



## Feature

## Recent Sightings of the Monk Seal in Croatian areas of the Adriatic

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Along with the common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) and the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), the monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) used to be a regular inhabitant of the Adriatic Sea. According to notes by Spiridon Brusina, a Croatian zoologist of the 19th century, the central and the southern parts of the Adriatic Sea were considered to be one of the most significant habitats of this species. Local people called it "sea man", "sea devil", "sea calf" or "sea bear" – the latter as it is referred to in the first Croatian document about this species, a poem by Mavro Vetranovic Cavcic, composed in the period from 1482 - 1576.

The monk seal male caught in 1777 off the island of Cres found its way to Johann Hermann. His detailed observations of this specimen, published in 1779, were considered the first modern scientific description of this species. Before any serious scientific research could be undertaken, the monk seal, as well as the common dolphin, had disappeared from the Adriatic Sea. The last confirmed habitat of two specimens of monk seal was near the island of Pag in 1992. In the summer of 1993 the monk seal was seen near the island of Palagruza for a short period of time. In the past year or so, a large number of monk seal sightings have been noted in the Croatian part of the Adriatic. The locations of these sightings are indicated on the accompanying map (Fig. 1), while further data on each observation are provided under the corresponding number in the table below.

All the reports have one common characteristic: only one specimen was observed. The animal was normally observed by only one individual but there were also sightings by two, three, four people and sometimes even larger groups.

The specimen was most frequently observed by those familiar with the sea: fishermen and divers. Taking into consideration all these factors, we conclude that at least one monk seal has been wandering across the Adriatic over the past year. Although it is not possible to be 100 percent certain that all the sightings are of *Monachus monachus* (conceivably, another species of true seal that has escaped captivity might be involved), we believe that the most recent sightings could well be of a Mediterranean monk seal — possibly a solitary visitor from the nearest population in the central Ionian Sea which wandered into the Croatian part of the Adriatic but has yet to settle in one area.

Map of sightings  
([enlarge](#))

Marked observation location	Observation date	Latitude;Longitude	Animal-observer distance (m)	Duration of observation	Kind of observer	Previous sighting interval km/days
1	15.5.2004	N42°52';E17°27'	10-15	?	Professional fisherman	-
2	16.5.2004	N42°52';E17°27'	10-15	?	Professional fisherman	0/1
3	26.5.2004	N44°05';E15°00'	20-100	5 min	Non-professional fisherman	240/10
4	1.8.2004?	N43°59';E15°04'	30	?	Non-professional fisherman	12/66?
5	23.10.2004	N43°42';E15°39'	3-4	?	Professional fisherman	56/83?
6	22.4.2005	N44°15';E14°47'	1-2	3-5 min	Professional fisherman	93/181
7	24.4.2005	N45°05';E13°37'	10-60	5 min	Divers	131/2
8	4.5.2005	N44°33';E14°27'	100	10 sec	Tourist walkers	89/10
9	15.6.2005?	N44°22';E14°39'	?	?	Diver	26/42?
10	18.6.2005	N44°34';E14°18'	?	?	TV crew, recorded by TV camera	36/3?
11	22.6.2005	N44°28';E14°31'	?	?	Tourists on board a ship	20/4
12	1.7.2005?	N44°52';E13°46'	?	?	Divers	74/9?
13	19.7.2005	N44°57';E14°03'	?	30 min	Non-professional fisherman?	24/18?
14	27.7.2005	N44°01';E15°05'	30	5 min	Non-professional fishermen	132/8
15	27.7.2005	N44°02';E15°04'	50	5 min	Non-professional fishermen	2/0
16	27.8.2005	N44°56';E14°32'	4-5	5 min	Diver	109/31
17	4.10.2005	N44°41';E14°41'	20	15 sec	Professional fishermen	30/38