

IAATO Operational Procedures for Viewing Seals¹

The SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Working Group has advised that there is a high risk that Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) will arrive in Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions during the 2023/24 – 2024/25 austral summers. Globally, the virus has caused mass mortality events in wild birds and seals. People working with or close to wildlife should assume HPAI will arrive and maintain the highest biosecurity possible. Report any unusual or high mortality events to IAATO following appropriate procedures via your expedition team.

IAATO's Operational Procedures for Viewing Seals provide an overview of best practice for viewing seals in a safe, environmentally responsible manner. They supplement but do not replace IAATO's species specific procedures.

General code of conduct for viewing seals on land and ice:

- Do not use vessels, small boats² or other means of transport in ways that disturb wildlife, whether on land, ice, at sea
 - Approach and depart from landing sites, colonies and individual animals slowly and carefully.
 - Coordinate with others in the area who are watching wildlife.
 - Keep noise to a minimum.
 - Do not make sudden movements.
- Monitor animal behaviour throughout any encounter for signs of disturbance (see 'Understanding seal behavior to help avoid disturbance' below);
- No matter the distance, avoid any behavioral response other than a briefly raised head, once only. An animal that raises its head more than once may be stressed by your presence. If this happens, move slowly away.
- Never surround a seal with people or small boats. Always leave them at least 180° of escape path.
- Always give animals the right of way.
- Never encourage interactions, touch wildlife or let it touch you. This can cause stress or injury, increase risk of disease transmission and lead to an aggressive response from the animal
- Always follow appropriate biosecurity procedure for clothing, footwear and equipment.
- Never feed wildlife.



¹ Be aware that IAATO wildlife watching and other Operational Procedures do not replace any domestic governmental laws. Some nations have guidelines or regulations stricter than IAATO's which may override IAATO procedures. Violation of national regulations may be punishable by fines, imprisonment and, in extreme cases, seizure of vessel

² For the purposes of this document, 'small boats' are defined as zodiac-style Inflatable boats, such as rigid or semi-rigid hull Inflatable boats or any similar small landing craft used for shore interaction.

Understanding seal behavior to help avoid disturbance

Seals hauled out on land, rock or ice, are sensitive to boats and human presence. Noises, smells and sights may elicit a reaction.

Be aware of seal behavior that indicates a seal has been disturbed: Such behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- An increase in alert or vigilance, head turning or neck lengthening;
- Change in posture from lying to erect;
- Swiveling of body to face a perceived threat from people, vessels or vehicles;
- Individuals or herds hurriedly moving away from approaching vessels, vehicles or people (e.g. hurried entry into water)
- Open mouth/yawning displays (e.g., in leopard seals on ice, or elephant seals on land), and/or
- Aggressive displays or bluff charges in your direction.

When in doubt, carefully increase your distance.

Viewing and approaching seals on shore

- During the height of the breeding season, it may not be possible to land due to the sheer number of seals and their forceful defense of territories.
 - Small boat cruising is an alternative activity that will protect both seals and visitors and provide a memorable wildlife watching experience.
 - Be aware of wildlife in the water, especially near colonies and breeding areas. Avoid blocking areas where wildlife is entering or exiting waters.
 - Slow down and/or alter course to avoid collisions.
- When viewing seals do not surround or separate them, especially harems, and mothers and pups.
 - A harem is a group of females (with or without pups) controlled by a dominant male
 - Pups are often left alone when the mother is feeding. They are not abandoned and should be left alone and not touched.
 - Stay on the side where they can see you.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea, walk 'above' them.
- Try not to tower over hauled out seals or break their horizon.
- Try to keep guest activity managed to minimize the risk of surprise encounters.
- When on breeding beaches, walk with a buddy to minimize the risk of surprise encounters for both visitors and seals. Take photographs in turn so one of your buddy pair is always on look out.
- Be aware of animals in tussock grass areas. Ideally, a field guide should lead, carrying walking stick or equivalent.
- Individuals, especially juveniles such as elephant seal weaners, may be interested in equipment on shore (e.g. shore stranding equipment or portable boundary markers). Keep equipment as far away as practically possible and be prepared to move it if seals approach. Do not try to scare animals away or touch them. Move equipment away carefully when safe to do so.





Recommended approach distances for viewing seals on land or ice:

- **Minimum distance from seals on land or ice is at least 5 meters/15 feet³.** This is assuming animals are showing no signs of disturbance from your presence. Be aware that your permit/authorization may require a greater distance to be kept.
- Recommended approach distances for species and/or life stages are summarized in Table 1. Stay vigilant for signs of disturbance (see above). Every situation is different and may require greater distances to be kept.
- Never disturb wildlife or plants to get better pictures. Don't use flash photography in any circumstance. Maintain the recommended distances between you and the animals.
- Don't use 'selfie sticks' or other equipment to get closer.

Table 1 – Recommended minimum approach distances

Species and/or life stage	Minimum Distance (m/ft)	Be aware:
Jousting bull elephant seals on land	25m/75 feet	
Fur seals and sea lions on land	15m/45 feet	Highly mobile on land and faster than humans over loose/slippery terrain. May charge (and potentially bite) if approached too closely.
Leopard seals on land/ice/water	5-15m/15-45ft	Highly mobile and naturally curious. May bite water craft.
Leopard seal mothers and pups	25m /75ft	
Juveniles, including pups and elephant seal 'weaners'	5m/15ft	Naturally curious, they may approach people. Avoid contact. Maintain a 5m distance, retreating slowly and carefully.

³ General Guidelines for Visitors to the Antarctic, Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting Resolution 4 (2021), Annex 1