

# National Park Service



## 2018 Elephant Seal Breeding Season Update February 16, 2018



### News This Week:

- Mating activity is prevalent at all colonies.
- Cow departures equals increase in weaned pups.
- Efforts to tag weaned pups are a top priority.

Coincidentally the height of mating occurs during Valentine's week in Point Reyes! Cows are leaving the beaches in droves, which occurs soon after mating. Weaned pups are left behind and will remain on the beaches for up to 12 weeks. The weaners will form pods, where they will learn together how to function in their environment. Researchers hope to tag upwards of 300 pups this season.

**Above:** Pup acting as a pillow for exhausted mom.

**Center:** A prime example of a fat weaned pup.

Photos by M. Cox. And S. Pickton  
NMFS Permit No. 17152-00

**Top:** Researcher tagging a weaned pup in its hind-flipper.

**Bottom:** Bull mating with cow, her pup in the foreground.

## Against the Odds



**Above:** On the periphery of the harem, three subordinate males wait for their chance to mate.

It's not easy being alpha male, but it's even harder for elephant seals to achieve that coveted status. Only 5% percent of males born survive to physical maturity, and less than 1% successfully mate in their lifetime. Not being alpha does not mean that a seal will never breed. Observable on Point Reyes beaches at this time of year are the efforts of subordinate males to get their chance at mating. Subordinate males will lurk on the periphery of the harem, and when the alpha is distracted by mating or fighting off other males, they will have their chance to make their move. Non-alphas will move quickly, albeit sneakily, into the harem. It's a risky game, as cows are less receptive to non-alpha males. Cows will often put up a noisy fight, attracting the attention of the previously preoccupied alpha, but it's a risk worth taking.

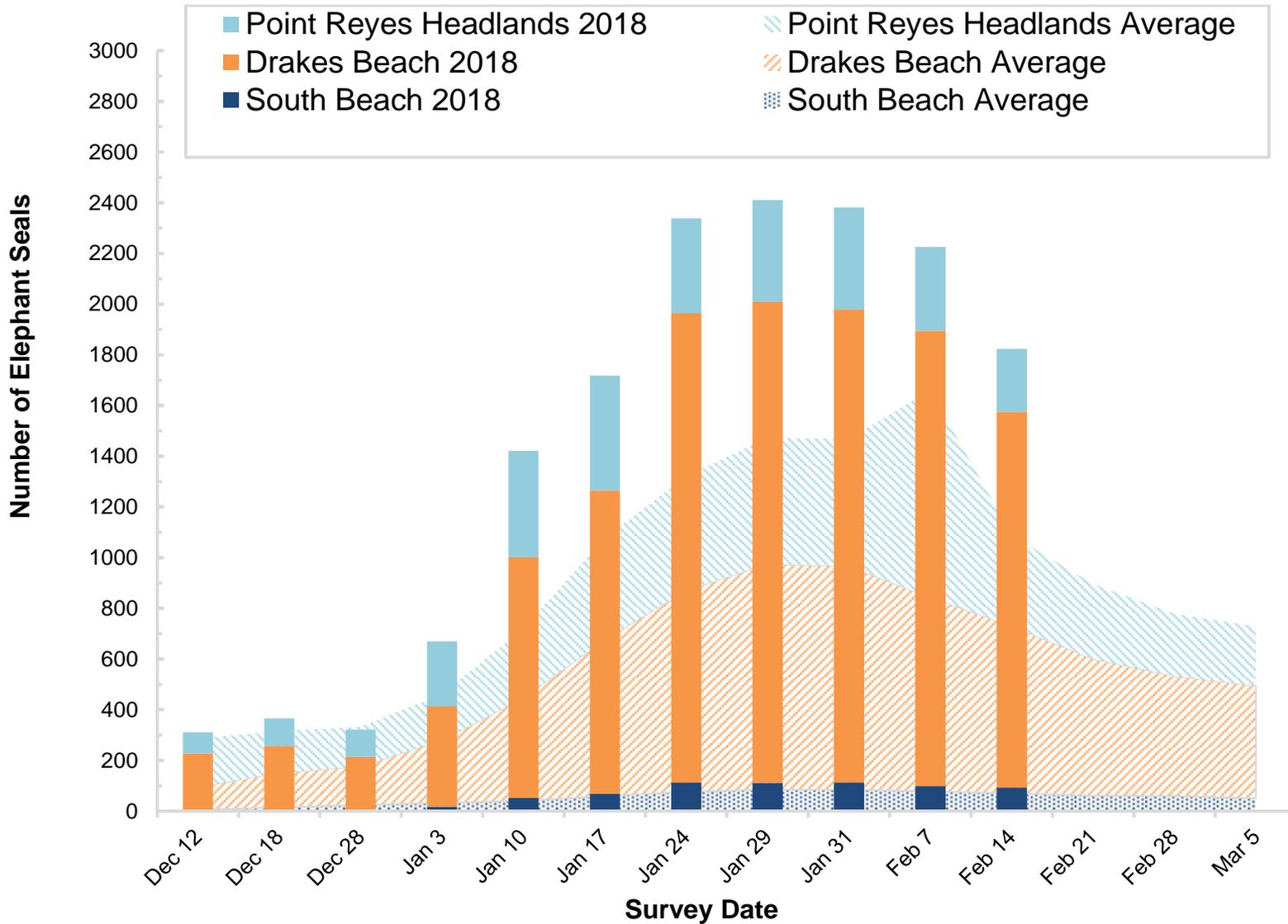
## Milking It



Gaining weight daily is the top priority of elephant seal pups. Elephant seal milk is about 34% fat, and in about 28 days pups can balloon from about 70 lbs. to 300 lbs! However, some pups can exceed 500 lbs. if they are wily enough to become “super weaners”. These extra chunky pups become milk thieves, stealing milk from cows after they have been weaned from their own mother. This is a dangerous strategy as cows are often aggressive to pups not their own. Super weaners are almost always male. The canine teeth of female pups erupt before weaning, but for males this can occur up to 4 weeks after weaning. The lack of teeth makes it easier for males to successfully thieve.

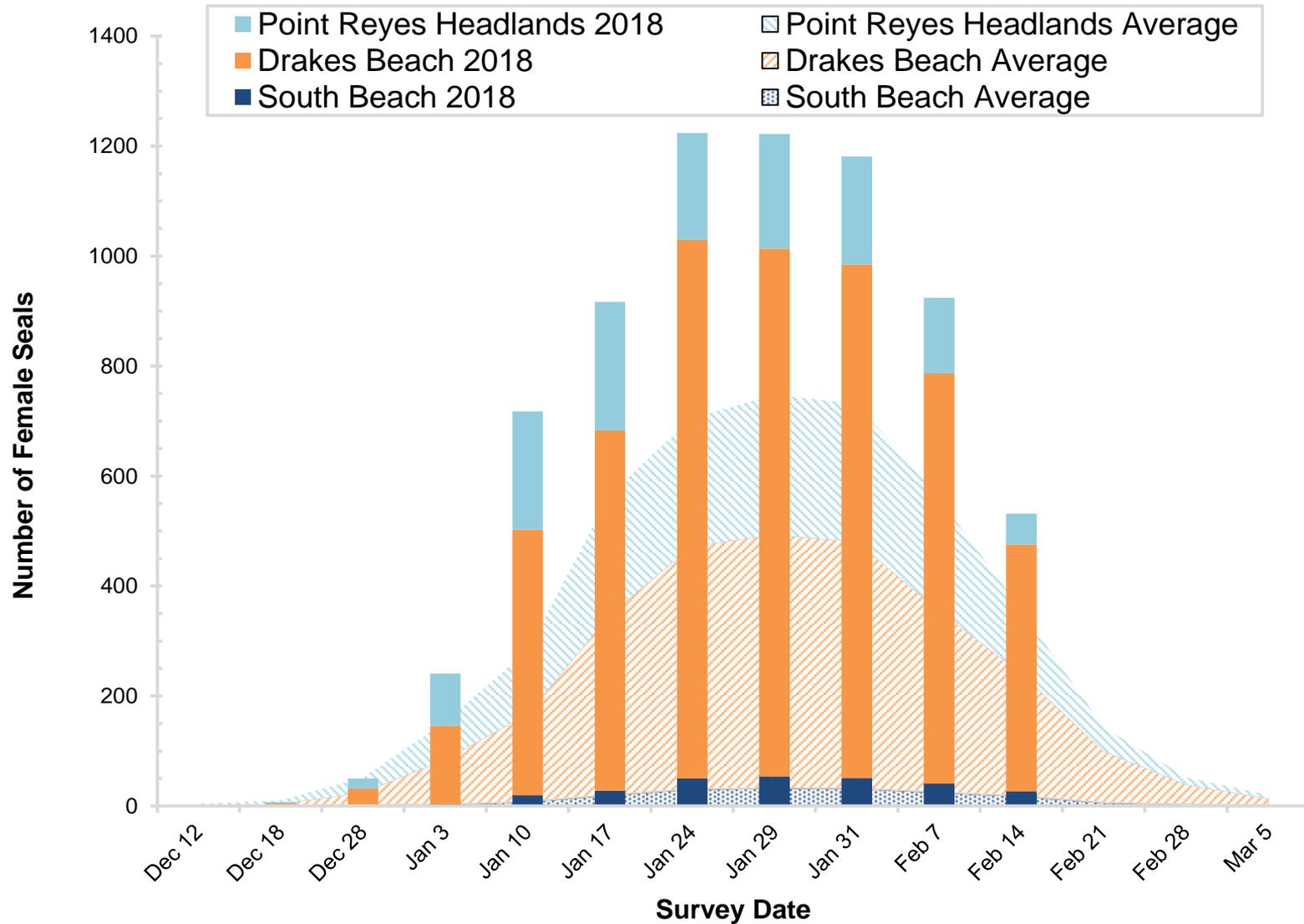
# Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

## Total 2018 Seal Count vs. 2005-2017 Total Seal Average



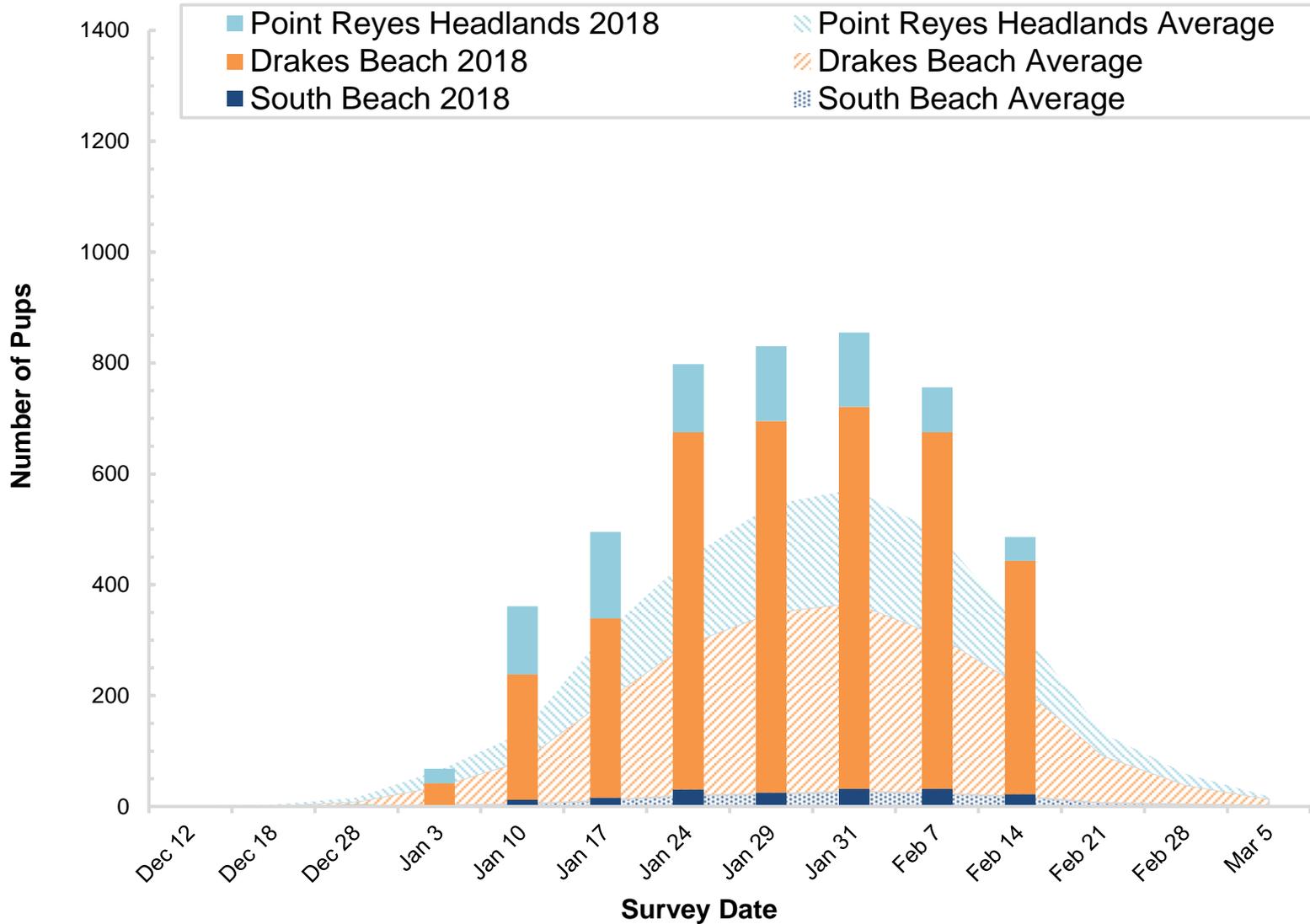
# Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

## Total 2018 Female Count vs. 2005-2017 Female Average



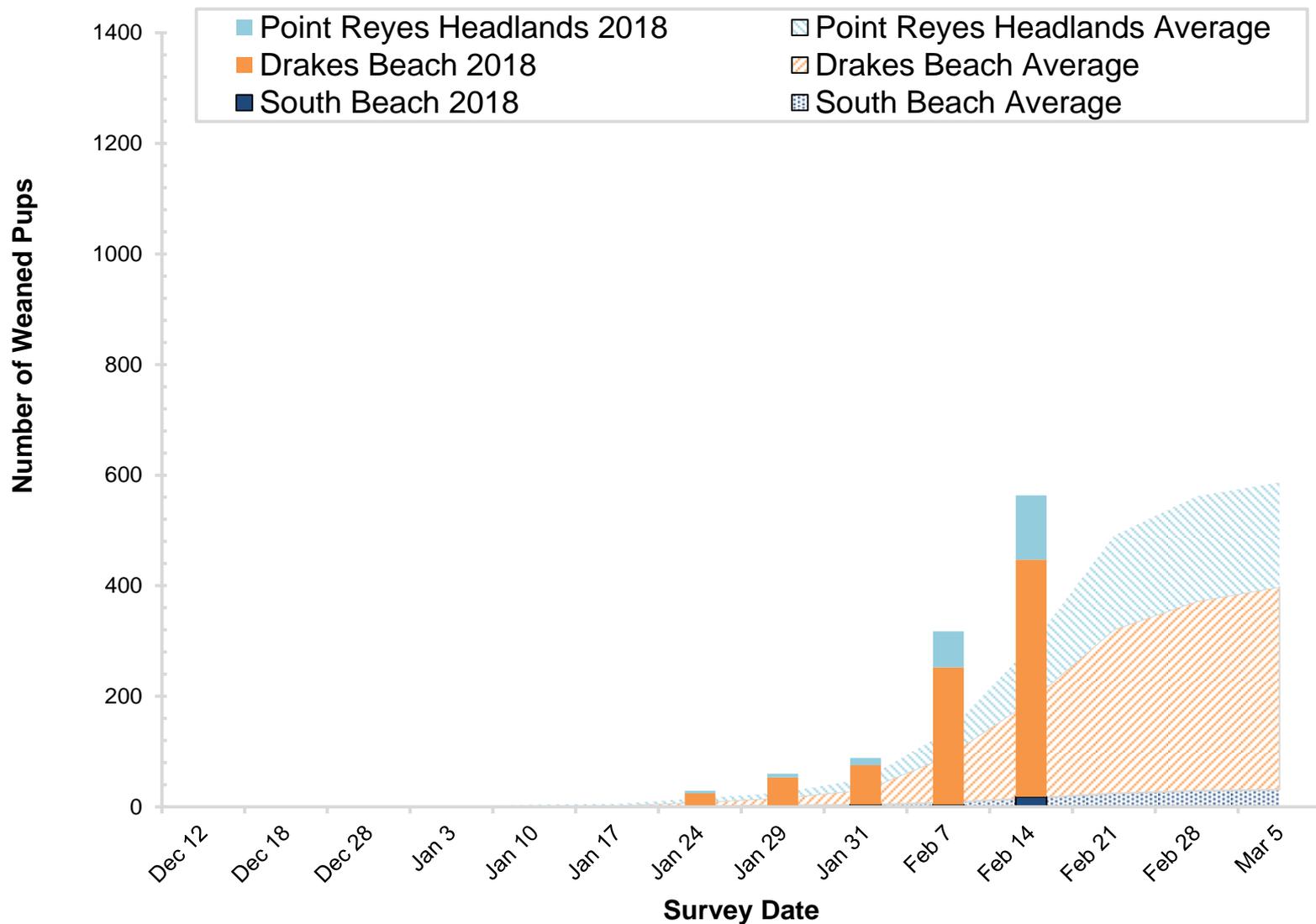
# Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

## Total 2018 Pup Count vs. 2005-2017 Pup Average



# Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

## Total 2018 Weaned Pup Count vs. 2005-2017 Weaned Pup Average



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