

IAATO Seal Watching Guidelines



General code of conduct for viewing seals on land and ice:

- When viewing seals do not surround or separate them, especially mothers and pups. Stay on the side where they can see you.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea, walk 'above' them.
- Suggested minimum distances from seals ashore are at least 5-15 meters/15-45 feet – some species, or behaviors, require a further distance to be kept (see below).

Understanding seal behavior

Seals hauled out on land, rock or ice, are sensitive to boats and human presence. Noises, smells and sights may elicit a reaction.

Be aware of seal behavior that indicates a seal has been disturbed. Such behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- An increase in alert or vigilance, Head turning,
- Change in posture from lying to erect,
- Hurriedly moving away from the approaching vessel,
- Open mouth threat displays (e.g., in leopard seals on ice, or elephant seals on land), and/or
- Aggressive displays or bluff charges in your direction.

Viewing seals on land and ice

- Try not to break their horizon or tower over hauled-out seals – stay low. Pups are often left alone when the mother is feeding. They are not abandoned and should be left alone and not touched.
- Any seal response other than a raised head should be avoided.
- 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) if approached too closely - keep at least 15 meters/45 feet from them.
- Be aware of animals in tussock grass areas. Ideally, a field guide should lead, carrying walking stick or equivalent.
- Keep a minimum distance from jousting bull elephant seals of 25 meters/75 feet.
- Elephant seal pups (weaners) are often very inquisitive and may approach close to passengers. It is important that the weaner is in control of any interaction at all times.

