

Hawaiian Monk Seal Facts

The Most Endangered Endemic Marine Mammal in the America

'Ilio-holo-i-ka-uaua (*ee-lee-o holo ee ka ooa-ooa*) meaning 'the dog that runs in rough waters'



The endemic Hawaiian monk seal has thrived for the past 13 million years, virtually unchanged, in the oceanic waters and coral reefs and atolls of the Hawaiian Islands. They have been around much longer than even some of the islands themselves, the Big Island of Hawaii being less than 1 million years old. Hawaiian monk seals are only found in the Hawaiian Islands, and are a very important piece of Hawaii's natural and cultural history. They are the only tropical seal in the world, and the only marine mammal found entirely within US waters.

Today, the Hawaiian monk seal is critically endangered and headed toward extinction. Hawaiian monk seals are the most endangered mammal in Hawaii, the most endangered marine mammal that occurs solely within the United States, and one of the most endangered mammals in the world.

Over the past 50 years, the Hawaiian monk seal population has fallen more than 60%.

Approximately 1100 Hawaiian monk seals remain in the wild. Compared to other endangered species, there are fewer Hawaiian monk seals in the wild than there are giant pandas. Tragically, the Hawaiian monk seal is perhaps the last hope for monk seals on the planet, as the Caribbean monk seal went extinct in the 1950's and the Mediterranean monk seals population has fallen to about 600 individuals.

Quick Facts:

Scientific Name: *Monachus schauinslandi*

Hawaiian name: 'Ilio-holo-i-ka-uaua

Status: Critically endangered

Population: Approximately 1100

Class: Mammals - Pinnipeds

Range: Hawaiian Islands

Size: Up to 7ft and 400 pounds

Lifespan: 25-30 years

Diet: Fish and invertebrates



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Hawaiian Monk Seal Habitat & Social Behavior

Where They Live

Most Hawaiian monk seals can be found around the Northwest Hawaiian Islands in the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, but seals are also found on the main Hawaiian Islands. The population in the NWHI is falling rapidly due factors including decades of overfishing, habitat loss, predation, and entanglement in marine debris. In contrast to the rapidly declining monk seal populations in the NWHI, the few seals on the main islands are doing well. A small, but growing number, perhaps 100-150, now live in the main Hawaiian Islands.

How They Behave

Monk seals get their name both from the soft folds of fur around their neck that resemble a monk's cowl and for being solitary creatures, like monks. They are unusual for seals in that they do not live in large groups. Monk seals generally stay well away from other seals and humans, and can become aggressive when they get too close or feel threatened. Monk seals, especially pregnant or nursing mothers, appear to be greatly agitated when they are disturbed by humans, so much so that they may abandon their pups. So if you see a Hawaiian monk seal, remember to keep your distance.

How They Feed

Hawaiian monk seals spend the vast majority of their lives at sea, but do come to shore to give birth, molt, and to find shelter in large storms. They feed on the coral reefs and sandy bottoms of the waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands. Hawaiian monk seals eat fish and invertebrates, including reef fish, flatfish, eels, octopus, and lobsters. Monk seals dive deep for their food, often to depths of 250-300ft, and sometimes deeper than 500ft, and dives can last for up to 20 minutes. They mature at 5-10 years of age and can live for 25-30 years, although many new seal pups fail to reach adulthood. New pups are dying quickly and there are few healthy juvenile seals ready to take the place of the aging breeding adults.



Image: John Johnson

How They Nurture

Monk seal mothers invest a great deal in their young, coming ashore to give birth and nurse. They will remain with their young constantly for the first 5-6 weeks of their life and may lose hundreds of pounds. The process of rearing a pup is very challenging, and most females are not able to reproduce every year. Rearing a pup becomes even harder when less food and resources are available to the seals, as is the case today.

Save Our Seals

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