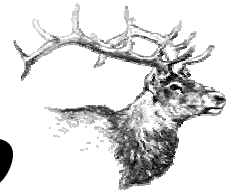


WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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Spring Has Sprung

More clear evidence that spring has arrived: the harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*) are pupping in Bolinas Lagoon. What else is there to say but about harbor seal pups but aawwww! You can easily watch dozens of freshly minted seal pups interacting with their moms right from Highway 1 - just pull out along the east side of the lagoon at mile marker 14.35.

The mother seals stay close and lavish attention on their little blubber balls, feeding, grooming and nuzzling the pups constantly. The moms only leave the newborns to go out to feed. The pups will bulk up for next six weeks on a diet of rich milk, and will gain 20 to 50 pounds.

About 50-100 seals regularly haul out in the lagoon at low tide to rest and replenish their depleted oxygen supply and also to warm up in the sun - they must periodically leave the cold water to maintain their body temperature.

When viewing the seals, please stay back 100 feet and do not disturb them. Hauled out seals are extremely vulnerable to disturbance by people, dogs and boats. If seals are flushed from their haul-out site, it cuts into their time to warm up, rest, and nurture young. Harbor seals have also permanently abandoned a haul-out site in San Francisco Bay due to constant human disturbance. Sealwatch (www.sealwatch.org) keeps track of seal haul-out sites and recruits volunteers to monitor disturbances.

Remember - if you come across a seal pup alone on a beach it is most likely not abandoned - the mother is probably in the water nearby feeding. Do not touch, move or otherwise disturb the pup, since it is extremely difficult to reunite a mother and pup after the pup has been moved, and practically impossible to raise a pup in captivity.

If you do find an injured seal or other marine mammal, the Marine Mammal Center (www.tmmc.org) will come rescue it. Call their 24-hour rescue hotline at (415) 289-SEAL. You can volunteer with the Center to help care for and rehab marine mammals. The Center just held their 24th annual *Run for the Seals* last weekend at Rodeo Beach.

There are quite a few harbor seal haul-outs and/or pupping areas in Point Reyes: Double Point, Wildcat Beach, Drakes Estero, Limantour Spit and Tomales Point. Drakes Estero and the mouth to Drakes Estero are closed to boating, canoeing and kayaking during the seal breeding season (March 15 to June 30) and Double Point beach is closed to all visitor access, but you can view the seals there through binoculars from the cliffs above.

To get up-close and personal with harbor seals, take a kayak out in Tomales Bay and the odds are good that you will be followed by numerous curious seals, especially if your boat is leaking fish or squid. You can rent kayaks from Blue Waters Kayak (www.bwkayak.com) in Inverness or Marshall.

For a vehicular pinniped sighting, if you are driving west-bound on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, look down on the left side of the bridge three-quarters of a mile west of the toll plaza, and you can see up to 50 harbor seals hauled out below on Castro Rocks at low tide. This is the second largest harbor seal rookery in San Francisco Bay.

The good news for seal viewers and great white sharks alike is that there has been a steady increase in the harbor seal population recently along the coast, especially in Marin County. There are upwards of 40,000 seals in California.

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at Box 111, Bolinas.