

IAATO Seal Watching Guidelines



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

- When viewing seals do not surround or separate them, especially mothers and pups. Stay on the side where they can see you.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea, walk 'above' them.
- Suggested minimum distance from seals ashore is at least 5 meters/15 feet;
- Some species, or behaviors, require a further distance to be kept:
- Keep at least 25 meters/75 feet from jousting bull elephant seals.
- Fur seals and sea lions are highly mobile on land and may charge (and potentially bite) if approached too closely. Keep at least 15 meters/45 feet from them.
- On beaches where there are concentrations of breeding seals, it is recommended to remain on your feet for wildlife observations.

Understanding seal behavior

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,
- Change in posture from lying to erect,
- Hurriedly moving away from approaching vessels, vehicles or people;
- Open mouth threat displays (e.g., in leopard seals on ice, or elephant seals on land), and/or
- Aggressive displays or bluff charges in your direction.

Viewing seals on land and ice

- Try not to break their horizon or tower over hauled-out seals – stay low. Pups are often left alone when the mother is feeding. They are not abandoned and should be left alone and not touched.
- Any seal response other than a raised head should be avoided.
- If an individual or a 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. Ideally, a field guide should lead, carrying walking stick or equivalent.
- Elephant seals, especially the pups (weaners) are often very inquisitive and may approach. It is important to be cautious and alert when near them and to avoid contact:
 - Make every effort to keep a minimum distance of at least 5 meters/15 feet;
 - Be aware that seals can be interested in equipment. Minimize interactions where possible;
 - If an individual or group moves towards you retreat slowly;
 - Do not initiate interactions;
 - Do not touch weaners.

