

Influx of sea lions just a start

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Sea lions are out in force around Crescent City and soon baby seals will be joining them.

Karen Helms with the Northcoast Marine Mammal Center said there has been an increase in sea lions near the Crescent City Harbor, but even the large numbers aren't that unusual.

"We have sea lions up in the harbor almost year-round," she said. "There are a couple time a year when we have a big herring run and they are literally up and down the sidewalk, spilling into the parking lot."

The California sea lions, virtually all male, can be seen most days resting on floating docks near the Chartroom Restaurant. Over the last few weeks, as the numbers have grown, they have been seen on the pier near the restaurant, giving people a chance to get a close-up look.

Helms said herring spawn in the marina, which attracts hungry sea lions. She said if you see one sea lion, you will almost always see others.

"They are definitely pack animals," she said. "When one goes out to feed, they all go out to feed. So sometimes you may not see any of them."

While the sea lions, some that weigh up to 600 pounds, are out in big numbers, Helms said her biggest concern is baby seals that will soon start showing up on beaches around Crescent City. Helms said she expects the seal pups to be born any day now, and when they do, she has a message for local residents – leave them alone. Helms said the baby seals are cute and often alone, but rarely is there a reason to be concerned.

“They’re born on the beaches,” she said. “They typically don’t swim immediately. We’ve had moms that have left pups for up to 24 hours.”

She explained the mother seals have to go feed to care for themselves, so they leave the babies on the beach. When they return, they are ready to feed the babies and continue the life cycle. That’s if the babies are left alone.

“If mom comes back and sees people or dogs, they may orphan it,” Helms said. “It’s best to leave them alone and call the professionals.”

That’s where the Northcoast Marine Mammal Center comes in. Helms said her organization gets between 600 and 1,000 calls each year about abandoned or injured mammals. They respond to about half and typically rescue between 40 and 120 animals a year.

The busy time is just beginning as baby seals are born. The goal with every animal is the same, rehabilitate and release. If the animals are unharmed, almost all can be returned to the ocean fairly quickly. But the key is to stay away.

More importantly, watch your dogs, Helms said.

“A lot of the time, they are victims of dog attacks on the beaches,” Helms said. “It’s more common with people living near the ocean and letting their dogs run free.”

If you see a baby seal or injured marine mammal, the Northcoast Marine Mammal Center rescue line is available 24 hours a day by calling 701-951-4722.