



## Grey Seals in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly : Fact Sheet

### Seals need our protection:

Grey Seals are one of the rarest seal species in the world.

The UK has 40% of the World's Grey Seals, so we have an international responsibility to protect them.

### Seal species – how to tell them apart and the types we have:

The UK has 2 resident types of seals Grey and Common; Greys are larger, have flatter, longer more dog-like heads and they prefer rocky shores; Commons have more cat-like faces with a clear forehead and they prefer hauling out on sandbanks.

Cornwall has mostly Grey Seals. Common, Harp and Hooded Seals are occasionally seen in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

### The number of seals in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly:

We are not sure, but possibly between 500 and 1000 Grey Seals spend most of their time in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

We know from our photo ID work (see below) & tag sightings that seals in Cornwall swim between France, Wales & Ireland.

One seal in Cornwall may even have come from Maine on the east coast of America.

Each seal has a unique fur pattern that allows us to tell which seal is which.

We have photos of over 600 different seals in our Photo ID Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Seal Database.

### Seal anatomy:

Grey Seals are the biggest land breeding mammal in the UK, but are superbly adapted for life in the sea.

Adult seals have 2 layers of thick fur and a thick blubber layer of fat to keep them warm at sea.

Seals get all the water they need from their food and a well hydrated seal will have bright eyes and tears.

The hands and feet of a seal are formed into webbed flippers with 5 strong claws on each.

They have very powerful:

- Rear flippers that propel them through the water, using their tail to help steer.
- Shoulders that enable them to haul out onto steep and slippery rocks, even in a big swell

### Seal lifecycle:

#### **Pups**

Grey Seal pups have a white coat when born & for up to 3 weeks, then they moult into their adult coat.

We've seen white coat pups every month of the year in Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly, but most are born August to December.

Mums feed their pups for 15 to 21 days with a rich milk that is 60% fat and pups balloon out very quickly.

After weaning, Mums leave their pups and the area. Pups leave too, as they must teach themselves to feed.

Life is hard for Grey Seal pups. About 30 to 50 percent of them die before their first birthday.

Mums recognise their own pup's calls and know exactly how their own pup smells.

#### **Young seals**

Up to the age of 4, seals have fine facial features and have long sleek and streamlined bodies.

They are fun loving and curious and are often seen playing with each other on the water's edge or at sea.

Young seals are renowned for chasing each other around the beach annoying all the older sleeping seals.

#### **Adults**

Seals become grown up when their faces fill out and they begin to look very fat and round.

They can mate from around 4 to 6 years old, but the latest research shows seals are starting to breed later.

Adult females mate after weaning, but delay implantation for up to 3 months and have a gestation period of 8/9 months.

Adult males aspire to become a Beachmaster, the dominant male seal on a breeding beach, and will fight to keep control of his beach and his females! In Cornwall, male fights are rarely serious, they just involve a lot of splashing and loud snarls.

Older adults spend most of their time sleeping when on land!

In the wild, adult male Grey Seals may live to 25 years old and females to 30 years old.



### **Seal senses:**

Seals can see and hear very well.

They have very sensitive whiskers that can pick up movements in the water left by swimming fish.

They are very curious creatures and will explore things they find in the sea with their whiskers. To find out how the objects feel, they will get the object in their mouth and test it using their teeth very gently.

### **Seal behaviour:**

#### **In the sea**

Seals swim at an average of 4 to 5km an hour.

On average they dive to 70 metres for around 12 minutes.

Seals sleep in the sea. They lie on the sea bed or float upright, but must return to the surface to breath.

Bottling and logging describe seals floating at the sea surface - upright or on their sides.

#### **On land**

Seals must return to shore (haul out) to breed, moult, rest and to digest their food.

Grey Seals spend about 4 days at sea for every one day on land.

Seals will sleep at all angles onshore on their bellies, backs and sides.

If another seal gets too close, they will growl, snarl, howl and swat the offending seal with their fore flipper.



### **Seal Food:**

Seals preferred food is Sandeels, which they snuffle around for on the seabed.

Seals will supplement their diet with other fish.

### **Seals, people and dogs:**

Seals are gentle creatures unless they feel threatened.

They have very long, sharp and interlocking teeth and very powerful jaws.

Seal bites are treated with special antibiotics; if unwell after contact with a seal, you must tell your GP.

Diseases can be passed between people, seals and dogs, so keep apart!



### **Threats to Seals in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly:**

#### **Disturbance**

When seals are hauled out they are very sensitive to disturbance from people.

To avoid disturbing seals on beaches from a clifftop, stand back out of sight.

If seals are hauled out offshore and look towards you and you continue to get closer, they will spook and rush to disappear into the sea!

If you are close to seals, move slowly and quietly. Watch their reactions, if they look wary & unsure, back off until they relax.

Remember that seals can hear human voices - we sound very scary to seals, especially if we have loud, high pitched voices.

#### **Feeding**

If seals get fed from boats or in harbours, they learn to link boats with food and this causes problems for seals and fishermen.

We want to break the link in seals' minds between boats and food.

#### **Netting**

Net entanglement is a big problem for seals in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Over 60 live seals have been seen with netting around their necks or bellies. A lot of net entanglement happens when seals swim over, under and into floating rafts of old, discarded or storm damaged net.

#### **Marine Litter**

Seal pups have been seen to swim head first into clear plastic bags and be bashed around at high tide by plastic bottles, floating planks and oil drums. Older seals have been seen eating floating plastic bags, rubber gloves and crisp packets. Please dispose of all litter carefully.



### **Helping Seals in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly:**

Grey Seals in the southwest are way too busy having fun to worry about their future, so they need a voice to represent them.

Cornwall Seal Group aims to represent seals in political, planning and conservation forums and reviews.

CSG is a non profit making, voluntary organisation that relies on donations and sales. CSG is proud to collaborate with other national and local organisations, E.g. Natural England, National Trust, British Divers Marine Life Rescue, National Coastwatch Institute, National Seal Sanctuary, Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trusts, CWTs Marine Strandings Network and others. CSG volunteers spend hundreds of hours on pup watches, rescues, releases and pioneering photo identification research.

We aim to provide people with information about seals for free, in the belief that the more people know about these charismatic creatures, the more people want to help and conserve them for future generations.

**You can help us by joining our group, donating money, buying our merchandise or adopting one of our wild seals.**

#### **For more information:**

Visit our **website** – the news section is updated weekly, so keep in touch wherever you are : [www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk](http://www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk)

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