

S262 'Ghost 2' : First Devon Seal ID for Cornwall Seal Group!

On 08/09/08 Rob Jutsum was visiting Morte Point during a short break and he took photos of a large pregnant adult female Grey Seal hauled out on rocks just offshore. His photo was forwarded by email through several contacts until it finally arrived in Lauren Davis' inbox at the Devon Wildlife Trust. As Rob had asked questions about the seal, Lauren forwarded the message on to Sue Sayer of Cornwall Seal Group.

On opening the photo attachment, Sue immediately knew she had seen this female seal before from her unique fur patterns! Cornwall Seal Group have been identifying and monitoring Grey Seals at one north coast haul out in Cornwall since 2000 and now have over 600 seals in their Photo ID Database. Sue began looking through photos from the database and suddenly remembered that this female had had been a Mum on the haul out beach last year. Narrowing down the search, Sue quickly found the seal pattern she was looking for – the seal was S262 'Ghost 2', who had given birth to a pretty female pup called Bonnie on 03/10/07, the previous year.

Cornwall Seal Group have always been mystified, as the mothers who give birth at their haul out are not known to the group, so must come into the area solely to pup... but from where? Female Grey Seals show site fidelity, so CSG members predicted that the heavily pregnant S262 would head west from Devon to Cornwall.

To everyone's amazement and delight, 12 days later on 20/09/08, S262 'Ghost 2' arrived in west Cornwall right on cue. She appeared, albeit briefly for around 30 seconds, on our mainland haul out beach around 100 miles west from Rob's sighting in Devon. A few quick photos were snapped of her before she left, presumably heading for the adjacent cove, where she had her pup last year.

On 23/09/08 around dusk, Terry Hocking (a founder member of Cornwall Seal Group) took photos of a female seal hauled out on this next cove with a new born pup. He emailed these to Sue, who was delighted on opening the photo attachments to discover, this was indeed 'Ghost 2' and her new pup. Sue was out first thing on 24/09/08 and soon spotted the young pup, but the pup's body was draped loosely over some boulders and Sue's heart sank, as she thought the pup was dead.

The next moment the pup moved, but it soon became apparent that the pup was trapped in amongst the boulders by its left fore flipper. An agonising 20 minutes later, it was still trapped and struggling on an incoming tide. The next time Sue looked through the viewfinder of her telescope, she couldn't believe her eyes. The pup was free and moving happily across the beach only to slump over the next pile of boulders! In view of these encounters 'Ghost 2's pup has been named 'Rocky'!

Rocky has given the Sue the most angst of all the pups born so far this year. The day after escaping from the boulders, Rocky was seen at high tide, hauled out on his cove. 'Ghost 2' had got him corralled between a large boulder and her own body, to protect Rocky from the incoming very high tide. 'Ghost 2' made the mistake of turning her back on her little ball of fluff, giving Rocky the time to sneak away behind his Mum's back. He crawled between his boulder and the cliff edge, straight into the crashing swell, which 'washing machined' him around on a spin cycle! It is agonising watching mischievous little seal pups put themselves at risk, whilst standing helpless on the cliff top!

Rocky wasn't seen for a few days after that, prompting everyone to fear the worst! Yet, true to form, Rocky was soon scaring us all again! He was out on the far end of his cove, swimming around in the sea doggy paddle style (he's not old enough to do proper seal swimming yet) without his Mum, who was bottling further out and near his original location! 'Ghost 2' is getting used to his antics though and she soon found him messing about in between white watered boulders.

Despite all these escapades, at the time of writing, Rocky was still looking good and had made it to the ripe old age ofa week! Phew. Life is tough for Cornish Seal pups!

Photographs taken by Sue Sayer:

Rob Jutsum's photo from Morte Point
Ghost 2 arriving at a Cornish Haul Out
Rocky trapped between boulders
Rocky sneaks away
Rocky saved by his Mum
Rocky loves his Mum!

Sue Sayer : Cornwall Seal Group