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Harp seal draws onlookers at Poquetanuck Cove

BY [Claire Bessette](#) STAFF WRITER

A crowd gathered at Poquetanuck Cove March 5 and 6 for an exciting wildlife experience, as a gray and white harp seal sunned itself on the ice and gazed back at curious onlookers who snapped photographs and set up spotting scopes usually reserved for rare bird sightings.

"We were delighted, because Poquetanuck Cove is such a fertile estuary," said Anne Roberts-Pierson, president of the Avalonia Land Trust, which has been leading an effort to restore the cove in recent years. "In the winter we focus on the bald eagles. We participated in the state bald eagle count. Four years in a row, we documented eagle sightings. But we hadn't seen any seals."

Residents near the cove called Roberts-Pierson and other neighbors and Avalonia members. They gathered at the end of Johnnie Court on the Ledyard side of the cove. Others watched from Route 2A on the northern Preston shore. Donald Blake, an amateur photographer from Quaker Hill, said he was out on Saturday trying out a new high-powered lens his wife had given him recently. The lens proved its worth, as Blake was able to zoom-in on the seal, which lifted its head to oblige. Blake said he returned to the cove Sunday morning, but as he lifted his camera, the seal slammed its head on the ice, breaking through and dove down.

"It was amazing," Blake said. "So many kids got to see him."

Actually, Skip Gras, the Mystic Aquarium's marine mammal stranding assistant said, no one could tell if the seal was male or female. Several people called the aquarium out of concern that the seal might be sick or lost.

Harp seals are spotted frequently from January through March in southeastern Connecticut waters - harbor seals visit during the summer. But this is an unusual year for harp seals, Gras said. Normally, the region sees juvenile seals, which face competition for food in the northern range of the species and venture farther south for easier hunting.

But this year, most of the harp seal sightings are adults. The aquarium checked on 10 harp seal sightings in the past two weeks throughout Connecticut and Rhode Island, and nine of them were adult seals. This winter, all but six of the 19 sightings have been adults, a "dramatic shift," Gras said.

A harp seal sighted in Norwich Harbor this winter was a juvenile, he said.

While the Poquetanuck Cove seal appeared healthy and not in distress, Gras said people should continue to report all seal sightings to the aquarium to allow the aquarium's network of 200 trained stranding volunteers check them out and record their locations.

"Usually, they're just hauled out enjoying the sun," Gras said.

It's difficult for anyone to tell whether a harp seal is acting "normal," because the animals normally don't come in close contact with people, and aren't sure how to react. The seals' normal predator is a polar bear, and humans look nothing like

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To report marine mammal sightings, call the Mystic Aquarium's wildlife hotline at (860) 572-5955, ext. 107. The phone is staffed 24 hours a day with the aquarium's two stranding staff members and the 200 trained stranding response volunteers.

that.

Roberts-Pierson did become concerned about potential predators that weekend. No hunting is allowed along the cove on preserved natural lands - some owned by the state Department of Environmental Protection, some by the Nature Conservancy and a small piece by the Avalonia Land Trust. Roberts-Pierson said many people think that applies only to duck hunting.

Seals are protected by the National Fish and Wildlife Service. Gras said federal law prohibits people from approaching within 100 feet of a seal in the wild.

There is public access to the cove in various spots. The Nature Conservancy owns 284 acres with a loop trail off Avery Hill Road in Ledyard. The DEP has 35 acres on the Preston side off Route 2A that is popular with fishermen.

Roberts-Pierson said any wildlife sighting along the cove helps the Avalonia Land Trust prove the point that it's worth the effort to restore the cove. The trust is working with the DEP to eradicate invasive phragmites to allow natural plant life to thrive. The land trust will hold a public workshop on the effort in the coming months.

"Sometimes it's hard show people the importance of preservation if they can't see the wildlife," she said.

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