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Seals frolic in North Cove

By Josh Rogers

It was a typical weekend in Battery Park City with many mammals visiting the neighborhood and enjoying the Hudson River, but instead of walking, two of them swam in and stayed in the water — delighting the two-legged creatures watching from the land.

Two seals splashed around in North Cove Marina for over an hour on Saturday, and perhaps they were the same ones who returned to the cherished spot Sunday.

More and more seals are being spotted in New York Harbor and a cleaner Hudson River, but the B.P.C. frolic was unusual for two reasons: the seals got so close to humans for such a long time in the Hudson River, and the seals were in all likelihood not the somewhat more common harbor seals, but appeared to be rarer harp seals.

“That’s a great sighting,” said Dave Taft, district ranger for the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Taft was most impressed that it looked to be harps, but he acknowledged that seeing any seal so close near the Hudson was unusual. Different people knowledgeable about marine harbor life interviewed for this article split between what was most noteworthy about the event. Visitors to North Cove Saturday who were either there for a free model boat program or were just passing by, watched with wonder.

“The seals seemed really interested in being observed,” said Ted Wallace, a certified sailing captain who saw them Saturday and Sunday. “They would come up close and look at people and they would roll over and dive into the water.”

Wallace, a member of the Manhattan Sailing Club, was running the club’s new Laser boat race program in which visitors can power remote control model boats for free. He said he has been noticing seals more and more on the rocks near the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge while sailing, but he had not seen them in the marina before last weekend.



Downtown Express photos by Robert Stolarik
Above, this seal is undoubtedly a more rare harp seal, according to a marine rescuer with the Riverhead Foundation. The other seal who swam in the icier part of the water is also likely to be a harp.



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[John W. Sutter, president](#)

WEBMASTER:
arturo@communitymediallc.com

Phone: 212.229.1890 | Fax: 212.229.2
Email: josh@downtownexpress.com

Taft said it is hard to tell if harp seals are happy, but it is easy to understand why many people think they are. "They look like they're smiling — they look like a puppy," he said.

He and others describe the seals as curious in the right situation.

"In their own element, they tend to be very curious and will approach vessels and surfers," said Kim Durham, who directs the Riverhead Foundation's marine rescue program. She said seal sightings are way up on the ocean shores and beaches of Long Island but long Hudson River looks are much less common. She encourages people who see seals to call the foundation's hotline, 631-369-9829, so that her group can collect more information about seal activity and have a history if a particular seal is hurt.



Durham, who looked at Downtown Express photos of the seals, said they were probably between 12 and 16 months old and the one who stayed further away from the crowd was definitely a harp seal. The friendlier one who swam near the ice also looked to be a harp, but Durham could not be certain without seeing more of his or her body. She could not tell the sex of either seal. Harps typically grow to be about 6 feet tall and 300 pounds and the B.P.C. visitors were only a few feet long.

So what drew the seals to B.P.C. and are they likely to return? At least two theories emerged from neighborhood people who had heard about it.

Wallace says the water is warmer in the marina and noticed the seals stayed in the warmest part of the

cove, the southeast section near a PATH commuter train tunnel to the World Trade Center stop nearby. He thinks the warmth was what attracted them and they may return a lot before the big sailing boats come back to the harbor in the spring.

Michael Fortenbaugh, the sailing club's commodore, who recently started running the marina as well, said the seal sightings were a "miracle" and "a sure sign that someone is smiling on North Cove." He suggested the seals were drawn to see the model boats on the first day of the program and perhaps because they heard the news that yachting champion Dennis Conner is one of Fortenbaugh's new partners running the marina. Marine analysts of course did not touch the second half of the theory but they did think there maybe something to the first.

John Waldman, a Queens College biology professor who authored a book about Hudson River marine life, said seals often "haul out" or come out of the water onto ice so he doesn't think warmth brought them to B.P.C. "They may have sensed these boats and were curious to see them," said Waldman.

Regardless of whether he was right or not, the seals were a happy weekend surprise for Wallace: "Life is coming back in the Hudson."

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