

IAATO Elephant Seal Watching Guidelines



In IAATO areas of Operation there is potential for humans to interact with Elephant Seals. Despite their seemingly undisturbed and restful appearance, elephant seals can be extremely quick and may become defensive or aggressive if humans get too close.

It is important for visitors to always observe these animals from a safe distance and to follow these guidelines.

During the breeding season (October through December), visitors should take extra care. At this time, males fiercely compete with one another to establish harems and can be aggressive to anyone who ventures too close. In addition, females may be protective of their newly born pups, especially if a person comes between the mother and her offspring, and there may be little or no warning before a reaction or attack.

When the females return to sea and the pups are weaned, the pups (weaners) can become very curious of humans. People should remain alert, and slowly back away if weaners approach.

Understanding Seal Behaviour

Elephant Seals hauled out on land are aware of human presence. Noises, smells and movements may elicit a reaction.

Be aware of seal behaviour that indicates a seal is disturbed. Such behaviours include, but are not limited to:

- An increase in alertness or vigilance, head turning or, neck lengthening,
- Change in posture from lying to erect,
- Hurriedly moving away from the approaching people,
- Open mouth threat displays, and/or
- Aggressive displays or bluff charges in your direction.
- Elephant Seal pups (weaners) and juveniles can be very curious of humans; be cautious and alert.
- Male elephant seals away from harems are more likely to be aggressive and unpredictable.

Guidelines for viewing seals on land

- When viewing seals, do not surround or separate them, especially harems, and mothers and pups.
- Harems should never be disturbed.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea.
- Walk slowly and do not run in the vicinity of seals.
- Suggested minimum distances:
 - From elephant seals ashore: 5 metres (16 feet).
 - From jousting bull elephant seals: 25 metres (75 feet).
 - Greater distances may be required if disturbance is observed.
- Seals always have the right of way.
- Activities should have no more than a minor or transitory impact.
- A safe walking route should be marked with flags, cones or other objects. Staff should be in visible positions along route as required and be prepared to adjust the route if needed.
- Any behavioural response other than a raised head should be avoided.
- If an individual or herd moves towards the water, or there is a hurried entry into the water by many individuals, you should retreat slowly and carefully.
- Be aware of animals in tussock grass areas, as they may be difficult to see.
- Elephant seals, especially the pups (weaners) are very inquisitive and may approach to seek milk as their mothers have left them. If an individual or a group move towards you, make efforts to back away slowly and avoid contact.
- Elephant seals are more vulnerable when moulting.
- Do not sit down on breeding beaches. Stay on your feet and aware of your surroundings.

- When on breeding beaches, walk with a buddy to minimise the risk of surprise encounters for both visitors and seals. Take photographs in turn, so one of your buddy pair is always keeping a look out.
- In areas away from breeding beaches, sitting quietly is acceptable, but always be aware of your surroundings.



Small boat operations near elephant seals

- Small boat approaches to landing sites where elephant seals are present should be done with extreme caution to protect visitors and seals alike.
 - Elephant seals may be completely submerged near landing sites, and can become aggressive.
- When landing, passengers should be instructed to move away from the water line. Flag markers or staff in visible positions will guide visitors away from elephant seal concentrations.
- At breeding beaches during the height of the season, it may not be possible to land due to the sheer number of seals and forceful defence of territories. Zodiac cruising is an alternative activity to protect the seals and visitors alike.

