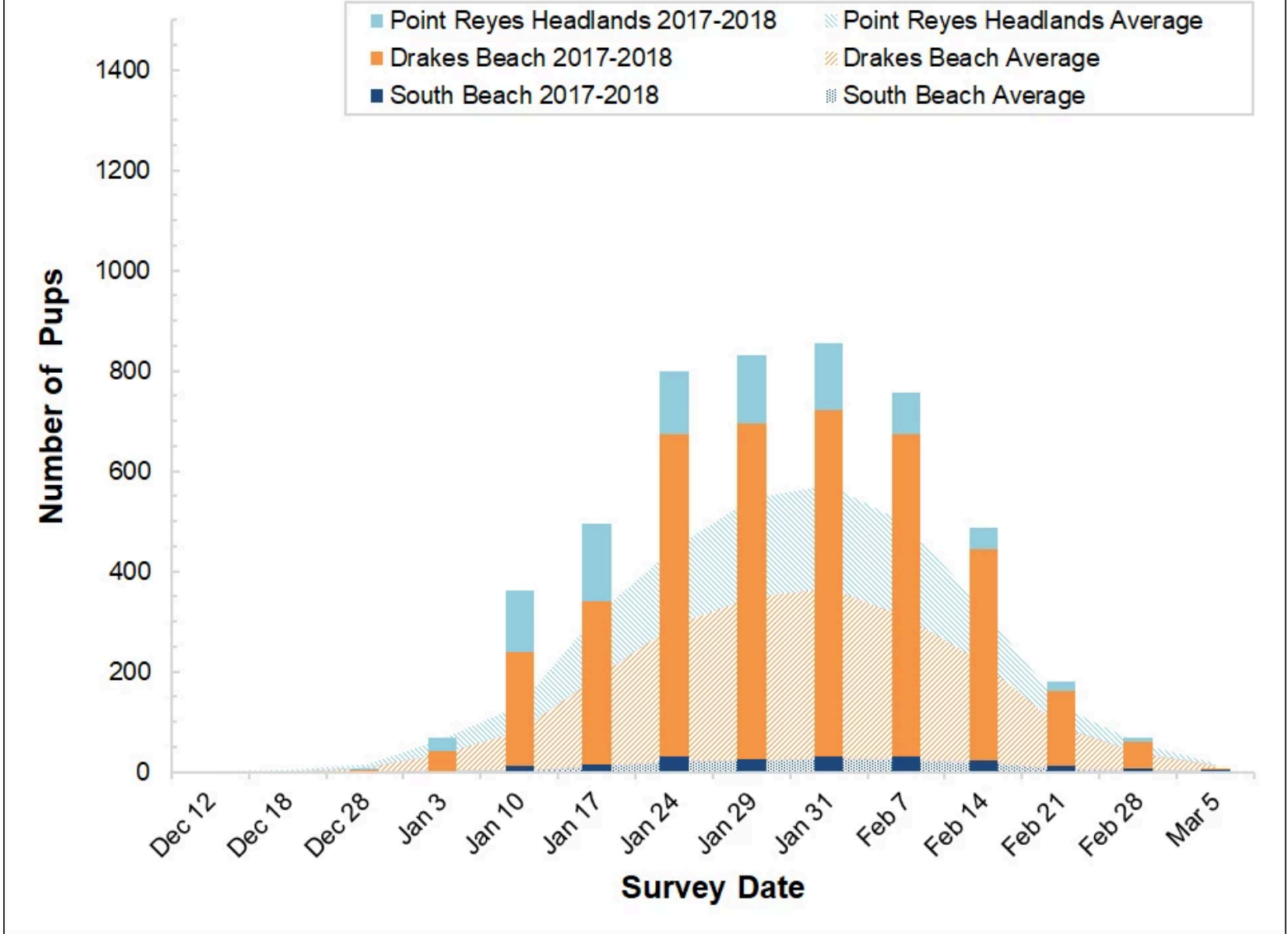
Total elephant seal counts this season compared to average totals from 2005-2017 at the three Point Reyes National Seashore breeding colonies. Surveys this season reveal more elephant seals than average on Point Reyes beaches starting in January. A decrease in the number of seals is continuing the trend that began Jan 31st.

**Female Elephant Seal Counts, Winter 2017-2018**



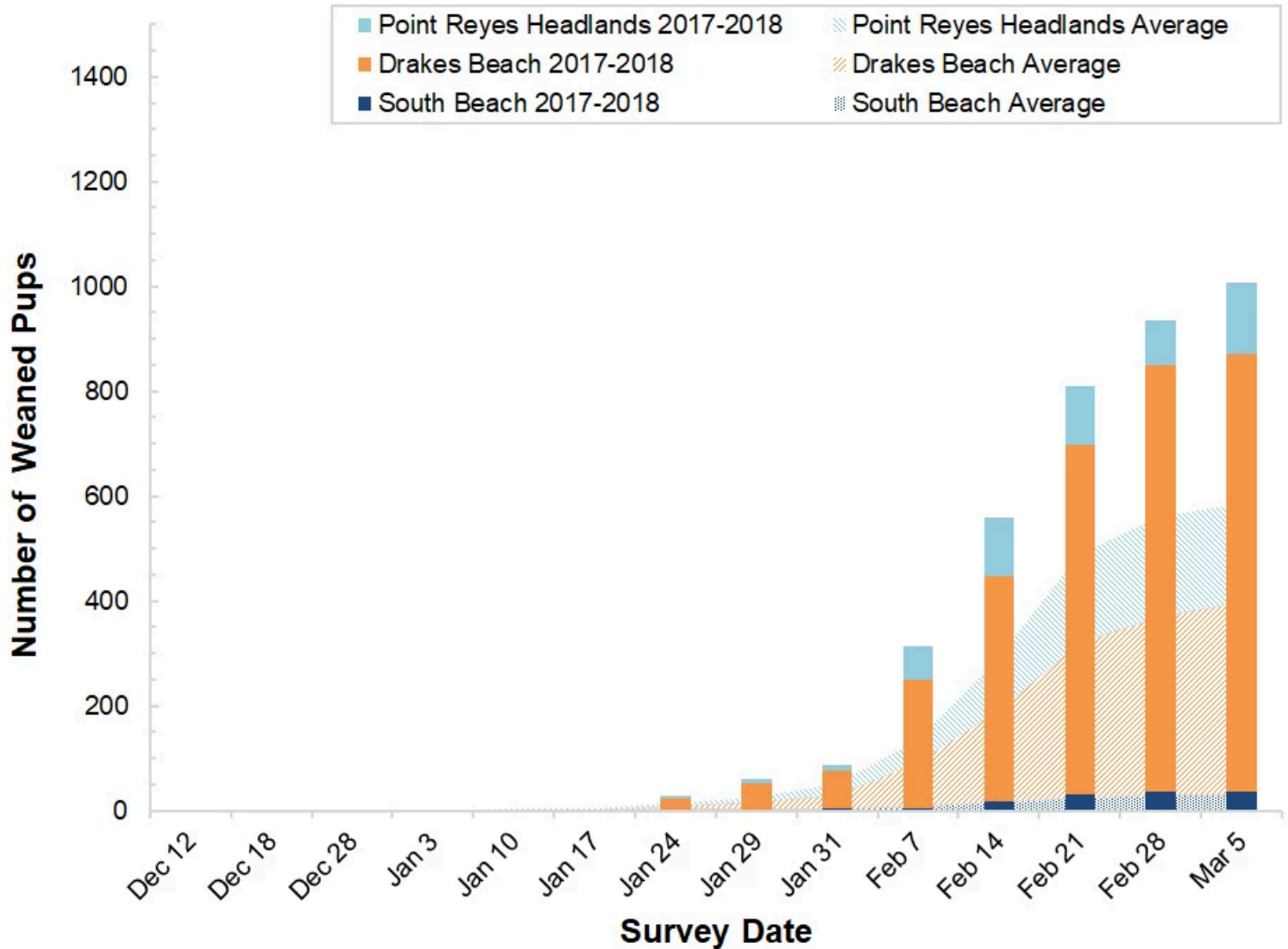
Female elephant seal counts this season compared to average female counts from 2005-2017 at the three Point Reyes National Seashore breeding colonies. The total number of cows on Point Reyes beaches is significantly higher than average, and we continue to see a decline in numbers due to females leaving after weaning their pups. The highest increase from the average was seen at Drakes Beach, the Point Reyes Headlands colony is declining, and the South Beach colony numbers are close to average.

Elephant Seal Pup Counts, Winter 2017-2018



Number of elephant seal nursing pups counted at the three breeding colonies in Point Reyes this winter compared to the average number of pups surveyed at those colonies between 2005 and 2017. The first pups of the season were counted on December 28. A decline in nursing pups began February 7th at Point Reyes Headlands, Drakes Beach, and South Beach colonies, and continues to decline as pups wean.

**Weaned Elephant Seal Counts, Winter 2017-2018**



Number of elephant seal weaned pups counted at the three breeding colonies in Point Reyes this winter compared to the average number of weaned pups surveyed at those colonies between 2005 and 2017. The first weaned pups were recorded at the Drakes Beach and Point Reyes Headlands colonies around January 24. An increase in weaned pups continues at all of the colonies.

# Weekly Updates Recap

[January 11, 2018 - Twins & Runny Noses](#)

[January 26, 2018 - Beachmasters & Flying Sand](#)

[February 2, 2018 - Seal Re-sights & Birth Timing](#)

[February 9, 2018 - Staying Cool & Clap Threats](#)

[February 16, 2018 - Mating Odds & Milk Thieves](#)

[February 23, 2018 - Pup Protectors & Marvelous Males](#)

[March 3, 2018 - Wonderful Weanlings & Dominant D1](#)

*The National Park Service shall not be held liable for improper or incorrect use of the data described and/or contained herein. These data and related graphics are not legal documents and are not intended to be used as such. The information contained in these data is dynamic and may change over time. The data are not better than the original sources from which they were derived. It is the responsibility of the data user to use the data appropriately and consistent within the limitations of geospatial data in general and these data in particular. The related graphics are intended to aid the data user in acquiring relevant data; it is not appropriate to use the related graphics as data. The National Park Service gives no warranty, expressed or implied, as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data. It is strongly recommended that these data are directly acquired from an NPS server and not indirectly through other sources which may have changed the data in some way. Although these data have been processed successfully on computer systems at the National Park Service, no warranty expressed or implied is made regarding the utility of the data on other systems for general or scientific purposes, nor shall the act of distribution constitute any such warranty. This disclaimer applies both to individual use of the data and aggregate use with other data. The National Park Service requests that the data user refrain from publishing these data and related graphics and wait until data is available in official, published reports.*



point reyes national seashore

sfan

elephant seals

seasonal update

monitoring

Last updated: July 22, 2021

## Was this page helpful?

☐ Yes

☐ No