

Scientists turn to drones to count growing seal colonies (Update)

February 5 2016, byPatrick Whittle



In this Jan. 7, 2016 photo released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a gray seal mother and pup lie on the beach of Muskeget Island at Nantucket, Mass. NOAA scientists are using a pair of drones as part of an effort to photograph the country's biggest seal breeding colony on the island. The pictures will help them find how many gray seals there are in Northeastern waters, said Kimberly Murray, coordinator of the seal research program at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center. (Kimberly Murray/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration via AP)

On a remote island off of Nantucket, scientists are using a tool most commonly associated with war and surveillance to get a look at fuzzy baby seals.

Researchers who want to get a handle on the growth of New England's gray seal population have been using drones as part of an effort to photograph the animals, which gather in huge numbers on remote islands.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration used a pair of unmanned aircraft on Muskeget Island off of Massachusetts to take pictures of seal pups in January. The island is the biggest gray seal breeding colony in the country.

The pictures will help scientists find how many gray seals there are in Northeastern waters, said Kimberly Murray, the coordinator of the seal research program at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center.

"We need to know how many seals there are before we can know what's going on, and how to manage them. Or, I should say, manage us," Murray said.

The population of gray seals, which can grow to more than 600 pounds as adults, has rebounded since the mid-20th century after being decimated by hunting. The growth of the seals has generated some complaints from charter fishing boat operators and beachgoers, creating a need for data about their population.



In this Jan. 7, 2016 photo released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, gray seals and their pups lie on the beach of Muskeget Island at Nantucket, Mass. NOAA scientists are using a pair of drones as part of an effort to photograph the country's biggest seal breeding colony on the island. The pictures will help them find how many gray seals there are in Northeastern waters, said Kimberly Murray, coordinator of the seal research program at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center. (Kimberly Murray/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration via AP)

The scientists used two drones on Muskeget—a six-wing aircraft that resembles a helicopter and another that looks somewhat like a foam bird. Two-person research teams launched them from dunes on the island, surrounded by seal pups. One researcher operated the drone via joystick while the other monitored a real-time video screen.

"One of the hardest parts was accessing the island," said Elizabeth Josephson, a data manager and drone pilot.

The research focused on the six-week gray seal pupping period, and the video/data will be used for ongoing studies and research for seals. It will be many months before the results are known.

The work with the drones was part of a larger effort to photograph seals that also took place elsewhere in Massachusetts and in Maine involving the use of manned aircraft.



In this Jan. 7, 2016 photo released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Jon Runstadler, left, and Kathryn Rose carry a gray seal pup to be weighed on Muskeget Island at Nantucket, Mass. NOAA scientists are using a pair of drones as part of an effort to photograph the biggest seal breeding colony in the country. The pictures will help them find how many gray seals there are in Northeastern waters, said Kimberly Murray, coordinator of the seal research program at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center. (Kimberly Murray/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration via AP)



In this Jan. 7, 2016 photo released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration made from a drone flying at 200 feet, gray seals and their pups lie on the beach of Muskeget Island at Nantucket, Mass. NOAA scientists are using a pair of drones as part of an effort to photograph the country's biggest seal breeding colony on the island. The pictures will help them find how many gray seals there are in Northeastern waters, said Kimberly Murray, coordinator of the seal research program at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center. (Jennifer Johnson/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration via AP)

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