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Seal Watching in Chatham: A Guide to Cape Cod's Wild Grey Seal Colony

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



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Stand on the bluff at Chatham’s Lighthouse Beach and look out toward the sandbar, and you’ll see them: hundreds — sometimes thousands — of grey seals hauled out on the sand, barking, lolling, sliding into the surf. Chatham has become the center of one of the largest grey seal populations on the East Coast, and watching them is one of the genuinely wild experiences left on Cape Cod. But there’s more to it than “look, seals” — there’s a right way to see them, a season that matters, and one very large reason (with a dorsal fin) to respect the water here.

Here’s the local’s guide to seal watching in Chatham.

Why Chatham has so many seals

Grey seals were nearly wiped out in New England waters and have rebounded dramatically since federal protection under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Chatham’s geography — the shifting barrier beaches, the sandbars off Monomoy, the rich fishing grounds — makes it prime seal habitat. The result is a colony that can number in the thousands, visible from shore and from the water year-round, with the biggest concentrations around **Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge** and the Chatham break.

Where to see them

Spot	How to see them	Best for
Chatham Lighthouse Beach	From the bluff/beach, often visible on the far bar	Free, easy, from shore
Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge	By boat tour to the seal haul-outs	The big colony, up close
Chatham Fish Pier	Seals hang around waiting for scraps from the boats	Casual, fun, free
Boat tours from Stage Harbor / Chatham	Guided seal & Monomoy trips	The full experience

From shore: Lighthouse Beach and the Fish Pier are the easy, free options — bring binoculars. **By boat:** a guided Monomoy seal tour gets you out to the haul-outs where the numbers are staggering, with a naturalist to explain what you’re seeing.

When to go

Seals are here **year-round**, but the experience changes with the season. Summer and early fall bring the biggest, most accessible crowds of seals and the full slate of boat tours. Winter has fewer tours but plenty of seals — and a stark, beautiful, empty-beach setting. If you want a guaranteed boat trip and warm weather, aim for **June through September**.

The Shark Smart part (read this)

Where there are this many seals, there are great white sharks — Cape Cod’s grey seal boom is directly tied to the well-documented rise in white shark activity off these beaches. This is not a reason to skip Chatham; it’s a reason to **be Shark Smart**:

- **Stay out of the water near seals.** Seals are shark prey; swimming among them is the single riskiest thing you can do here.
- **Heed the flags, signs, and Sharktivity alerts.** Cape beaches post shark information and closures for a reason.

- **Watch from the beach or a boat, not from the surf.** The best seal viewing is dry anyway.

Responsible viewing

Grey seals are federally protected. Keep your distance (the guideline is at least **150 feet**), never feed them, and keep dogs well back — a curious dog and a large seal is a bad combination for both. If you find a seal pup alone on the beach, don't touch it; mothers leave pups temporarily, and well-meaning "rescues" do harm. Report a seal in distress to the local stranding network rather than intervening.

Don't miss: a Monomoy boat tour on a calm summer morning. Seeing the haul-out from the water — hundreds of seals at arm's length, the naturalist narrating the whole shark-and-seal ecosystem — is one of the most memorable wild experiences on Cape Cod.

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