



IAATO MARINE WILDLIFE WATCHING GUIDELINES PART 2

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GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR VIEWING WILDLIFE

Hauled Out Seals

Seals hauled out on land, rock or ice can be sensitive to boats and human presence. Noises, smells and sights may elicit a reaction. Be aware of behaviors that indicate a seal has been disturbed. Such behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- An increase in alertness or vigilance, including head turning;
- Change in posture from lying to erect;
- Hurriedly moving away from the approaching vessel;
- Open mouth threat displays (similar to yawning);
- Aggressive displays or bluff charges in your direction.

In essence, any seal response other than a raised head should be avoided.

General Guidelines for Viewing Hauled-Out Seals

- Hauled out seals should not be approached closer than 5-10 meters (15-30 feet)
- When viewing seals do not surround or separate them, especially mothers and pups. Stay to one side where they can see you.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea; walk 'above' them, trying not to break their horizon, or tower over them – stay low and quiet.
- Pups are often left alone when the mother is feeding. They are not abandoned and should be left alone and not touched.
- Keep commentary, conversation and engine noise to a minimum and be aware of your radio volume.
- 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 that fur seals and sea lions are highly mobile on land and might charge (and potentially bite) you if approached too closely.
- Be alert to animals hidden in tussock grass areas. Ideally, staff member should lead any tussock walks, carrying a walking stick or equivalent.

Watching Seabirds

Vessel & Zodiac operations near birds:

Sometimes spectacular concentrations of seabirds may be found out at sea – rafts of birds either feeding on the surface, diving, or simply resting and bathing. Many of these birds may have flown hundreds or thousands of miles, often to find food for their young.

- Be aware of birds in the water, slow down and/or alter course to avoid collision.
- Stay on the fringes of these concentrations. Ships should stay 100 meters (300 feet) and small boats or Zodiacs 30 meters (100 feet) away.
- Birds such as penguins may be subject to disturbance by Zodiac operations close to landing sites or colonies.
- Approach or depart a landing site or colony slowly to minimize any disturbance.
- Avoid boat operations in waters close to where birds enter and exit, are bathing, or are feeding close to colonies.
- Staff/crew should assess the best landing point – ideally as far from the birds as possible. This is particularly important if birds are moulting near the shore.
- There may be occasions when swimming penguins find themselves in a Zodiac when they 'porpoise'. Occupants should remain quiet and wait for the penguin to find its own way out. It is normally not necessary to assist.
- Under no circumstances should 'chumming' (depositing fish guts or oil) or feeding of birds occur.

Viewing birds ashore:

If parent birds are blocked from returning to their nests, increased predation of eggs and chicks by skuas and gulls may occur. In addition, parent birds will waste precious energy by avoiding human obstacles on their way to their nests.

- Walk slowly and encourage visitors to simply sit quietly and watch the animals.
- Avoid blocking 'walkways' in colonies, and water entry and exit points.
- Take care in tussock grass where birds may be nesting in burrows and walkways may be hidden by foliage.
- If skuas (jaegers) or terns start dive-bombing, they are protecting young or nests. Retreat in the direction you approached. Be aware that eggs and young are well camouflaged.

For the purposes of this information small boat is defined as a Zodiac, RIB, Naiad, Avon, Polarcirkle or similar small landing craft.

Recommended approach distances:

- In general, keep 5-10 meters (15 – 30 feet) from nesting seabirds.
- Keep 10 meters (30 feet) from nesting, and 25 meters (75 feet) from displaying albatross on South Georgia.
- When on the same level as, or walking above, nesting giant petrels stay 25-50 meters (75-150 feet) away, if possible.

Entanglement and Strandings

- Any animals entangled in fishing equipment etc., should be assisted where possible. Only use experienced staff/crew and take precautions – seal bites are particularly prone to disease.
- Photographs of the entanglement should be taken and a report sent to IAATO.
- Should you not be able to assist, please record details including geographic position (in latitude/ longitude), species, and type of entanglement. Please report the event as soon as possible, so assistance may be sought from others.
- Details of dead (floating) animals and 'strandings' (beached) cetaceans should be recorded and reported to IAATO. If possible include photographs of the front and side of the head of the animal (for species identification) with a scale of measurement (e.g., a ruler or Zodiac paddle). If the state of decomposition of the animal allows, please also take photographs of the fluke (tail) and the dorsal fin (if present).

Identification and Data Collection

Recording species, including their latitude and longitude, and any other information can be of immense value, especially if photographs are included. Please send copies to IAATO at iaato@iaato.org.

Helpful Hints!

- Reduce pollution from engines – in all close wildlife encounters, please ensure you are using 'clean running' engines, especially on small boats or Zodiacs.
- Polarizing sunglasses can considerably enhance viewing of submerged/partially submerged marine animals and birds.
- Encourage the use of binoculars for viewing marine mammals and seabirds.

Recommended Field Guides

Whales, Dolphins and Other Marine Mammals of the World by Shirihai and Jarrett 2006
Birds of Chile, Antarctica and Southern Argentina by Jaramillo, Burke and Beadle 2003
A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife by Shirihai and Jarrett 2002
National Audubon Guide to Marine Mammals of the World by Folkiens et al. 2002
Seabirds: A Photographic Guide by Peter Harrison, 1987



These Guidelines are endorsed by the Sea Mammal Research Unit, Getty Marine Laboratory, University of St. Andrews.

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