

National Park Service



2019 Elephant Seal Breeding Season Update February 22, 2019



News this week:

- Number of breeding females dramatically decreased this week.
- Weaned pups begin to congregate in “weaner pods”.
- Researchers continue tagging seals.
- Drakes Beach, parking lot, and access road remains closed. On weekends, from 9 am – 5 pm, the road will be open and visitors can access the parking lot and visitor center only.

Above: A weaner on a log amidst the visitor center harem.

Center: A molted weaner in a weaner pod.

Top Left: A harem with attending alpha male in a cove near chimney rock.

Bottom Left: Visitors enjoying the weekend show at Drakes beach.

Who You Callin' A Slug?

Elephant seals are adapted for an aquatic life, with limbs evolved into flippers. The hind flippers are not used when moving on land, while the fore-flippers are used to support and stabilize the body. Forward propulsion on land is created by spinal undulations, the more frequent the undulations the faster the speed. It is easy to assume that the mostly sedentary seals aren't a threat to people, but they are faster on land than they look. When pursuing a female, evading a more dominant seal, or looking to engage in a fight, male seals can have bursts of speed up to 5.7 mph. This is faster than most humans walk, so if you aren't paying attention and your back is to an animal they can easily overtake you. Always keep your distance, and never put yourself between two seals, especially when mating activity is frequent.



Above: The misleading repose of a very large bull, you would not want to get in this guy's way!



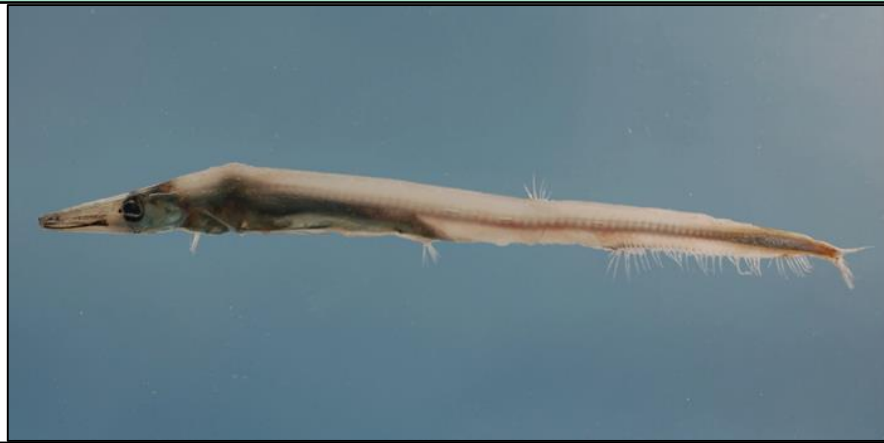
Cruise Control



Technology has done amazing things for elephant seal research, and one of those is an increasing knowledge of their behavior at sea. It is now known that when at sea, elephant seals spend about 90% of their time underwater, surfacing for only about 2 minutes between dives. They travel about 60-75 miles per day at about 2-3 mph. Keep in mind most of their swimming involves diving, and there is variation in dive behavior between males and females. Their top speed is about 10-15 mph. In comparison, a California sea lion can swim up to 25 mph and a great white shark up to 30 mph!

Above: An adult male elephant seal on the surface of a shallow tidal area.

Delicious Fish



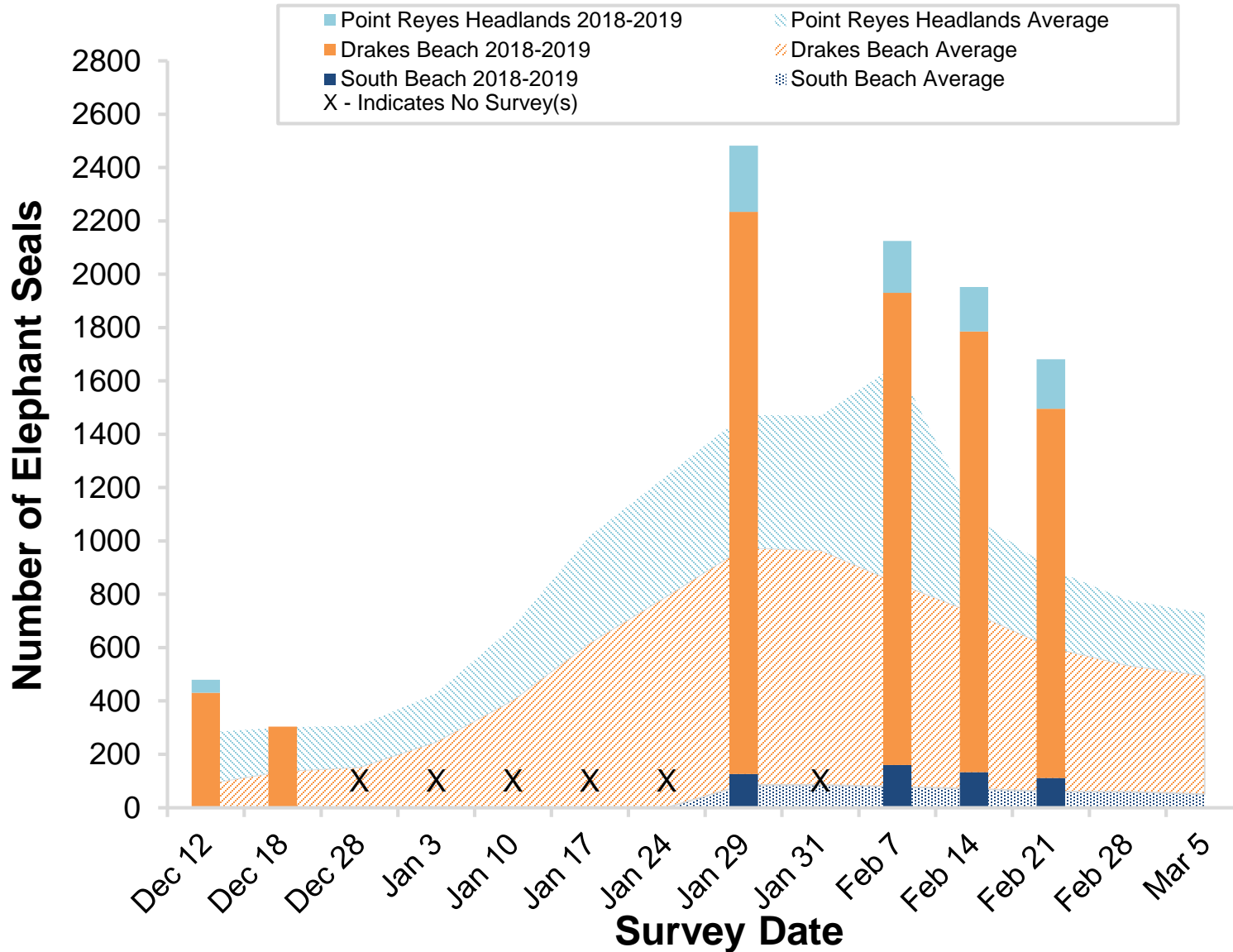
The adult female seals of Point Reyes are leaving for the open ocean, and will finally get to eat after nursing for about 1 month. Until recently, scientists had believed that the primary diet of northern elephant seals is squid. However, new research on satellite tagged females shows differing results. Previous studies showing squid as the primary prey have analyzed stomach contents of seals, the hard beaks of squid were more likely to survive in the stomach, thus the determination of squid preference. By sampling species in areas of known migration, and analyzing the fat of individual seals, these scientists were able to determine that female elephant seals are primarily feeding on meso and bathypelagic fishes, example of these intermediate and deep-water fishes are: lantern fish, barracudina, viperfish, and deep-sea smelts. While slow moving, “sit and wait” non-migratory squid are easier prey (and constitute about 1/3 of a seals diet), the fishes are much more energy rich and appear to be the preferred meal for female northern elephant seals. These fishy results also align with previous dietary studies of southern elephant seals!

Above Left: An example of a barracudina (not the same species in study)

Above Right: An example of a lantern fish (not the same species in study)

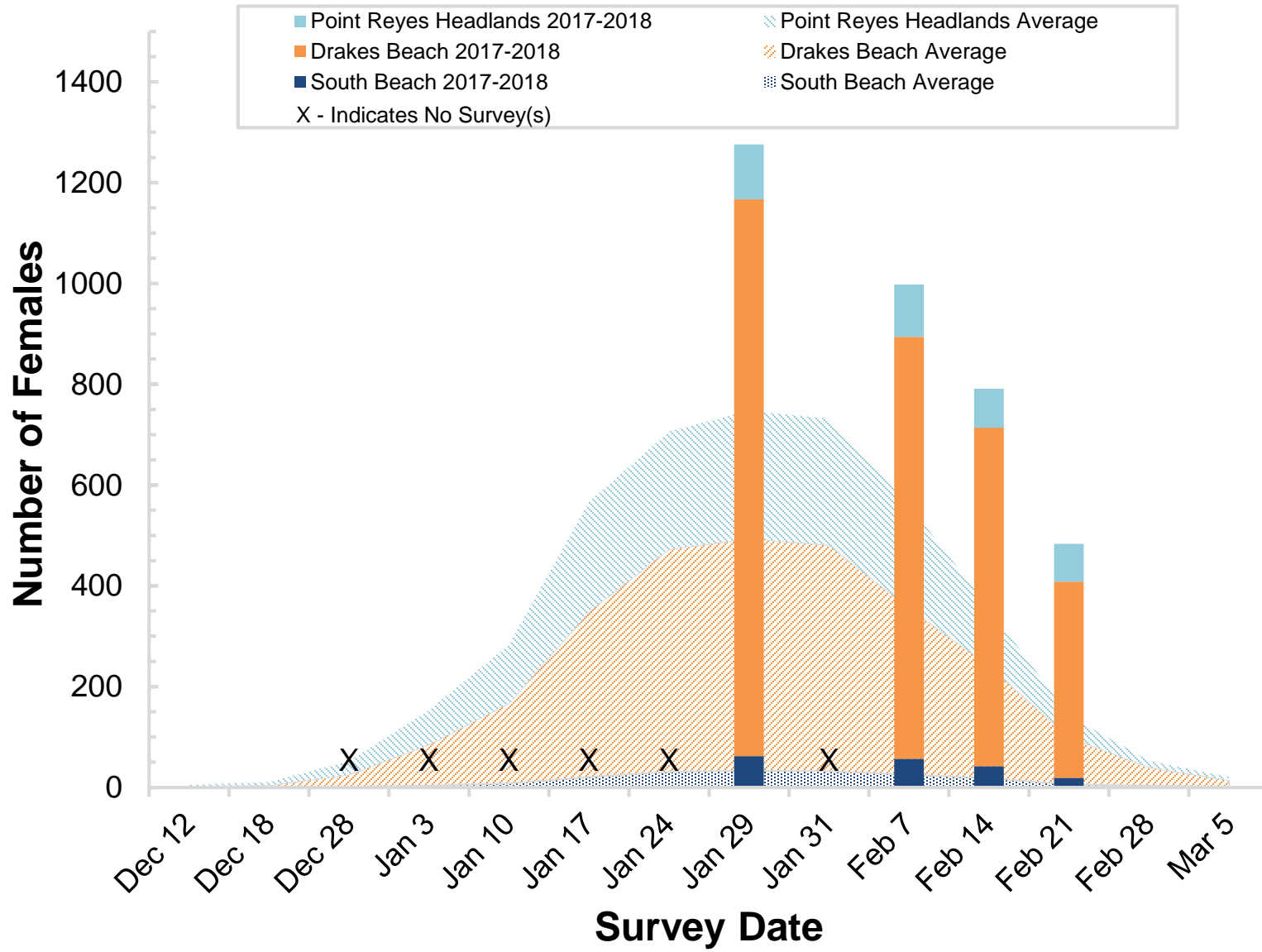
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2019 Seal Count vs. 2005-2017 Total Seal Average

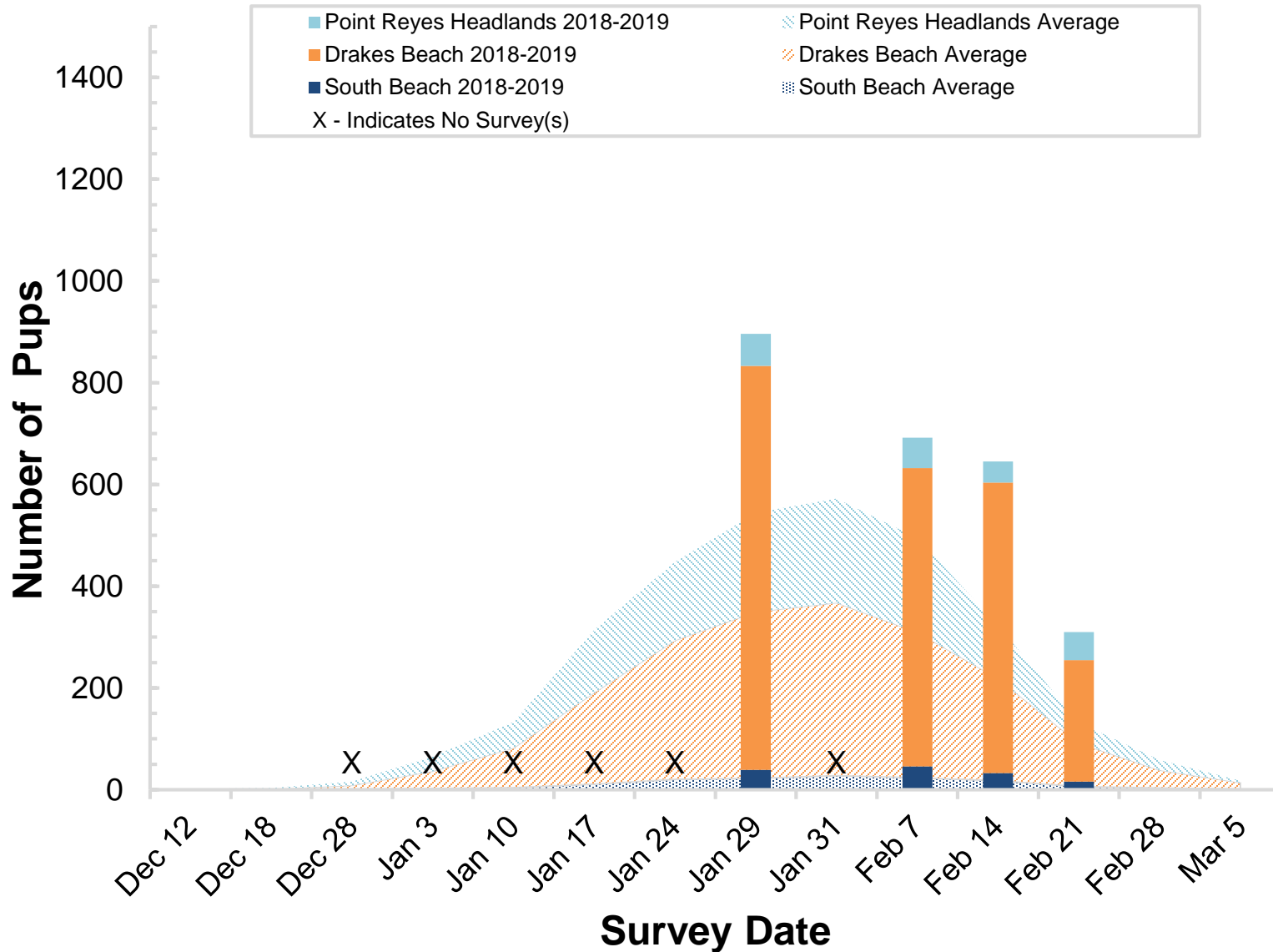


Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2019 Female Count vs. 2005-2017 Female Average

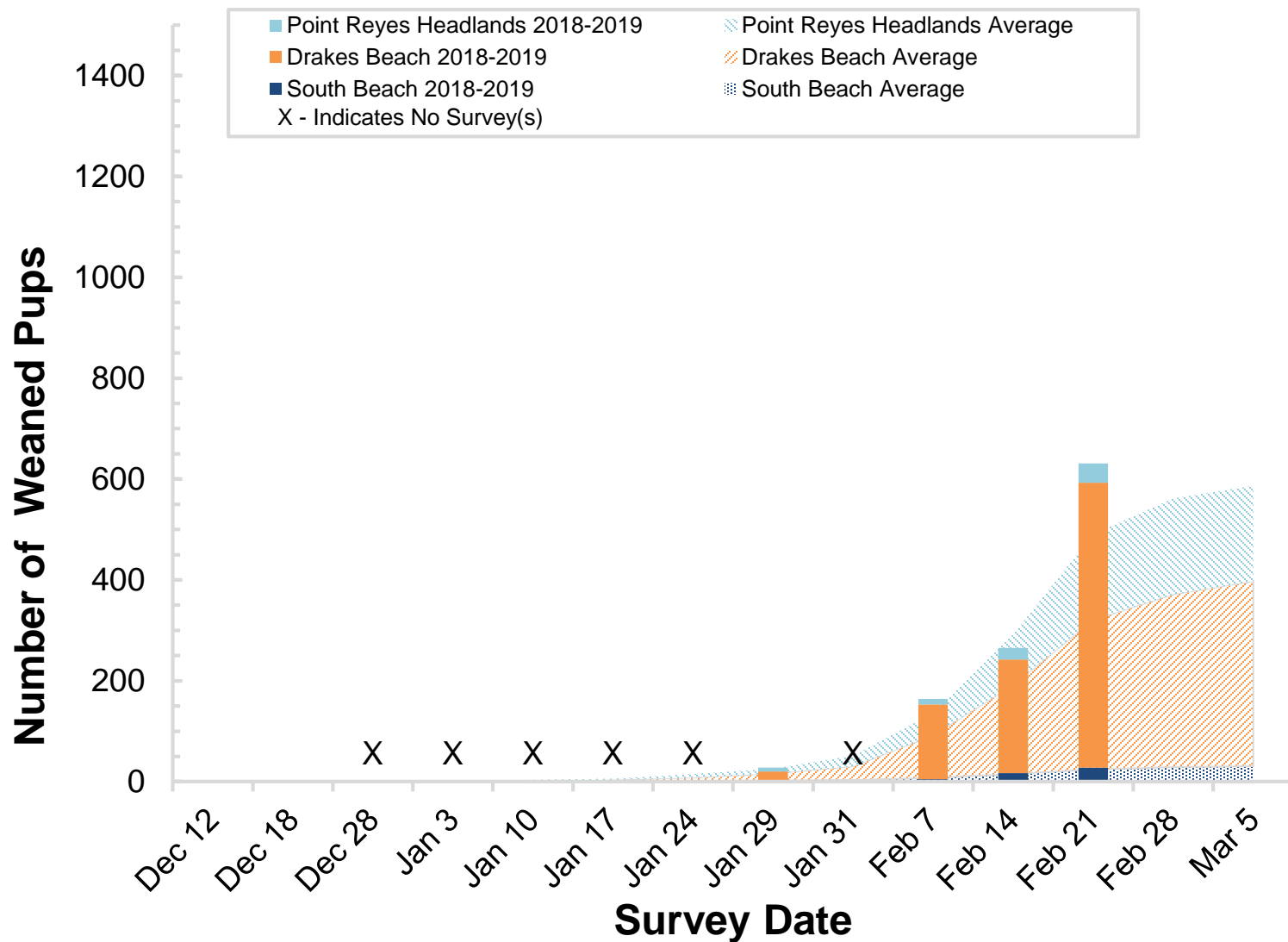


Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore **Total 2019 Pup Count vs. 2005-2017 Pup Average**



Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2019 Weaned Pup Count vs. 2005-2017 Weaned Pup Average



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