

National Park Service



2024 Elephant Seal Breeding Season Update January 12, 2024

News this week:

- This week's king tides brought high tides up to 7 feet. With no storms or high surf, the elephant seals and pups fared well.
- Total elephant seal numbers in the park are below average. The bulk of the elephant seals are farther down on Drakes Beach.
- The beach and ice plant in front of Ken Patrick Visitor Center continues to be a popular hang out spot for male elephant seals.
- Drakes Beach, the Fish Dock, the beach at the Historic Lifeboat Station, and the southern end of South Beach are closed.



Above: Elephant seals continue to hang out in front of Ken Patrick Visitor Center. The total count was 24 seals as of 1/11/23.

Center: A subadult male elephant seal with a scar around his neck was spotted at the fish dock. This scar is likely from a previous entanglement.

Top Left: A growing harem at Gus' Cove, near Chimney Rock. 51 pups were counted here on 1/11/23.

Bottom Left: A cow and her pup snuggle up together. Cows bond with their pups upon birth so that they can recognize their pup by scent.



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Don't flip out!

It is common to see elephant seals of all ages using their front flippers to propel sand onto themselves.

There are multiple reasons for this behavior. Sand flipping is primarily a way of thermoregulation for elephant seals. Elephant seals have thick blubber to keep them warm in cold water. But on a hot day at the beach, they can easily overheat. The wet sand helps reduce the seal's body temperature. The sand also acts as sunscreen. Seals can also be seen flipping sand when they are agitated.



Above: Elephant seal cows flipping sand.
Photo by M Cox. NMFS Permit No. 21425

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Timing is everything!

Female elephant seals continue to arrive at the sandy beaches in Point Reyes to prepare for their pup to be born, and they are right on schedule!

Cows must time their arrival at the beaches perfectly—too early and they can miss out on more foraging opportunities. If they leave too late, they can lose their pup out at sea.

Pupping is also timed so that beach temperatures aren't too hot and weaned pups can forage during spring upwelling, when prey is more abundant.

Using satellite tags on cows, researchers at UC Santa Cruz found that on average, cows arrive at the beach 5.5 days before giving birth.

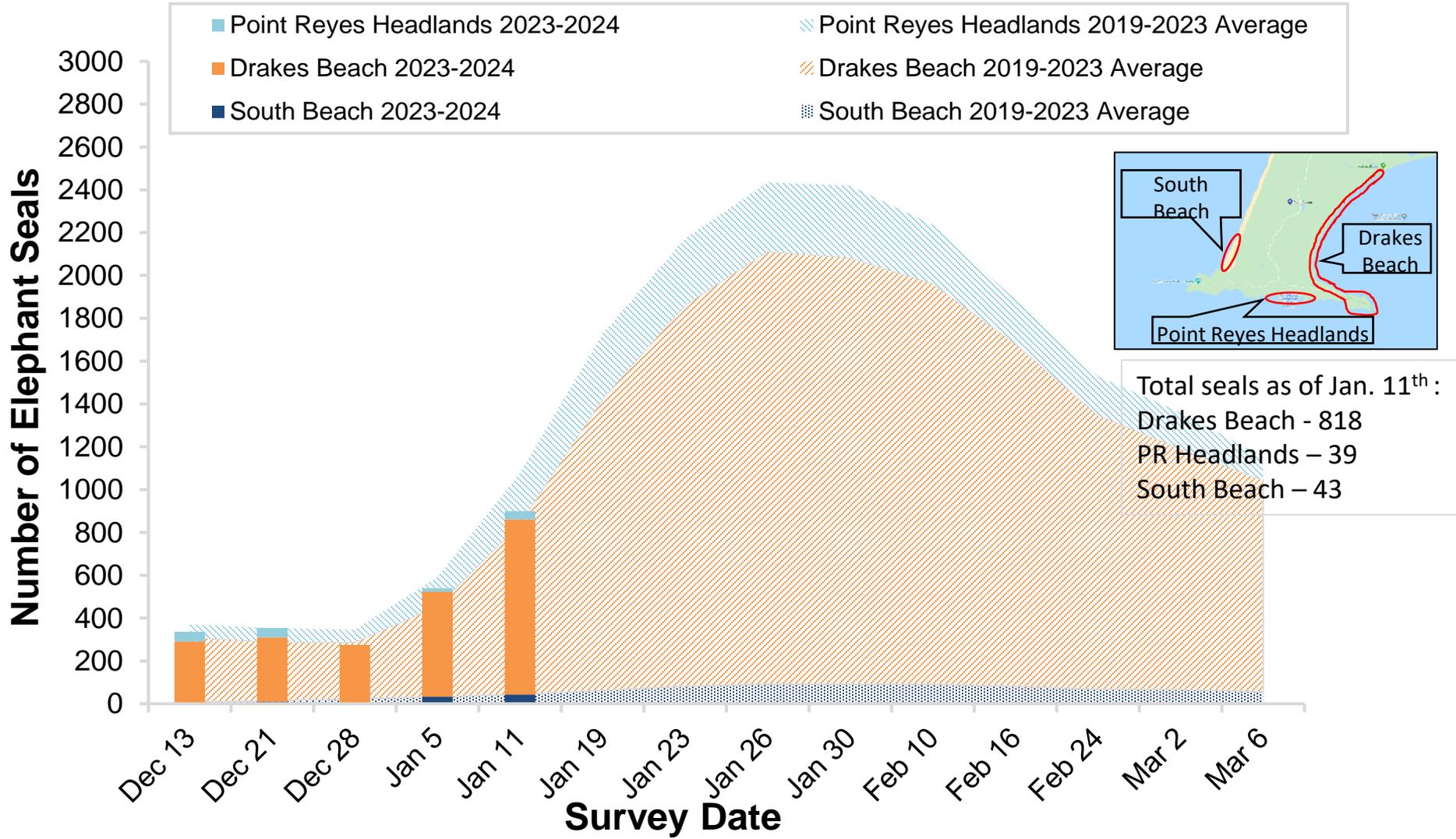
These cows are coming from their foraging grounds, thousands of miles out at sea. They will travel 40-50 miles per day to time their arrival perfectly for when their pup needs to be born. Cows running late will swim faster to cover more distance and shorten the delay between arrival and giving birth. One latecomer in the study gave birth within 30 hours of arriving at the beach!



Above: Two pregnant cows on Drakes Beach.
Photo by A.Goldston. NMFS Permit No. 21425

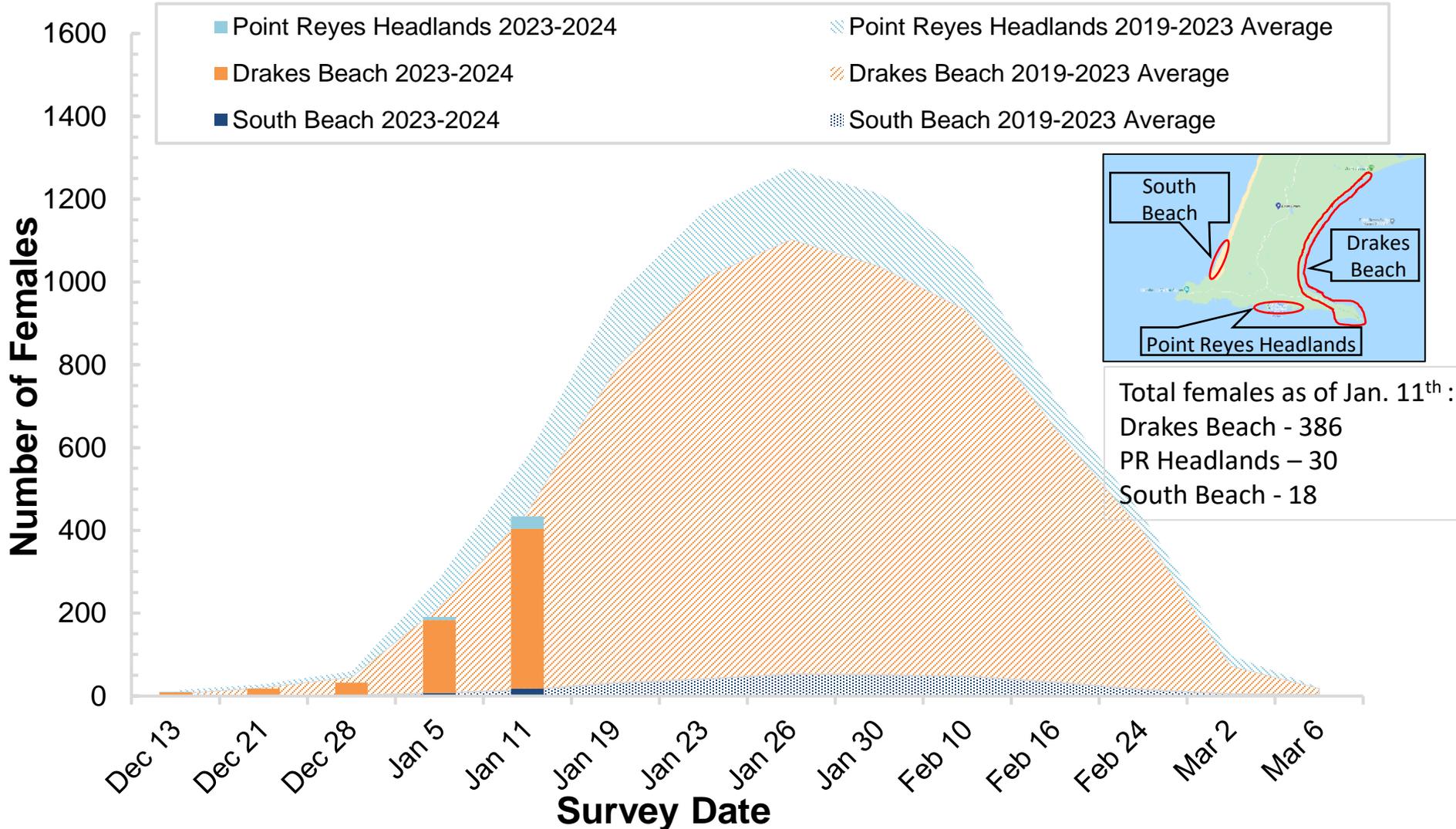
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

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



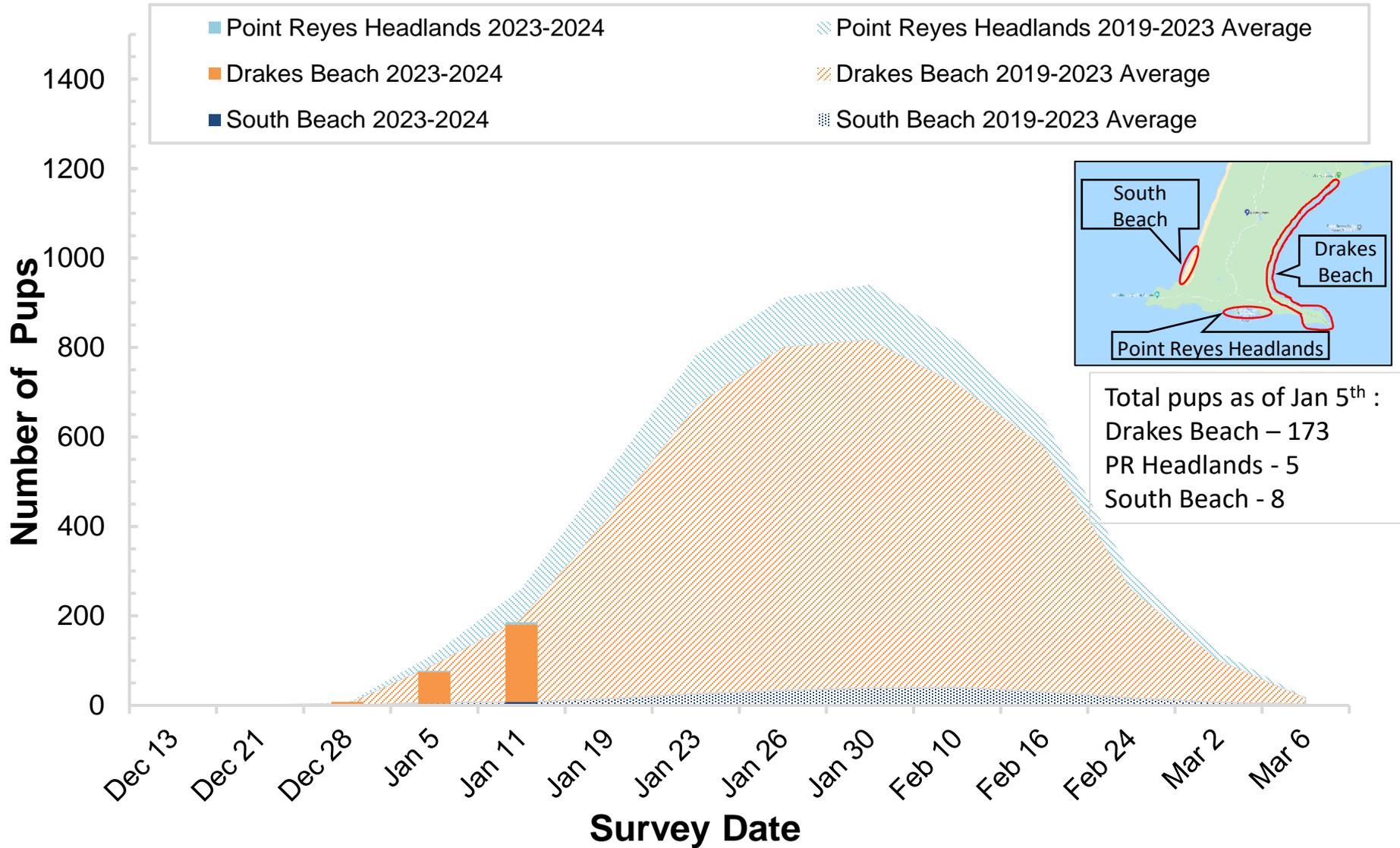
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

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



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