

National Park Service



2019 Elephant Seal Breeding Season Update March 1, 2019



News this week:

- Only 145 adult females are left on Point Reyes beaches, down from seasonal peak of 1,276.
- Inclement weather limited researchers tagging and survey time in the field this week.
- 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: Two males fight in the surf.

Center: The Drakes beach sign has had a rough season with rowdy seals and big storms..

Top Left: The alpha male mates with a female at the visitors center.

Bottom Left: A wrinkly weaner in the grass.



Satellite Success



On February 11, Point Reyes researchers spotted an adult female seal with scientific instruments on her head and back. These instruments were deployed from Año Nuevo Reserve by researchers from UC Santa Cruz. The team at UCSC had to wait for favorable conditions to retrieve their tag, and that's what they got this past Sunday, February 24. Upon arrival to Point Reyes they located their target seal using radio telemetry, and with that good news they were ready to launch. With minimal swell and low wind the researchers set off by boat to one of the colonies on the headlands. After landing they quickly located their target and were able to isolate her and retrieve their equipment. This seal was carrying a valuable Fluorometer CTD Tag. Not only does the tag record the seal's use of their environment such as distance traveled and dive depth, but also oceanic conditions such as temperature, salinity, and chlorophyll concentration. Since elephant seals spend minimal time at the surface, where data can be transmitted via satellite, the tag itself needs to be recovered in order to collect all the data recorded. Check out <https://anonuevoreserve.ucsc.edu/> to follow their research!



Top: A view of the headlands beach where the satellite tagged seal was located. **Bottom:** UCSC research team working on their target seal.

Chimney Rock Rocks!



Drakes Beach and the Ken Patrick Visitor Center are getting all of the attention this breeding season, but keep in mind we have thriving harems in other locations as well. In the rocky pocket beaches between the historic life boat station and Chimney Rock, we had two large harems this year with a combined total of 268 breeding females at peak. The rocky intertidal areas of these beaches protect the seals from large waves and tidal surges, and they are also an excellent place for weaned pups to learn to swim away from rough seas and ocean predators. Similar to Drakes beach, this area is closed to the public during elephant seal breeding season.

Above Left: An alpha male attending his late season harem in a cove near the lifeboat station. **Above Center:** Weaned pups practice swimming in a tide pool near chimney rock. **Above Right:** A view of pocket beaches with chimney rock in the background.

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Fatter Up!

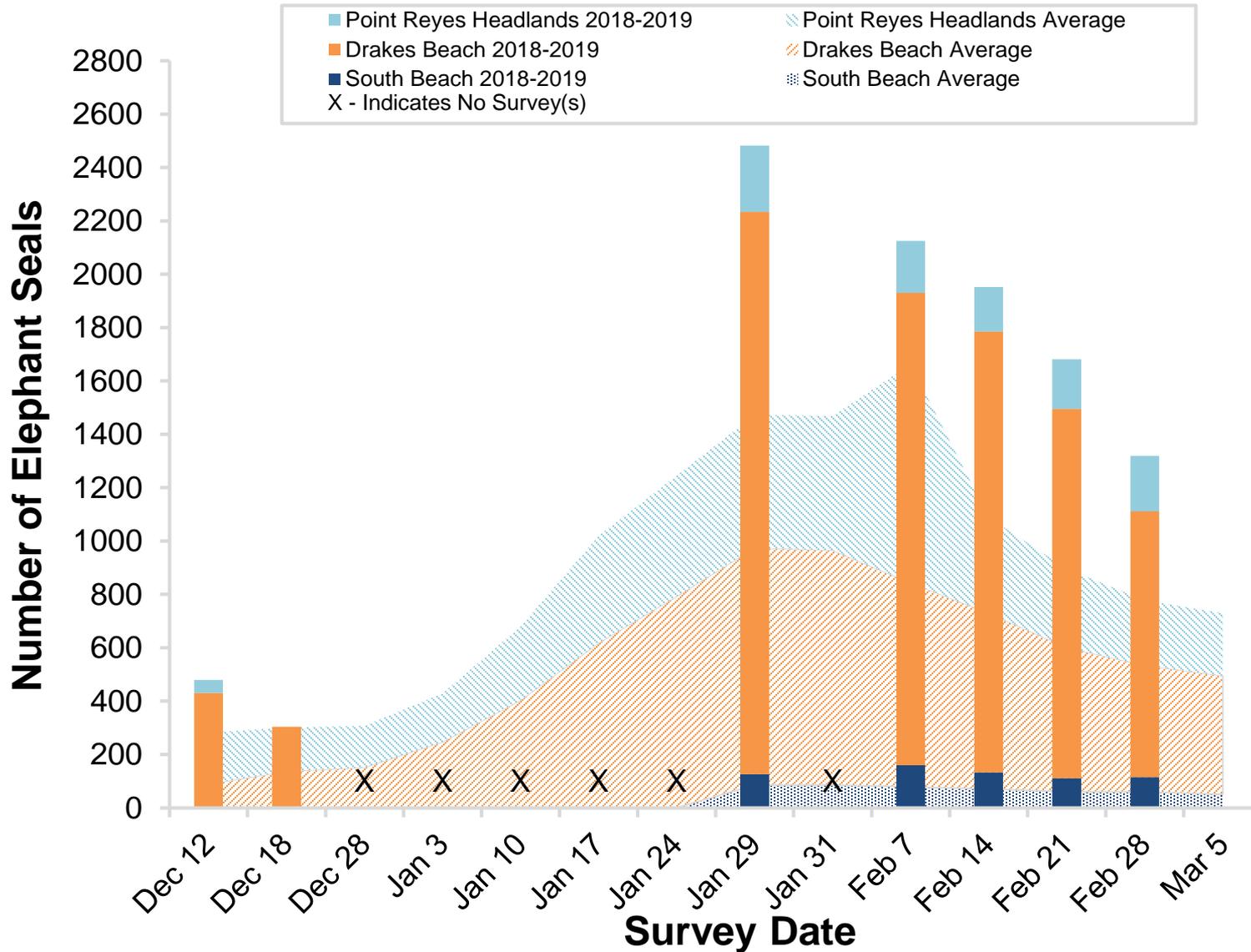
Point Reyes beaches are filling up with hundreds of fat and healthy weaned pups. When pups are born they weigh about 75 lbs. and by weaning time have inflated to about 300 lbs! This incredible weight gain, about 10 lbs. a day during nursing, can be attributed to the rich milk of the elephant seal mother. When nursing begins the fat content of the milk is about 15% (Human milk is 11% fat), and gradually increases to about 55%, plateauing after 21 days. This physiological system seems to play a role in water conservation. Fasting mothers are in-taking no water during nursing. As the pup develops water conservation strategies such as breath holding and increased insulation, the water content of the milk is reduced as fat content increases, helping to save some water for mom AND fatten up the pup!



Above: A fully molted and healthy weaned pup

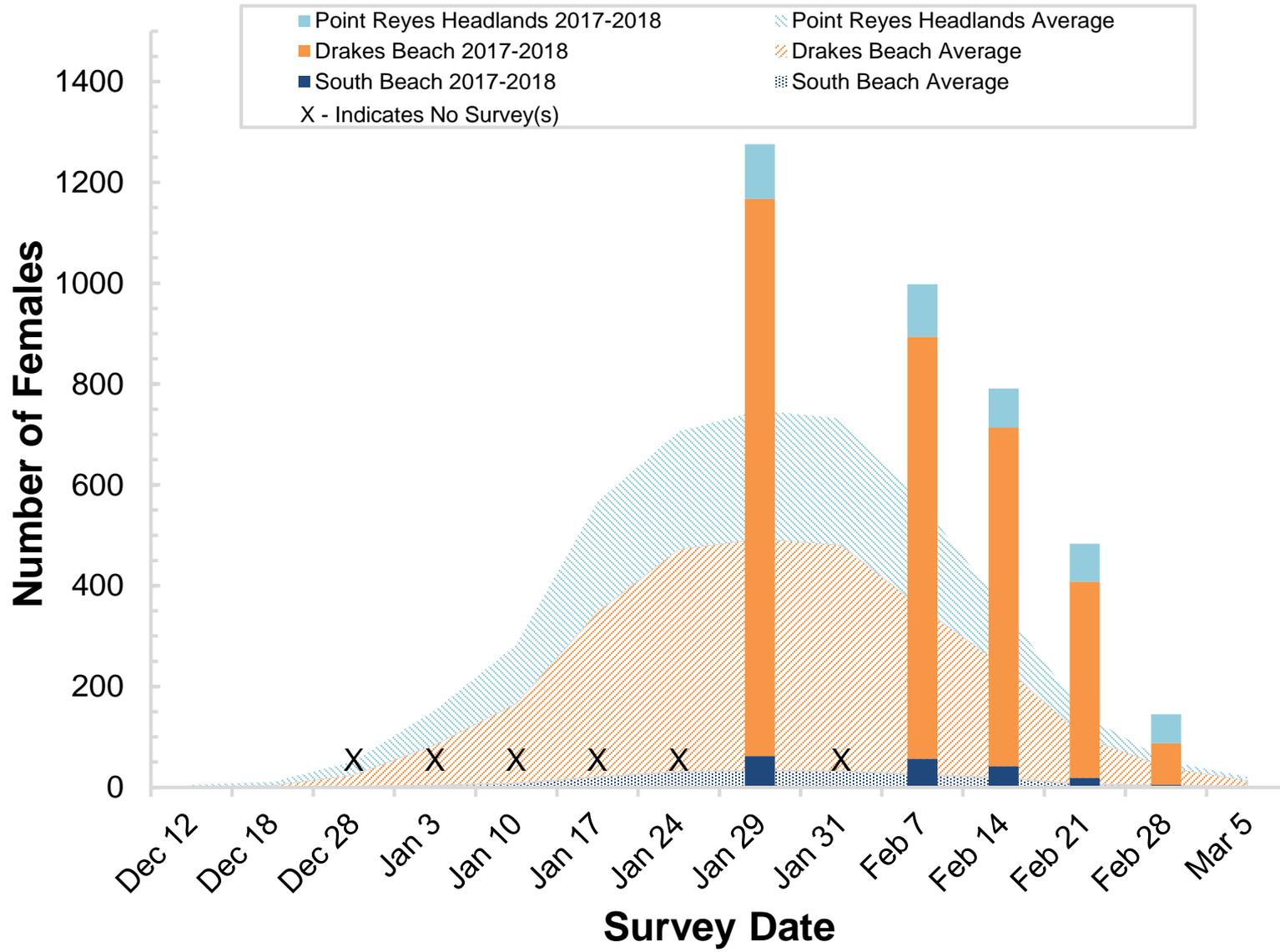
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

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



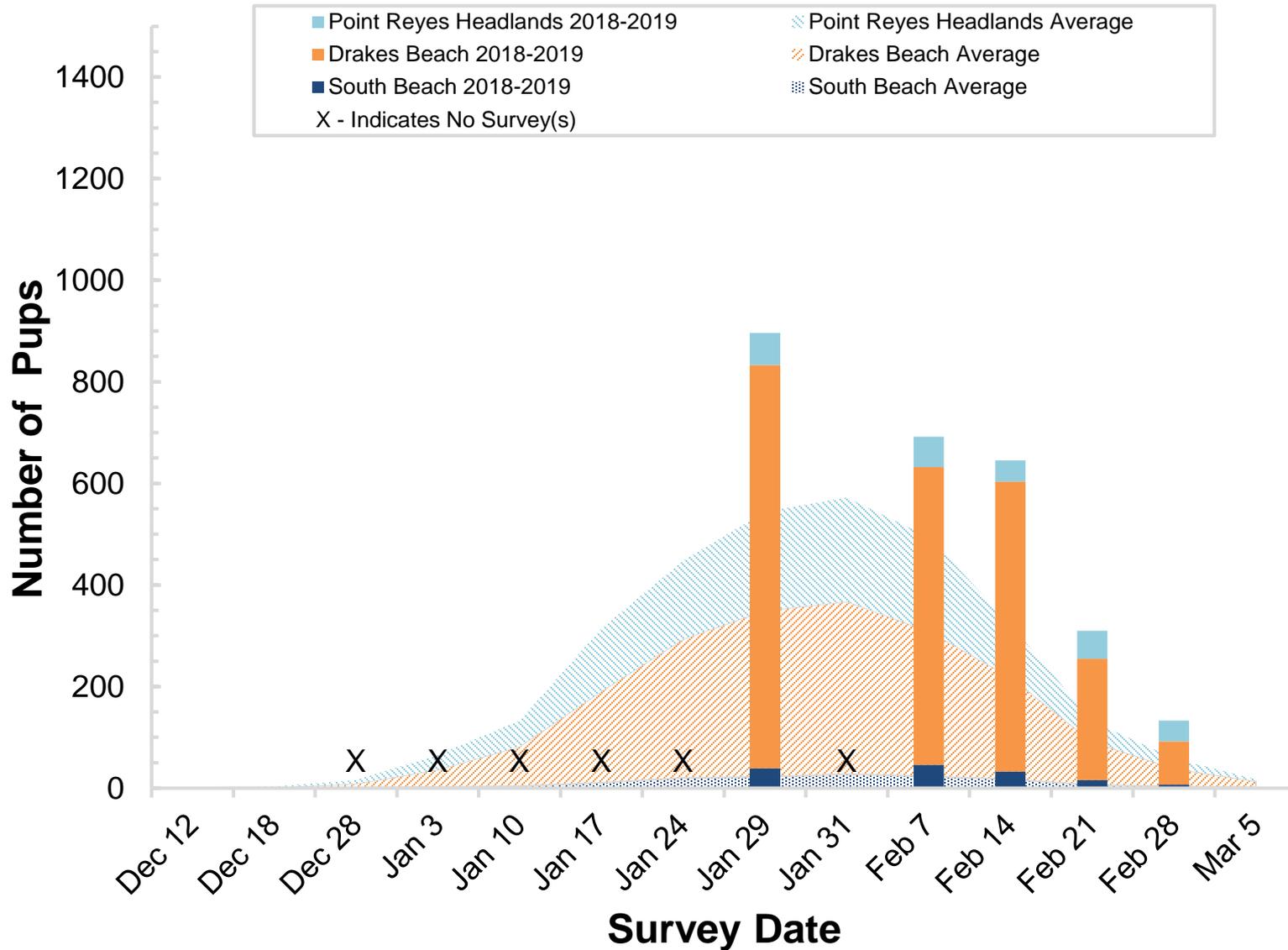
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

Total 2019 Female Count vs. 2005-2017 Female Average



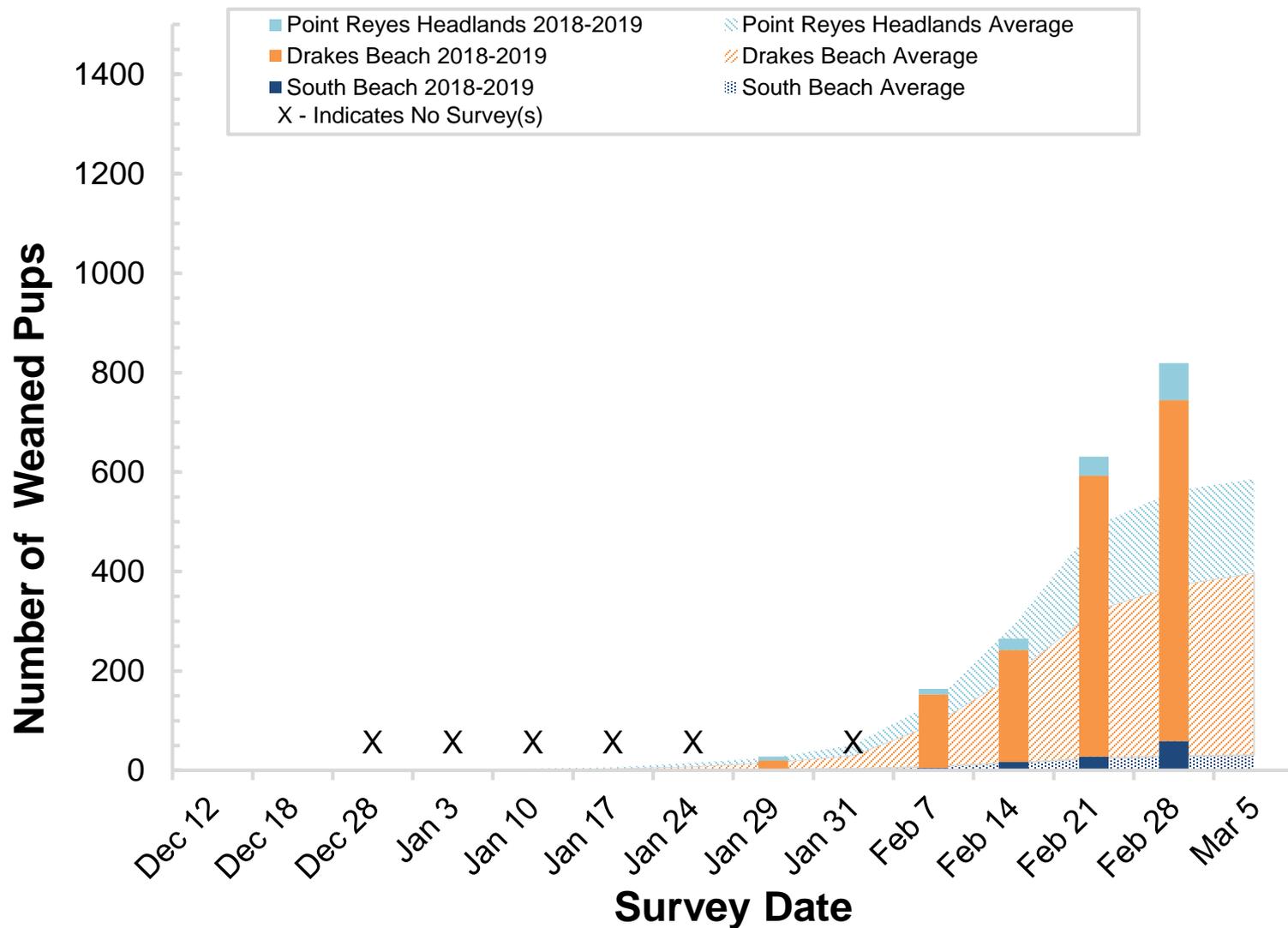
Northern Elephant Seals at Point Reyes National Seashore

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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