

He harbors a love of seals



IN THE FIELD

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Science professor Artie Kopelman peered through a telescope set up on the bay side of Cupsogue Beach County Park in Westhampton Beach.

What had from a distance looked like logs scattered across a sandbar assumed more definitive shape: dozens of gray and tan harbor seals basking in the middle of Moriches Inlet.

"There are 72 hauled out and three in the water," Kopelman said quietly to a group of about 50 adults and children lined up against a fence at the western end of the park.

Bundled against the 24-degree chill on a January Saturday, the observers leaned in for a better look. Kids jostled for their turn at a second scope set up nearby.

Sharing a passion for seals

A professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan, Kopelman has been studying Long Island's seal population since 1995.

He shares his knowledge on walks like these, scheduled every week or so in the winter, which help subsidize the efforts of his group, the Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island.

Right now Kopelman is working on a special project — photographing individual Cupsogue seals for a catalog that identifies each one by its markings. He'll use it to track which seals return to the spot.

"At this point I can recognize about 18 of the seals that are here, and some have been here repeatedly now for five years," he said.

Kopelman swung the scope, scanning for familiar faces. "I know you," he said. "That big fat one? . . . It's got a marking on the right side of its head, right behind its ear, that looks like a hammer. So I call it Hammer-Head Right."

Kopelman reached into his camera bag and pulled out an absurdly long lens the length of an arm. He screwed it on to the camera and got down to business, snapping away like a pa-



Artie Kopelman of the Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island watches harbor seals last month on a sandbar across the bay at Cupsogue County Park in Westhampton Beach. Below, the view seen by Kopelman, who has been studying Long Island's seal population since 1995.

parazzo for pinnipeds — Latin for "wing" or "fin-footed," the group name for seals, walrus and other flippers marine mammals.

Harbor seals are by far the most common seals that frequent Long Island shores, although gray seals make the occasional appearance.

This particular group generally shows up at Cupsogue in December and stays through May, clambering up onto the sandbar at low tide. They head for cooler waters when boat traffic picks up in late spring, Kopelman said.

Numbers fluctuate from year to year, but Kopelman has charted a definite overall jump — from 20 or so in 2007 to as many as 123 hauled out on the sandbar at once last year.

Watching them socialize

Other local haulout sites include Jones Beach, Montauk and Plum and Gardiners' Islands on the East End.

"Pinnipeds are marine mam-



mals, but they also are tied to the land," Kopelman told the group as they shivered in the parking lot before the walk. "They'll come out of the water to rest and socialize."

Apparently impervious to the cold, Kopelman then delivered an extemporaneous lecture that touched on seal diets (fish and crustaceans), mating and gestation (about a year

for a single pup) and menaces (pesticides, harp seal hunts, fishing gear and garbage, which can entangle and choke the mammals).

He wrapped up with a warning to stay close and stay quiet, to minimize disturbance to the seals. Not endangered, seals are, like all marine mammals, protected under federal law.

Off the group marched west

about three-quarters of a mile down a dirt road. They talked in low voices, parkas swishing as boots crunched over icy ruts.

Kopelman led them up a hill and set up the scopes. One woman passed around binoculars. Others fiddled with the zoom feature on their cameras or whispered excitedly.

Close encounter, sort of

"Oh, look at those guys," said Michael Klein, 55, of Commack, who came out with his wife, Debbie, and a nature-loving nephew, Eric, 14.

The seals stared back, beady eyes assessing the potential threat from the interlopers 1,000 feet away. A few bolder seals dragged themselves into the inlet and swam closer, poking their heads up like periscopes.

Eventually, most settled down and resumed their repose, their sleek bodies curved like bananas, heads and rear flippers elevated off the sand.

Two girls hopped with delight next to the other scope.

"He's looking at me!" said Rhyse Muller, 9, of Shoreham. "You see it? Isn't it small!"

Small only at a distance. Adult male harbor seals can weigh up to 245 pounds and measure between 5.5 to 6.3 feet long, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Much of their bulk comes from a thick layer of blubber that, along with their fur, keeps them warm in icy waters.

Enthusiastic and undaunted

Lacking that layer, most humans observing the seals peeled off after half an hour. Kopelman's enthusiasm was undimmed.

Last winter, when he was on sabbatical, he visited this beach about 40 times to gather photographs for the catalog.

Eventually, he said, he wants to expand it to cover all the seal groups along the South Shore Estuary.

What does he find most interesting about seals?

"Pretty much everything," he said. "I'm always learning new stuff."

For more information about seal walk season, see cresli.org.

PHOTOS BY JOHN DUNN