

National Park Service



2024 Elephant Seal Breeding Season Update February 9, 2024

News this week:

- Sunday's atmospheric river moved many seals around the park. Ken Patrick Visitor Center now has 138 cows, 96 pups, and 6 weaned pups!
- The atmospheric river caused more pup mortality. However, most of the pups survived the storms.
- There are a total of 278 weanlings in the park as of 2/8/24.
- The total elephant seal count in the park continues to be below the 5-year average.



Above: The cow count peaked last week but there are still some latecomers arriving and giving birth. The last pups of the season will be born by the end of next week.

Center: Sunday's storm caused most of the seals to move into the ice plant in front of Ken Patrick Visitor Center. Always maintain at least 25 feet of distance from elephant seals.

Top Left: Gus' Cove, near Chimney Rock. Groupings of weanlings, termed weaner pods, are starting to form on the edges of the harem!

Bottom Left: Weanlings are now fasting on the beach for around 2 months as they learn to swim and develop their diving capabilities.



Fight or flight

The goal of the male elephant seal during the breeding season is to mate with as many females as they can. To do this, they compete for dominance over harems of cows. They have several competitive responses: vocalizations, physical posturing - where males rear up their chest, seismic signaling - where males slap their chests onto the sand, and physical fighting. Only about 5% of interactions lead to physical confrontations. Using playback experiments and acoustic analysis, researchers at UC Santa Cruz found that elephant seal males learn and recognize each other's distinctive vocalization. Furthermore, they found that alpha males respond to all aggressors while subordinate males respond based on previous outcomes of competitive interactions. This is for good reason – male elephant seals are fasting while on land and must balance their time between conserving energy and competing. By recognizing their competitors, they can save their energy and avoid unnecessary fights. This recognition is also important for maintaining the social hierarchy.

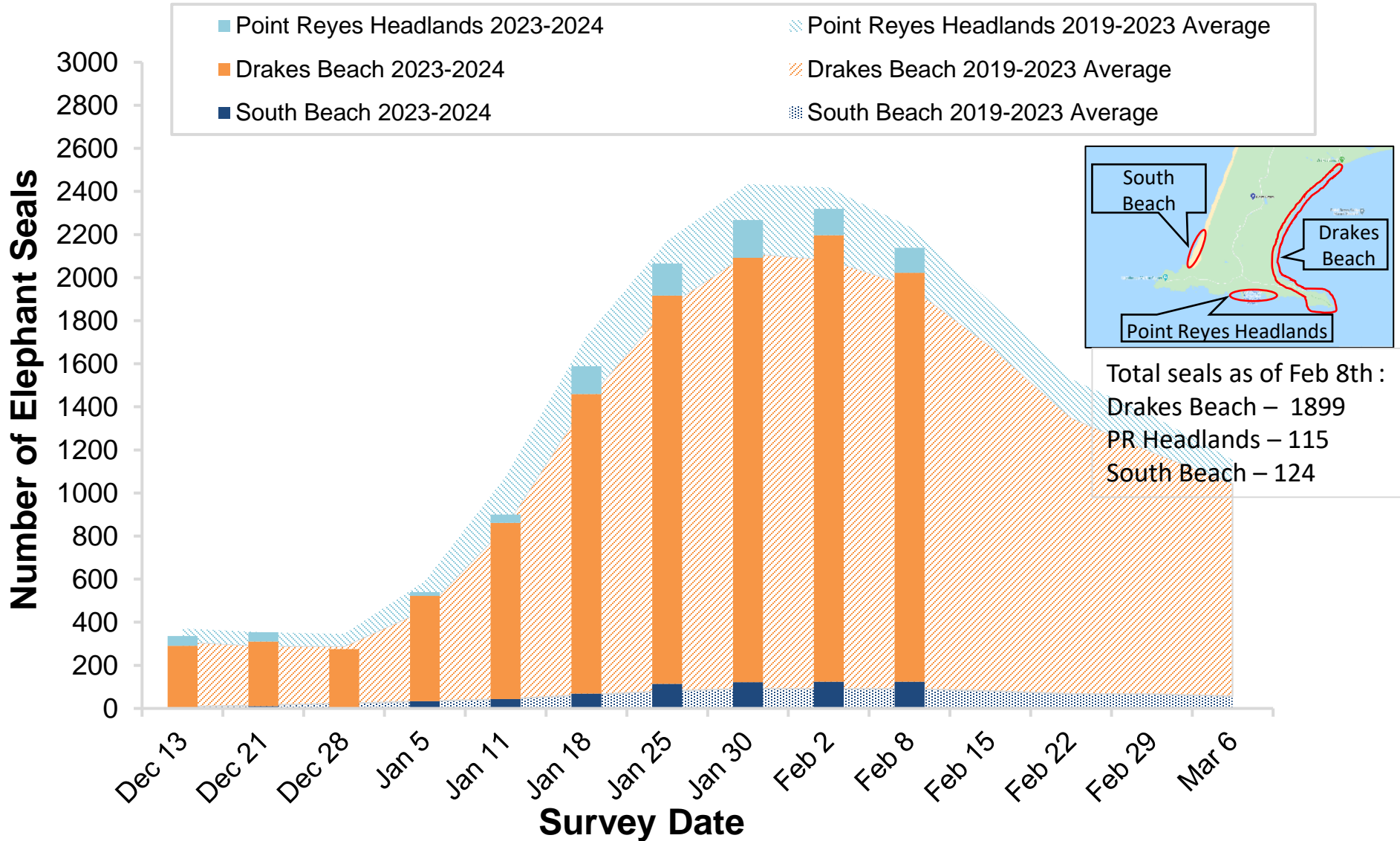


Above: An elephant seal bull vocalizing.

Photo by Marjorie Cox, NMFS Permit No. 21425

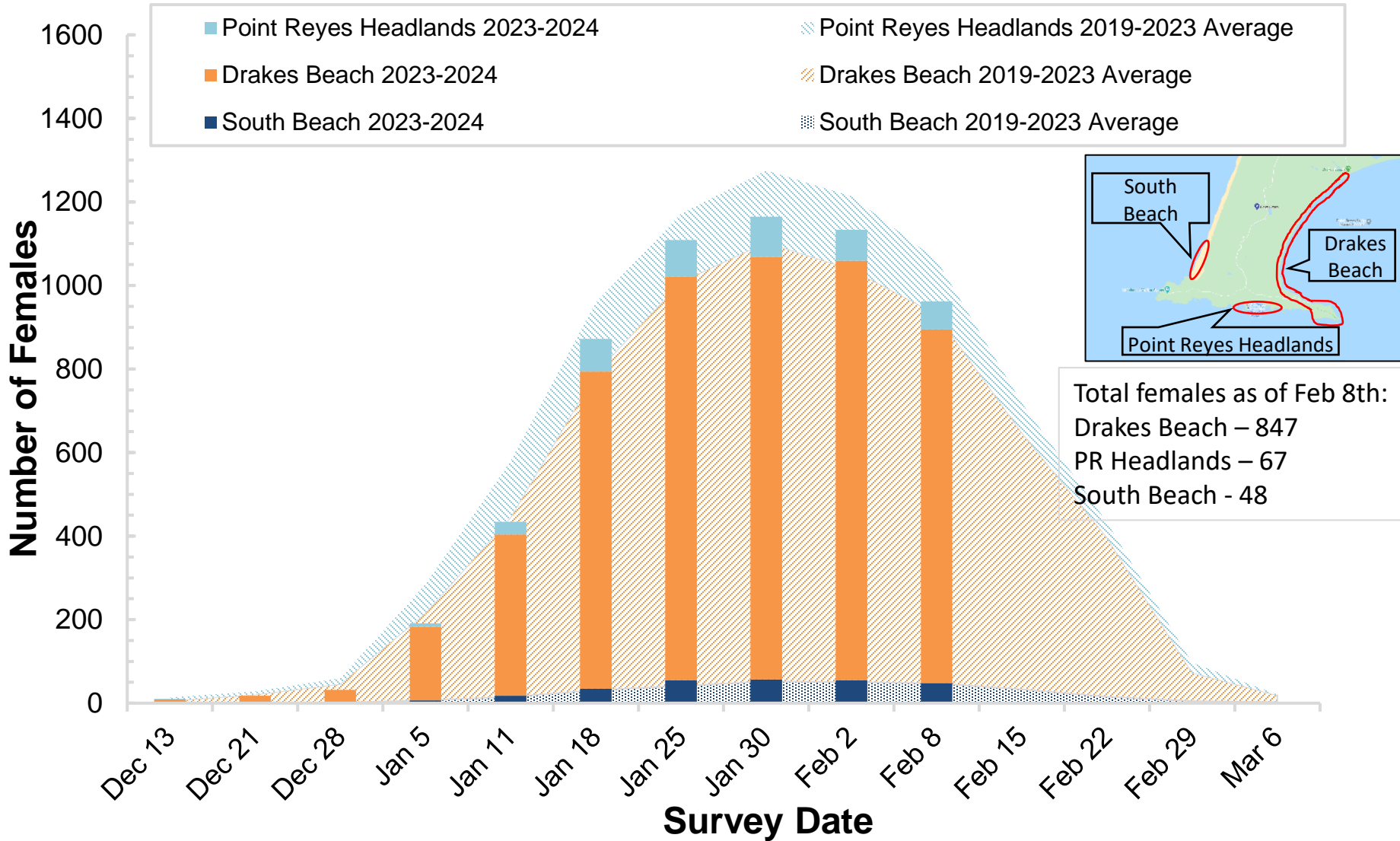
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

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



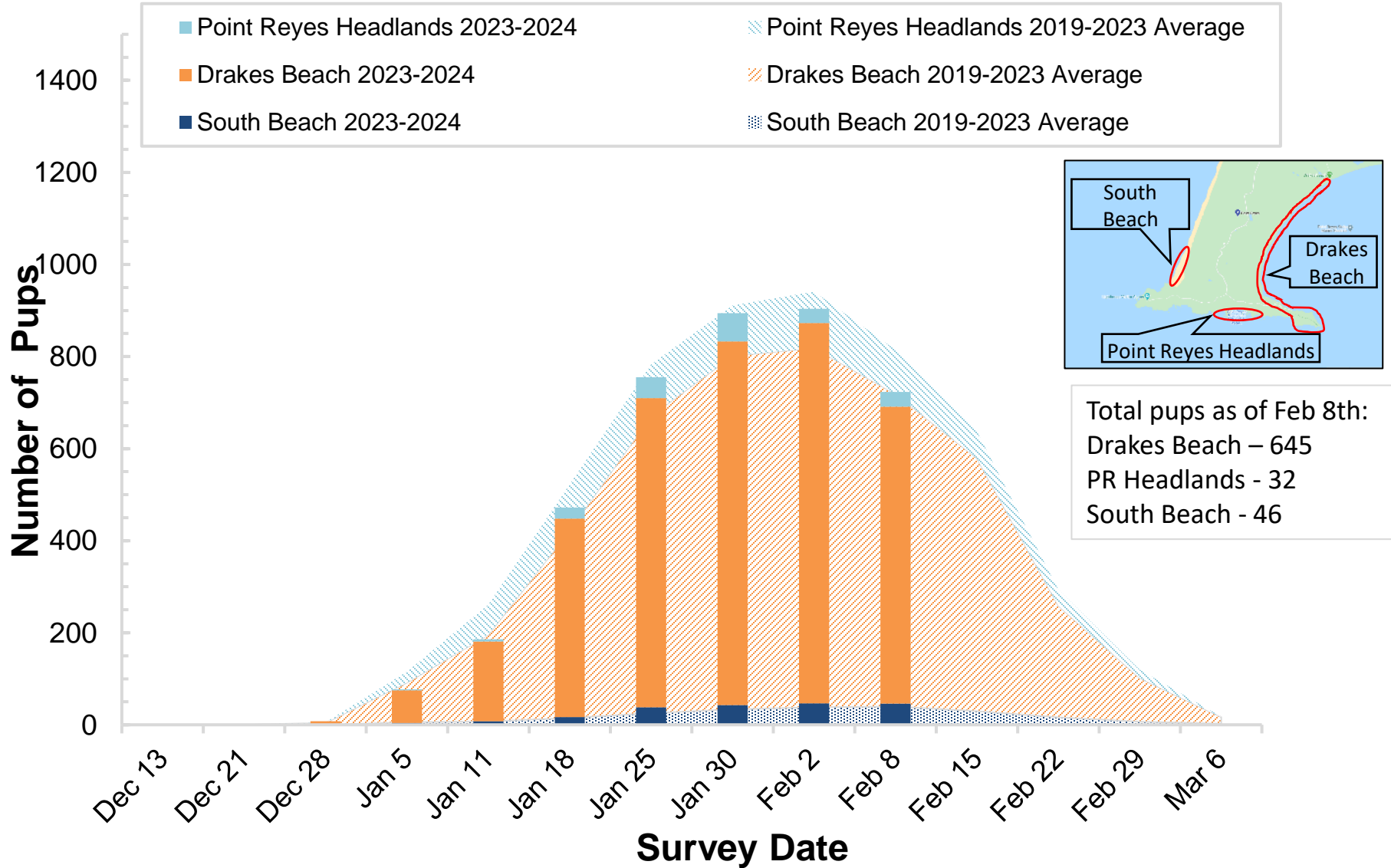
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2024 Female Count vs. 2019-2023 Female Average



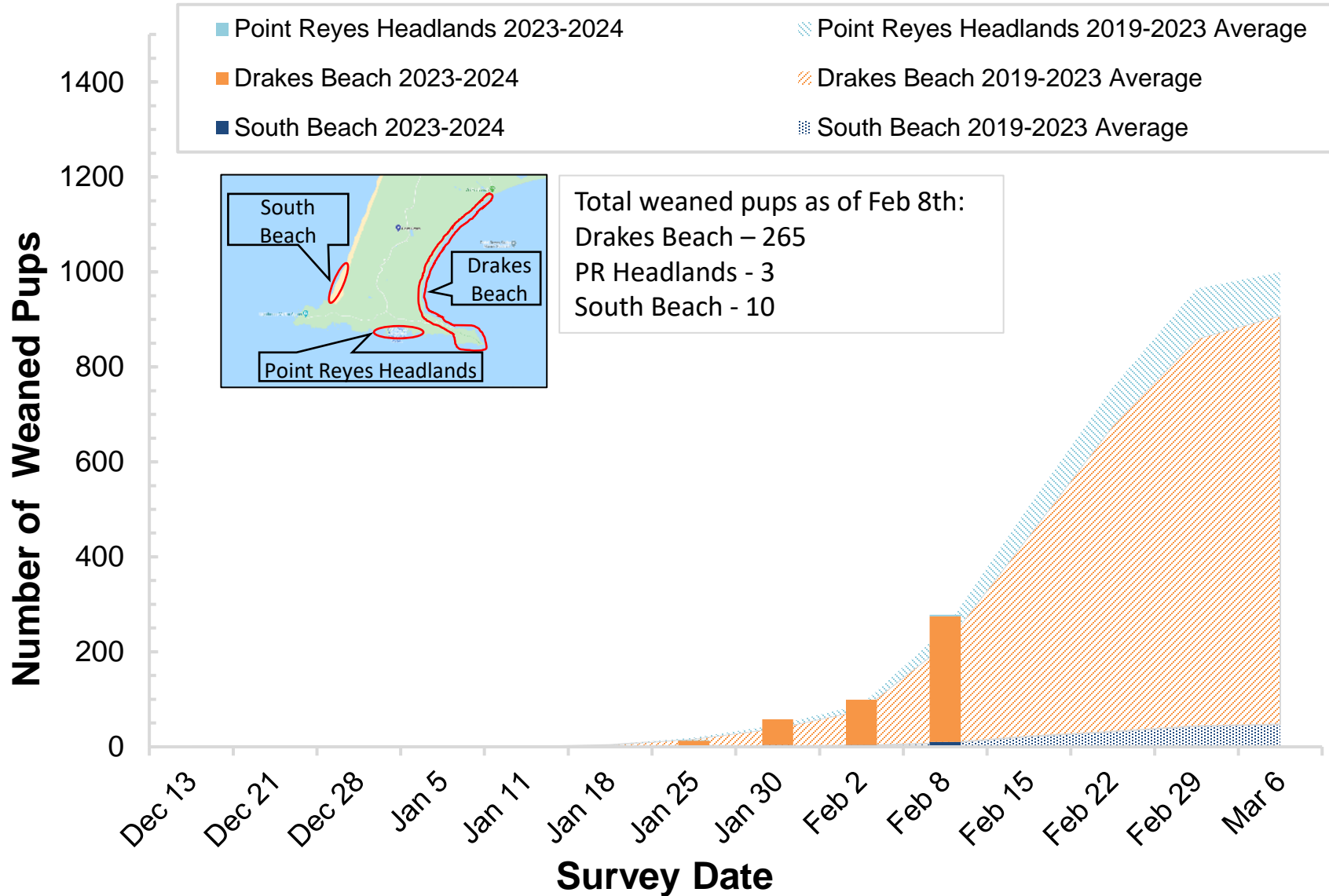
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

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



National Park Service



EXPERIENCE
YOUR
AMERICA

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.