Photograph courtesy of Bjoern Kils/New York Media Boat

Why These Seals Left New York—and Why They Came Back

(/lenora) **Lenora Todaro (/lenora)**
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New York is like their Miami resort.

This is Sidewalk Naturalist, a monthly column by Lenora Todaro which sees New York City through its wildlife citizens, whose lives tell us something about the way we live in the fragile ecosystem that is the city today.

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I want to say their limpid eyes jolted me into my first seal crush, but it was the linguistics of their lives that initially captivated me. I love these words: pinniped (wing or feather-footed), spy-hopping (head out, looking around), banana-ing (lifting head and tail), porpoising (rhythmic pitching and heaving in the water), hobbling (dragging their bodies on the ground with front flippers), hauling-out (resting on land), bottling (resting vertically in the sea, nose pointing out), flipper-slapping (what it sounds like), and the words for a group of seals (herd, pod, harem, bob, colony, rookery).

After a century's long absence, these past two decades, seals have begun to return in winter to New York City for a little rest and relaxation. Mostly, they're harbor seals that migrate south from arctic waters in Nova Scotia, Maine, and Cape Cod to the warmer waters surrounding our city. They vacation here from about October through April before heading north to breed. Our winter is their summer. As one urban park ranger put it: "New York is like their Miami resort."

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Harbor seals are semi-aquatic, meaning they spend half their time in the water and half on the land. They are swift and acrobatic in the sea (they can swim twenty miles per hour), but clumsy on the land (moving barely one mile per hour). Adult seals can be between four and five feet long, sturdy, rotund, with lots of blubber to keep them warm, and they weigh between 180 and 250 pounds depending on whether they are male or female. They have spotted coats in various shades from white-ish grey to brownish-black. They avoid people and prefer to sun themselves on isolated islands like Swinburne off of Staten Island, and Middle Reef, off of Orchard Beach in the Bronx. You can see them with your binoculars, or spotting scope, or, if you're lucky, by boat.

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Gabriel Willow, an urban naturalist and environmental educator, designed and led Audubon-sponsored ecology cruises for nearly ten years on the now-defunct New York City Water Taxi. Those cruises no longer take place, but he's a whiz seal spotter, so I accompanied him on an epic adventure that began in the morning at the Erie Basin Park in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and ended with us chasing a rare bird on Staten Island at dusk.

The Erie Basin Park incorporates memorabilia of the Civil War-era drydock and decommissioned shipyards (it was once the official end of the Erie Canal). To stand on the waterfront is to imagine the industry that passed through Brooklyn's harbor. There are sculptures made from ropes and winches, four original cranes standing sentinel, and a series of concrete blocks bearing the names of vessels that once called this home: Elin Hope, Taurus, Resolute.

Binoculars in hand, we scan the water's surface for telltale signs of a harbor seal: a shiny head bobbing in the water. "People tend to think of seals as sea lions, which aren't even closely related," Willow says. "They're the ones that stand on their flippers and bark and clap like in circuses. These are true seals, which are a little more blobby and sluglike." But to search for seals with Willow is to be drawn also into the mind of an expert birder who reads the skies as if it were codex. Willow punctuates our conversation with the names of birds he sees: arctic goose, red-breasted merganser, gadwall duck.

Willow also has a gift for sounds, as I will discover over the course of the day. When I ask whether seals make distinguishing noises he answers: "They sort of sigh, so you'll hear an exhalation: *haaahhhh*. They don't bark, but sometimes you'll hear a little grunt or groan. Sometimes you hear a belching sound like *beehhh* as if they're grumpy about whose rock it is." Throughout, he spots more birds: Brant geese, loon, American black duck. He continues, "As part of a mating ritual, the males sing to the females. They get together in a group like a little barbershop quartet and they harmonize, putting their heads together, but it's underwater." I haven't been able to get this image out of my mind: seals clad in red and white striped vests, boater hats jauntily tilted.

With no seals popping up, we leave for Bay Ridge, Brooklyn and the American Veterans Memorial Pier, a popular fishing spot that buts up against the seventy-year-old Owls Head Wastewater Treatment Plant, which, depending upon the weather, can sometimes smell like farts, local residents say. It's a cold winter day, so although the water is calm, there are not many people fishing, and not much stench.

Looking through a spotting scope and binoculars, scanning the water for a seal's shiny, bald head, we talk about why the seals may have returned to New York these last two decades. In colonial times they were hunted to near extinction, and in the decades following, polluted waters either drove them away or killed them. From the oil industry in the late 1800s to chemicals like PCBs and dioxins in the 1950s, the filthy waters could not sustain much life. This was not unique to New York City. In 1969 the Cuyahoga River in Ohio, which ended in Lake Erie, was so filled with industrial waste that it frequently caught fire.

The 1972 Clean Water Act was pivotal: a federal law designed to limit the discharge of pollutants into the nation's waters and improve the quality of water for fishing and swimming. "Now we're fifty years out and finally seeing results," explains Willow, "so as long as those laws aren't gutted we can expect to see more wildlife returning to the Hudson." (Alas, at the end of 2018 the Trump administration made clear that it intended to "redefine" the law by curtailing federal authority over water pollution, leaving it to states with wildly different levels of regulation.)

The Hudson River is cleaner, too, due to pioneer activism from the likes of musician Pete Seeger's Hudson River Sloop Clearwater organization and Riverkeeper, both of which raised awareness about the river's waste and championed its clean-up. Around the same time, seals' lives were improved by the Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972, which made it illegal to harass, feed, capture, collect, kill, import or export any marine mammal (with some exceptions for permitted scientific research and Alaska natives). It is illegal to come within 150 feet of a seal, although scientists suggest 500 feet.

Facing south we can see the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, which connects Brooklyn and Staten Island. Through a scope, Willow points out Hoffman and Swinburne Islands, which "look like a mirage." Then he spots a cormorant flapping its wings among the pilings. Then: "Seal—right there! See its head?" he chuckles. "That's what I'm waiting for. What a beauty. That's about what you see, a little Labrador retriever head. They can hold their breath for two or three minutes so it will probably pop up again."

Each time I see a wild creature it's another splash of wonder, a zing of joy. "See its nose," Willow says. "When they're feeding they're generally solitary; when they're hauling out to rest and sun themselves they like to be with others." Then, bird distractions: northern shoveler, lesser scaup. “A handsome little duck. Purple head, white flank, yellow eyes, blue beak. Unusual to see it alone.” Willow’s recitation of characteristics are like found poems. The seal bobs, swims underwater, pops up, flashes large, dreamy eyes. Then it’s gone.

We move on to Staten Island’s South Beach, where we can see Swinburne Island more directly. Meanwhile, a report comes in about a rare bird sighting at Cloves Lake Park in Staten Island: a varied thrush. Through the scope we see five seals hauling out on Swinburne Island. They look like driftwood, blending in with the rocks, and with some strain, I do see one “banana-ing” beside another.

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Dr. Kristy Biolsi, Associate Professor and Director for the Study of Pinniped Ecology and Cognition (C-SPEC) at St. Francis College, and Dr. Kevin Woo, Associate Professor at the Metropolitan Center of SUNY Empire State College, met briefly as undergraduates at Long Island University where they studied psychobiology. Some years and two more academic degrees later, they reconnected over their mutual interest in pinnipeds, which includes seals, sea lions, and walruses. They founded C-SPEC to formalize their research. Together they make up New York City’s main seal scientist dynamic duo. For the last eight years, they have been conducting the first systematic documentation of wild seals in New York City. From October to the end of April they make observations by land when the tide is low (and thus easier to see the seals hauling out) and by boat at varying times depending upon when a boat is available. First they went with the Audubon Society, with Gabriel Willow as guide, and now with New York Media Boat, with Bjoern Kils, a marine scientist and journalist from Germany, who docks one of his seven boats in Battery Park City. Kils started NY Media Boat in 2012 to take journalists out to cover stories (just in time for Hurricane Sandy), then expanded to include recreational tours, and scientific research trips.

The seal population is now stable at around 614, with the majority of them near Orchard Beach in the Bronx and on Swinburne Island. The return of the seal is a “bioindicator of ecosystem health,” they wrote in a paper for Aquatic Mammals (2018). The seals are here in part, they wrote, because there are fish to eat and the quality of food can support them year after year, which represents “a clear example of local fauna reclaiming previous habitat.” Although the seals have to watch out for boat traffic and can be stressed by motorized noise, their stability tells us that they and our water are doing better, but it also helps us prepare for more human interactions with seals, which are inevitable.

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“They are called semi-aquatic, or truly amphibious,” Dr. Biolsi says of the seals the first time I meet her at Orchard Beach, a place once known as “the Riviera of New York City.” They haul out on land to rest, get warm and dry, to molt, and to give birth. In the water, they eat, hunt, play, and travel. They move in the water like a rocket, and scooch awkwardly on land.

Using her scope, set up on a rock facing Middle Reef, she scans a spit of land that resembles a sandbar. “We think they like this area because there is a drop-off near the reef, which means there’s probably more fish to eat.” So what type of fish do they eat in New York City? There are about 220 species of fish in the Hudson. They are opportunistic feeders, which means they’ll eat what’s available. They like herring, young shad (although it can be boney), alewives, flounder, mackerel, and bunker fish, which is used for bait. Seals use their antenna-like whiskers, which have up to 1500 nerve endings, to locate prey under the water. They swallow fish whole, head first.

Every mammal is part of the food chain, so seals, too, can be eaten, mostly by sharks (yes, there are sharks in New York City’s waters). “It’s a balanced ecosystem because they regulate each other,” Woo says philosophically. “There is always the potential for a deadly interaction between humans and animals, but you’re more likely to get trampled by cows than killed by a shark.” Advice: don’t get too close to seals and don’t feed them. “People need to know there are seals in our backyard,” says Woo, “but they need to keep their distance as with any wild animal.”

Dr. Biolsi and Dr. Woo have questions they want to answer: Do the seals travel between Swinburne Island and Orchard Beach? Are the same seals returning year after year? Are they in New York Harbor because it’s a good place, or just good enough because they got pushed out of Long Island and ended up here, like New York City apartment dwellers who flee crowding and high rents, moving further out into the boroughs? “The Holy Grail would be to reliably photograph them and ID them in the field,” says Biolsi. “Different spot patterns on seals are like fingerprints.”

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On the New Jersey side of the harbor Joe Reynolds, who recently founded Save Coastal Wildlife, a not-for-profit educational group, organized two seal counts in February and March. He and dozen volunteers counted around 169 and 126 respectively in Sandy Hook

Bay. He's identified at least one regular that returns each year, a seal he's named "scar belly," for its three distinguishing scars, most likely from a boat's propeller. Usually, seals swim swiftly enough to avoid this fate, but Reynolds has heard a theory: "I've heard that a boat propeller sounds to female seals like a mating call from males so it traps the female. In the last ten years, I've seen more seals with these scars so there's something going on." Biolsi hadn't heard that theory and knew of no data to support it, but thought it was not implausible. "When people ask me what a male's roar sounds like I say it sounds like an outboard motor."

"The biggest fear I have," says Reynolds, "is that yes, there are seals here, but people want to get close and take selfies. They think they will do tricks for them like sea lions. But harbor seals aren't friendly like sea lions; they're sensitive and don't like people getting close. I worry that people, wind surfers, boaters—if they get too close regularly, the seals will abandon the area. That happened in one place in San Francisco. They never came back."

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One afternoon, I join Kils and Biolsi on a trip to Swinburne Island in New York Media's four-seat SAFE boat (Secure All-around Flotation Equipped), the type used by the Coast Guard and the police. We head south, passing the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Bayonne, New Jersey, Staten Island, and then glide beneath the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge. Nearby, a tugboat ushers an oil tanker down the river. We slow down as we approach Hoffman and Swinburne Islands.

From the late 1800s through the early twentieth century, immigrants suspected of illnesses like cholera and yellow fever were quarantined on Hoffman Island. Usually they died there. A crematorium on Swinburne handled their bodies. Both islands had been built on landfill and, after Hurricane Sandy, not much remained other than the remnants of a dock on Hoffman and a dilapidated smokestack on Swinburne. Now, it is a haven for heron, egrets, gulls, and seals.

I have wobbly sea legs, so I stay close to a pole on the outside deck. In one direction I can see South Beach in Staten Island where I stood with Willow peering out at Swinburne. Now within 200 feet of the island, I immediately see two seals on the rocks near a skeletal tree. Two more frolic in the water, spy-hopping, flipper-slapping, porpoising. Those eyes.

Biolsi notices one seal, however, that appears to have a red eye. She thinks it could be missing, or have a growth on it. Soon after, Kils calls out that he sees a seal caught in a plastic bag. It’s possible, though, he thinks, that the seal was playing with the bag. Photos didn’t confirm either situation, but neither Kils or Biolsi had seen anything like it here before.

Twelve seals in total swim around the boat or lounge in Swinburne’s cove or catch winter sun on its rocks. To watch them is to be yanked into the watery world of glistening eyes and slippery bodies, of floating landscapes and the slapping sound of white caps on the surface, below you the mysterious underworld you don’t belong to, then slowly, their graceful rolls and bobs nudge you into a meditative state, which is among the many gifts seals bring to our waters.

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