

Factsheet: The grey seal



Happy Horsey Seal by Mary Groombridge

Where can grey seals be found?

The grey seal is the larger and more common of the two British seal species, the other being the common seal (aka harbour seal). There are 3 distinct populations of grey seals in the world, but it is the eastern Atlantic population that is mainly found in the UK. One hundred years ago there were only around 500 grey seals in this country. Now however, half of the world's population, approximately 80,000 individuals, are found on and around British coasts. They are usually found mainly around exposed rocky northern and western coasts, however the wide, sandy beaches in Norfolk provide an important breeding area for them.

What do grey seals look like?

Grey seals are classed as 'true seals', meaning that they have no external ears and have shorter front flippers. Unlike 'eared seals' such as sea lions, grey seals are less mobile on land and tend to move along the ground on their belly.

The grey seal can be distinguished from the common seal by its long, straight 'Roman' nose and wide nostrils earning its scientific name *Halichoerus grypus*, meaning "hooked-nosed sea pig". Common seals have smaller, rounder heads with shorter noses.

Adult grey seals can grow up to 2.5 metres long; males are much larger than females, averaging 233kg in weight, while females average around 155kg. Males are generally darker in colour and often scarred from territorial battles with other males. For this reason males rarely live longer than 25 years, while females can live for up to 35 years.

Breeding

Male seals reach maturity at 6 years, females between 3-5 years. Female grey seals give birth to their pups in autumn and early winter, beginning in West Wales and Cornwall in August/ September. As you move clockwise around the British Isles the time of pupping gets later, in Norfolk, starting around November until early January while in the Farne Islands and eastern Scotland pups do not arrive until late December.

Grey seals come ashore to breed with the breeding site known as a **rookery** or **haul out**. On arrival, males will compete for territories on the beach, with the biggest, oldest and more aggressive bulls being more successful. Occasionally the males fight in a bid to win the best territory, and may sustain deep scars on their necks as a result. Females will pick a defended territory and give birth around a day later. Bull seals average around 8 females in their pack, but if really successful they can have up to 20!

Seal pups weigh around 15kg at birth and are born with the trademark fluffy coat. A strong bond forms between the mother and their pup from birth, and the mother can recognise her pup from its smell and its call. Pups will suckle from their mother for 18-21 days, 5-6 times a day, for up to 10 minutes at a time. The milk is 60% fat, with the consistency of condensed milk, and allows the pup to gain about 2kg of weight a day. The mother will remain just offshore between feeds, rarely feeding herself and losing up to a quarter of her body weight by the time her pup is weaned.

Towards the end of the nursing period, the mother has weaned her pup and the pup has increased from 15kg to 45kg! The mother mates with one or more of the bull seals, before leaving the pup to fend for itself. The pup stays at the rookery for a further 3-4 weeks after it is weaned. During this time, while living off its blubber reserves, it moults fully, and swaps its fluffy fur for a dense, grey waterproof coat. Only then can the pup head to sea to start learning to feed for itself. If the pups do not gain sufficient weight, e.g. if they are regularly disturbed during their first 3 weeks nursing period, they may not develop the necessary blubber reserves to be insulated from the cold water, or have enough energy to feed successfully at sea.

Adult female seals will be pregnant for almost a year and tend to return to the same beach where they were born to give birth. This is why pups are always born at the same time of year. By mating shortly after giving birth, it allows these normally unsociable animals to give birth and mate at the same time. For most of the year the Norfolk seals disperse throughout the southern North Sea and tend to remain solitary. They only come together again about 2-3 months after breeding to moult their fur. This involves the seals returning to the beach to participate in communal haul-outs, during which time they actually do not tend to socialise, and actively keep their distance from each other.

Grey seal diet

The grey seal feeds on a wide variety of fish – they are incredible divers and can dive over 100m, and hold their breath for an hour, in search of food. Sand eels, cod, flatfish and herring are an important part of its diet, although they are opportunistic feeders so will take whatever is available, including octopus and crustaceans. In general seals need around 5kg of food a day, although they do not feed every day and will fast during the breeding season.

Conservation status

Grey seals are protected in Britain under the Conservation of Seals Act 1970 and also under the EC Habitats Directive. Globally, they are one of the rarest seal species, but around 50% of the world population lives in British and Irish waters, classing them as 'locally common'. However because such a large percentage of the world population of grey seals are found here, the protection of this species is of international conservation importance.

Seal finger

Seal finger is an infection that can affect the fingers of people who come into contact with, or are bitten by a seal. It is associated with bites, cuts or scrapes contaminated by the saliva, blood or blubber from marine mammals such as seals. It can cause joint inflammation, cellulitis and swelling of bone marrow. In the past the only cure was to amputate the affected fingers, however these days, because it is thought to be a bacterial infection, it is treated with antibiotics.

Seals and Horsey – a brief history

During the 1990s, the seal colony at Horsey was small with only 5-10 pups born each year. Over the years favourable conditions encouraged numbers to increase, and with this came more interest from people. This resulted in some unintentional disturbance to the seals, often by dogs.

In response to this, Natural England, who are responsible for the management of the Winterton Dunes National Nature Reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest, began a volunteer warden system in 2002-3 to manage visitors during the pupping season. In 2011 the Friends of Horsey Seals (FoHS) was set up as a community venture to manage the growing number of volunteer wardens.

Conservation efforts and the presence of seal wardens guiding visitors away from vulnerable pups, have created favourable site conditions for the seal colony. Over the last decade, this has resulted in significant year-on-year rises in pup births between November-January, with 2069 pups born between Waxham and Winterton in the 2018-19 season.

With the increases in seal numbers and an organised warden system at Horsey, there has also been a year-on-year rise in the number of visitors to the colony in the winter months. It is now estimated that there are approximately 80,000 visitors to the colony with the majority visiting over the Christmas holidays.

How can people help?

Although there is a voluntary beach closure and designated, wardened viewing areas at Horsey, due to the number of visitors and expansion of the seal colony beyond Horsey, people and seals inevitably come into contact with each other. This can be risky for both, so there are a few things for visitors to consider while they are here:

1) Keep a minimum of 10 metres from any seal and move on quickly

Seals can be easily spooked from their resting spots and this will happen if you get too close or if you observe the same seal for a long period of time, at close range. Disturbance to a suckling pup may cause its mother to abandon it or prevent the mother from feeding it as much as it needs. If the pup does not build up enough reserves before being weaned, it is unlikely to survive until adulthood. If a pup is spooked it may also move into a bull seal's territory and be hurt or killed.

2) Stay on the landward side of the seal

While the pup stays on the beach, their mother will often remain in the water, watching their pup from a distance. By staying up the beach from the seal you avoid walking between them and their mother. This enables the mother to reach their pup for feeds, and for mature seals, it gives them an escape route should they become spooked.

3) Keep your dog on a lead

Quite simply, seals and dogs don't mix. Seal disturbance will be kept to a minimum and you will avoid the risk of your dog being bitten by a seal and potentially contracting 'seal finger'.

4) Keep an eye out for seals

Seals move around so stick to marked paths and be aware that seals may also be on them.

5) Don't approach a seal

Even if you think it is in trouble. If you have concerns contact British Divers Marine Life Rescue: 01825 765546 or RSPCA 24hr emergency line: 0300 1234 999.

6) Follow advice from the volunteer seal wardens (Horsey and Winterton)

The wardens will have the most up to date information about the seals and where to walk. By following their advice you can minimise disturbance to the seals and other wildlife and minimise impact on the fragile environment.

7) Care for the environment

The sand dunes along this stretch of coastline are internationally and nationally recognised as important habitats for a wide range of plants and animals. They also play a vital role as sea defences, a barrier to the fierce easterly storms which hit this coastline in the winter.

By sticking to the marked paths and staying outside of enclosed areas (intended to protect certain species and allow the habitats time to recover from trampling), you will be helping to care for this stunning environment so others can enjoy it.

Please take your litter home with you and if you have a spare 5 minutes why not have your own mini beach clean? Not only will it keep the area looking good but it will reduce the amount of harmful litter in the marine environment.

8) Care for the local community

When visiting the seals consider the small, rural communities in this area. If you have to come by car, please park considerately in the allocated car parks and allow plenty of time for your visit, particularly during busy times of the year. Use local shops and services as much as possible. And please try to minimise your impact on the local area and its residents.

Travel information

Public transport is limited, however buses do travel to Winterton from Great Yarmouth.

By bike: Sustrans regional route 30 runs the length of the east coast of Norfolk, enabling access to Horsey or Winterton.

By car – roads are narrow and car parks are limited so please car share where possible.

Horsey: Horsey beach car park from which you can follow the allocated paths to dedicated viewing areas and find out more about the seals from the seal wardens.

You can also park at the National Trust's Horsey Windpump from which you can cross the road and follow the footpath up to Crinkle Gap where you can access the viewing areas.

Winterton: Parking is available at Beach Road car park with adjacent public toilets and a café. Please do not park on Beach Road itself as 24 hour access to the beach is required down this narrow lane.

While you are there, why not make use of the local cafes and shops? Please note that WC facilities in these establishments will be for customers only.

Useful contacts for information and seal concerns:

Friends of Horsey Seals: Peter Ansell 01493 748516, www.friendsofhorseyseals.co.uk

British Divers Marine Life Rescue: www.bdmlr.org.uk, 01825 765546, info@bdmlr.org.uk

Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA): www.rspca.org.uk, RSPCA 24hr emergency line: 0300 1234 999

For information about the Norfolk Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty:

Norfolk Coast Partnership: www.norfolkcoastaonb.org.uk, Twitter - @NorfolkAONB

