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2024 Elephant Seal Breeding Season Summary

Season Highlights

- Ken Patrick Visitor Center (KPVC) area was a busy pupping site this year. The seal count on the beach in front of KPVC was the highest it has ever been - peaking at 139 cows and 96 pups during the first week of February.
 - Last year, KPVC count peaked at 72 cows and 62 pups.
- Storms coming from the south, as well as king tides and high surf in early February, led to some pup mortality. Approximately 950 pups weaned this year, compared to the highest count of 1,153 weaned pups in 2021.
- Total seal, cow, pup, and weaned pup counts were lower than the 5-year average.



Left: Elephant seal harem at Ken Patrick Visitor Center.



Right: A screaming pup.

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Seasonal Peaks 2020-2024

Elephant Seal Seasonal Peaks



This graph compares the peak number of cows, weaned pups, and total elephant seals over the past 5 years. This year's peak counts across all categories were lower than last year's counts. This is likely due to the storms occurring during the pupping season.



Above: Elephant seal cow vocalizing.
Photo by Matt Lau. NMFS Permit No. 21425

What's next for the seals?

The breeding season for elephant seals is coming to a close. A little over a month ago on January 30, biologists counted 1165 cows; this week biologists counted only 19 cows. That means about 98% of cows have weaned their pup, mated, and returned to the open ocean!

Fret not, as elephant seals are found almost year-round at Point Reyes.

Here is what you can expect in the coming months:

March:

- Males are still on the beach, mating with the last cows. They will head out to sea by the end of the month.
- Weanlings are molting and preparing for their first foraging trip. They will be gone by the end of April.

Late March – June:

- Cows and juvenile seals will return to the beaches to molt.

June – August:

- Males will return to the beaches to molt.

September – November:

- Juveniles, including weanlings from this year, will return to haul out on the beaches.

December

- Males return to the beaches to begin defending their territories. The arrival of pregnant cows marks the beginning of the new breeding season!



Above: Annual cycle of an elephant seal. Elephant seal cows in the background. Photo by Matt Lau. NMFS Permit No. 21425

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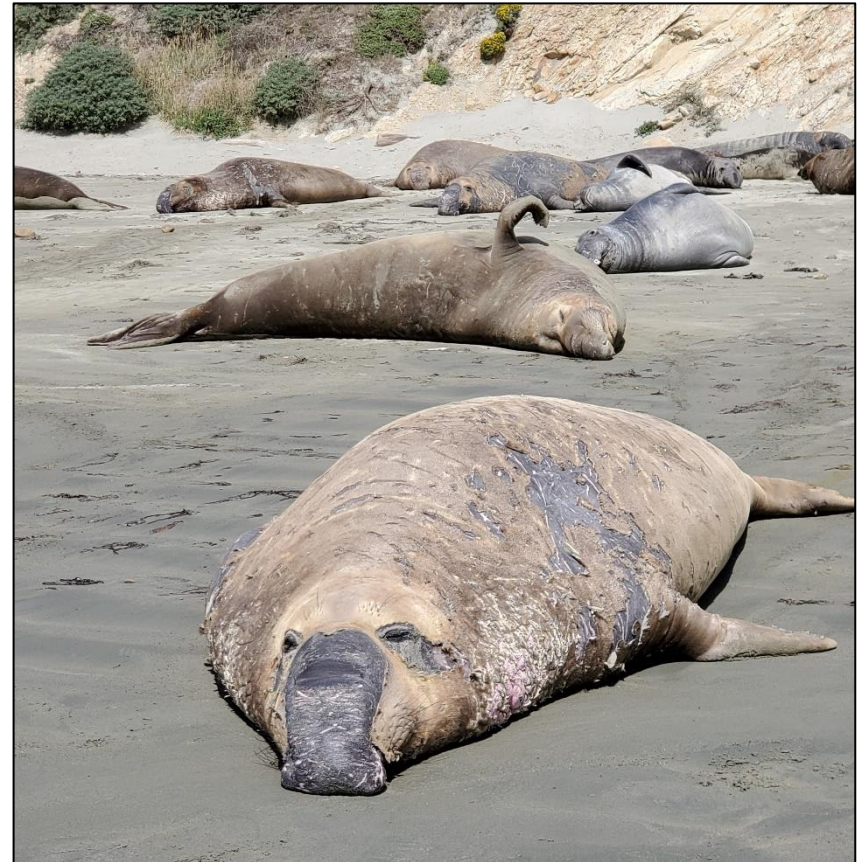


Catastrophic Molting

Now that the breeding season is almost over, the next time elephant seals will be returning to the beaches at Point Reyes is to undergo catastrophic molting. When elephant seals molt, they grow a new layer of skin and fur. This causes their old fur and skin to come off in large patches, which is why it is termed catastrophic molt.

Elephant seals must return to land to molt because while in the ocean, growing new hair and skin would compromise their insulation from the cold temperatures of the ocean. Once the seals are on land and don't have to worry about keeping warm, blood is circulated to grow new skin and fur while shedding their old coat. The molting process takes about a month to complete, and the elephant seals are fasting the entire time.

Adult female and juvenile elephant seals return to molt in late March and April while Males return to molt in June and July.

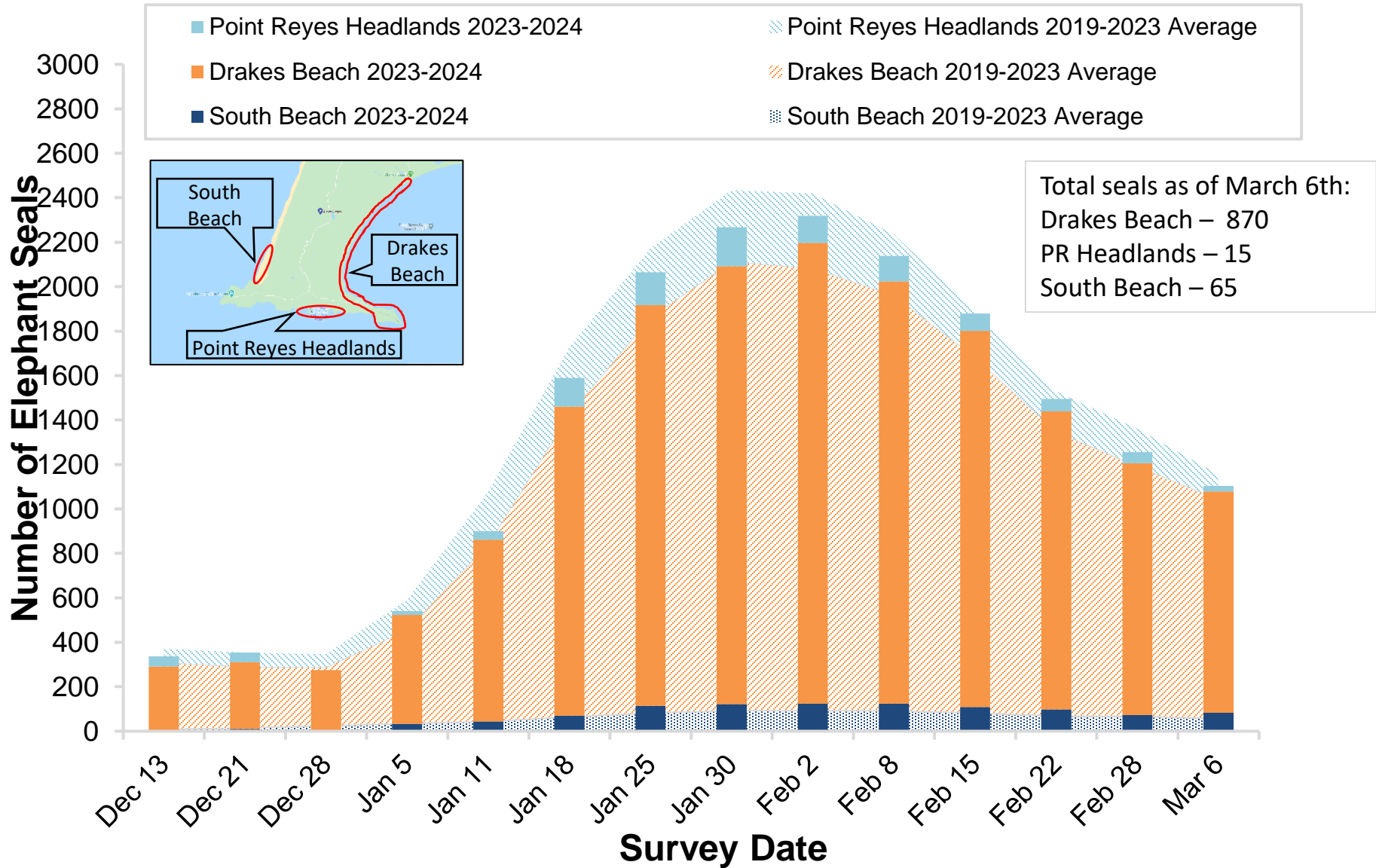


Above: A molting male elephant seal.

Photo by S. Allen. NMFS Permit No. 21425

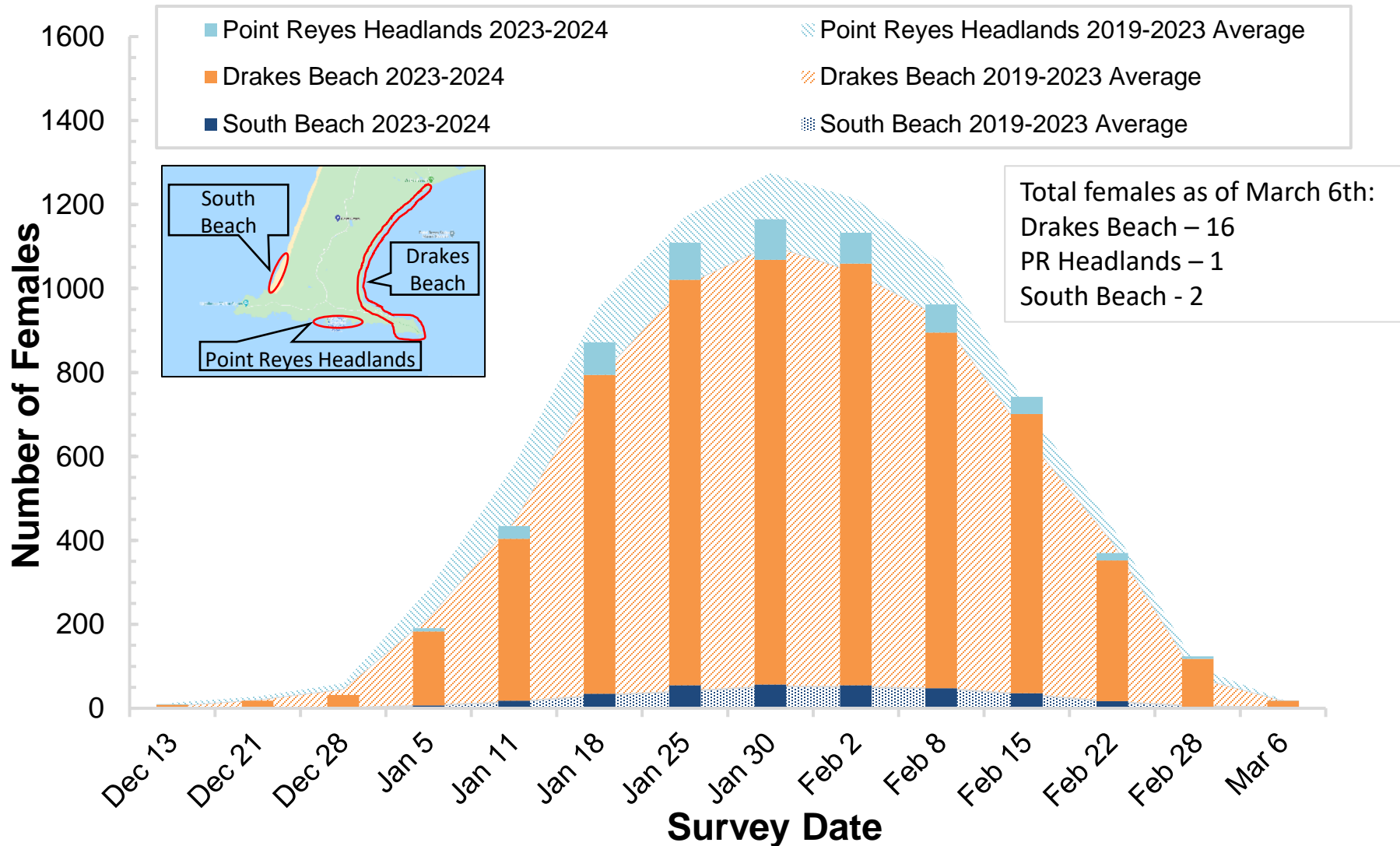
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2024 Seal Count vs. 2019-2023 Total Seal Average



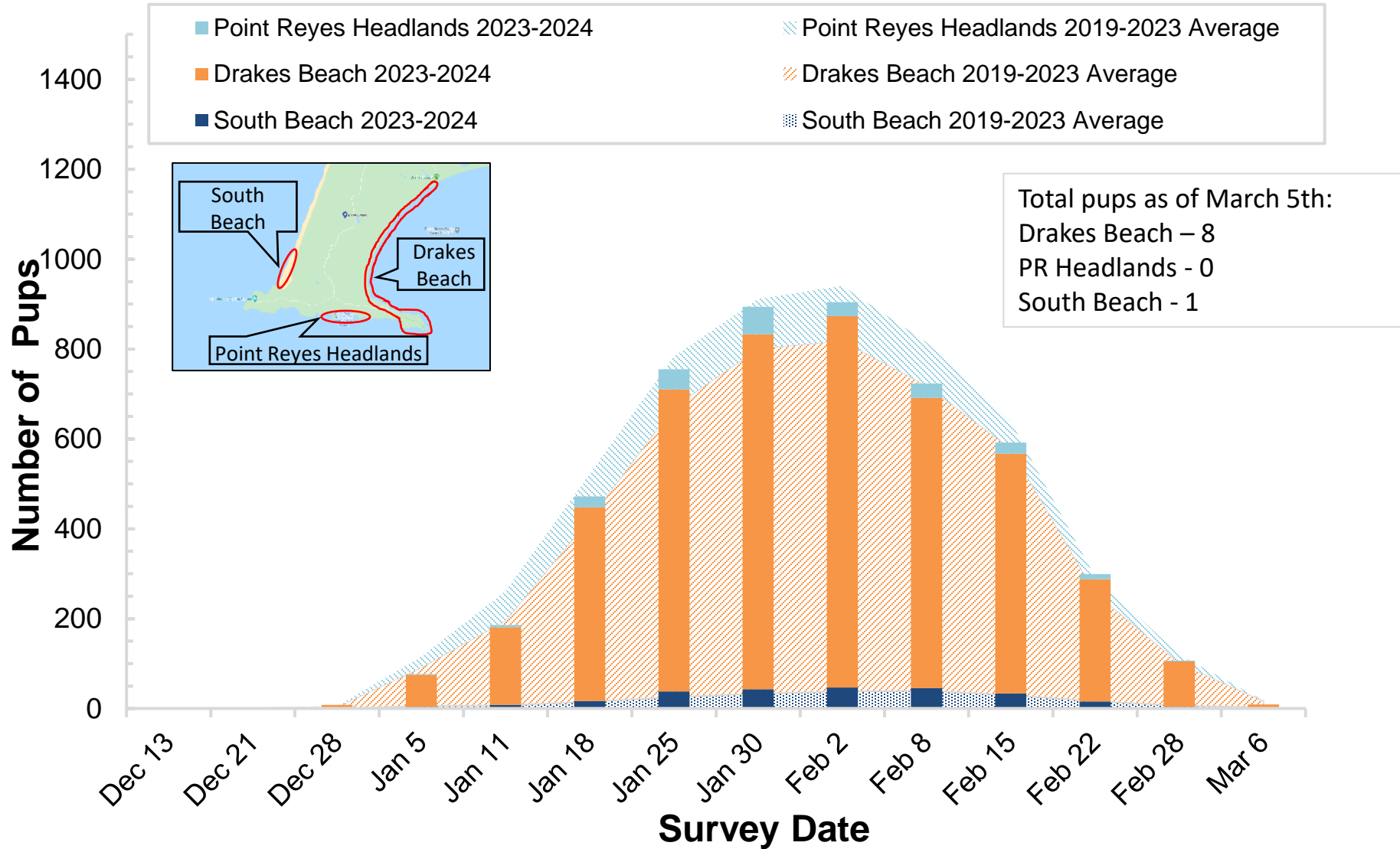
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2024 Female Count vs. 2019-2023 Female Average



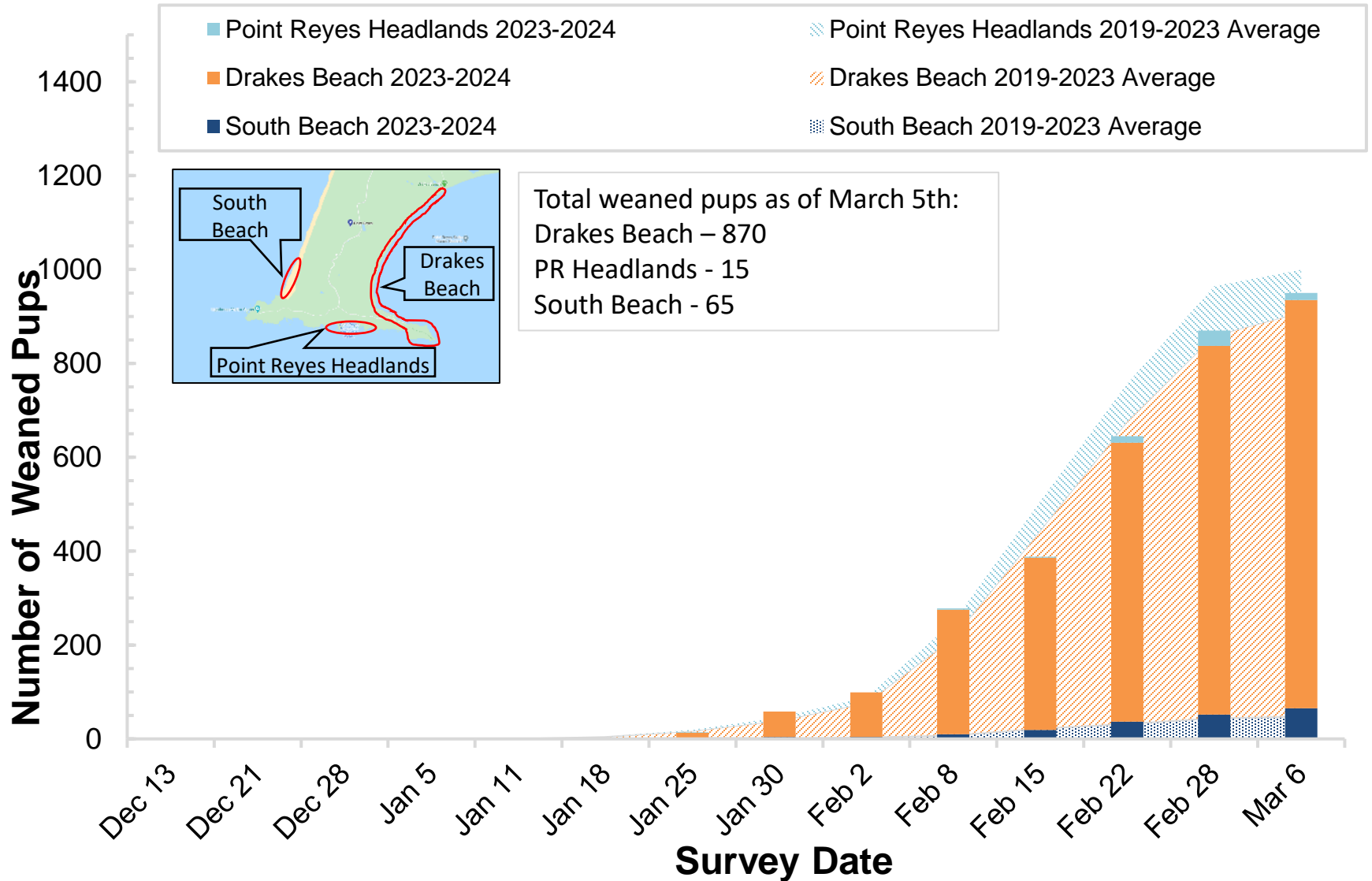
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2024 Pup Count vs. 2019-2023 Pup Average



Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2024 Weaned Pup Count vs. 2019-2023 Weaned Pup Average



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