

Harp seal 'visits' Crosswicks Creek

Residents take delight in sighting

Tuesday, March 13, 2007

BY KEVIN SHEA

It's not odd for Chris Krupa and his daughter Hannah and son Haven to see an animal scurry away from them during their walks along the banks of the Crosswicks Creek behind their home in Chesterfield.

On Sunday morning, though, one animal scurried a bit, but it did not run away.

That's because it didn't have legs.

It had flippers.

"It was pretty clear to me it was a seal right away," Krupa said yesterday. "We just tried to observe it."

Krupa then snapped a picture of the sea creature, later identified as a harp seal, sunning itself on a mud flat in the creek. Then he and his children started telling people about the unusual sight.

By yesterday, word had spread through Crosswicks in Chesterfield and across the Church Street bridge into North Crosswicks, in Hamilton, Mercer County, and beyond.

The Krupas have a large back yard on New Street, right on the creek. The seal mostly stayed between their back yard and the Crosswicks Bridge (Church Street), and a little farther west.

On the bridge yesterday, motorists slowed, some pulled over and got out, and several pedestrians stopped by. Everyone had the same question, "Can you see it?" Or, "Can you see her, or him?"

Some did, like Dan Conover, a father of three who lives a few houses from the bridge and brought his camera and snapped several pictures of the seal leaving a wake in the creek. He and his children saw the seal Sunday, too. "Not every day you see a seal here," he said, grinning.

Others left before the small harp seal surfaced to swim around. Harp seals can usually stay underwater for 15 to 30 minutes at a time.

Hannah Krupa, 9, named the seal Sally, and by yesterday many people were adopting the name because she was among the first to spot the seal.

"I was just thinking of a girl's name for it and that was the first name I could come up with. I also wanted a nice name," Hannah said yesterday.

The seal might be a Sally, but Marine Mammal Stranding Center co-director Robert Schoelkopf said yesterday it was too early to tell its gender.

The marine center, in Brigantine, sent a staffer to see the seal yesterday but after watching it determined it was not stranded. The center will not take action unless an animal appears to be sick, injured, or seriously stranded and not able to free itself back into the water.

As of yesterday, Sally the seal was just that, a seal, and appeared to about 80 pounds. Harp seals are used to hanging out on an ice floe on the Arctic Ocean, and since residents saw it eating, it's probably happy, Schoelkopf said.

"I saw it with a fish in it's mouth this morning," Chris Krupa said yesterday.

With warm waters and a food supply, Sally is probably summering in the area, Schoelkopf theorized.

"You know how New Jerseyans go to Florida every winter, well (seals) come down here from the Arctic," he said. "It's a heckuva lot warmer here."

On a more serious note, Schoelkopf said that although it might look cute and cuddly, harp seals should not be approached, or touched. A harp seal bite could be highly infectious, and trying to "save" the seal could be a crime since they are federally protected.

Harp seals, like many marine mammals, fall under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and "it doesn't need to be thrown fish," Schoelkopf said.

Schoelkopf said the Crosswicks harp seal does not appear to be the seal that was spotted on the banks of the Delaware River in northeast Philadelphia last week. "We compared photos," he said. "It's not the same seal."

The sighting is not out of the ordinary, Schoelkopf said. About five or six times a year, seals come down from the Arctic and poke around New Jersey.

His advice to sightseers, "Leave him alone."

One local man got that lesson very clearly yesterday from New Jersey Conservation Officer Tom O'Rourke, who was called to the Crosswicks Bridge to investigate someone who was walking the banks with a fishing net, and told some onlookers he was going to trap the animal and "get it back home."

"It's a seal. He's in the water," O'Rourke told the man. "He found his way in, probably up the Delaware and into the creek, and he'll find his way out."

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