

Skomer Island Seal Factsheet

Two species of seal breed on the coast of the British Isles – Common and Grey Seal. About half the world's population of Grey Seal breeds in Britain. Only Grey Seals occur regularly on the Pembrokeshire coast, where they are present all year around. The total number in West Wales, mostly Pembrokeshire, is estimated to be about 5,000 animals, with some 1,400 pups being born each year.



Characteristics

Male and female Grey Seals can be distinguished by their size and head shape. Each seal can even be identified individually by its own unique markings. There is some considerable variation in colour – dark brown, grey, fawn-brown or pale silvery grey.

A fully grown cow or female seal is about seven feet long and has a slender head and shoulders. Her coat is typically mid-grey, paler on the underside, with large dark markings. In contrast, mature bull or male seals average about eight feet in length, have a heavy 'Roman' nose, thickset 'shoulders', a wrinkled appearance and a very dark, finely mottled coat. Males can live up to 30 years and females up to 46 years.

Observing seals safely

For much of the year seals are widely dispersed and may be seen almost anywhere along the West Wales coast, even in rivers at times. It is best to observe seals at a distance. Seals catching sight of people on cliffs or at sea often keep their large dark eyes fixed on what they perceive as a threat, giving an impression of tameness, but in fact are watching the source of danger. They dive with a noisy splash that warns other seals. If seals react to your presence this way, you are too close for comfort, and unless you withdraw you may not see any more seals!

Watching on Skomer

On Skomer, seals can be seen year round, especially at the Garland Stone, where they haul out as the tide recedes on to low rocks at its eastern extremity and can be watched, and often heard, from the cliff top opposite. Although seals are likely to be seen swimming at any point around the island, the most likely spot to see them is in Pigstone Bay on the extreme western side. If not visible when you arrive, wait some minutes and it is not long before one, or more, will be seen swimming, sometimes in the heavy swell which can pound into the Bay.

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About seal pups.

Female seals produce a single pup each year. The new born pup has a white or yellowish-white coat. This is usually moulted after three weeks, to reveal a short, velvety coat similar to that of the adults. The pup is suckled for 14 to 21 days, trebling its weight during this time from 30 pounds (14kg) at birth to about 100 pounds (45kg). The rich milk has over 50% fat, which helps the pup build up much needed reserve blubber to insulate it from the cold sea and provide nourishment until it learns how to hunt and feed itself. Following the weaning of her pup, female seals will mate again. Females mate at 5-6 years of age. Males mate at 9-10 years. Seals are very vocal during pupping season and when they moult. Young pups can often be heard calling to their mothers. In 1946, the pioneer sound recordist Ludwig Koch made the first recording of young seals in breeding caves on Skomer.



Pupping sites

The average number of pups born each autumn on Skomer is about 160. Some are open beaches like those on the south side of The Neck, in North and South Haven and The Wick, others are deep inside caves like the Seal Hole and The Lantern.

Threats

Although pups are capable of swimming from birth, some become separated from their mothers and drown or are battered against rocks in violent storms.

Fortunately oiling is a rare occurrence, but there have been seal casualties. The most notable was the *Christos Bitas* in the autumn of 1978 when young seals were lost at Skomer and Ramsey and the *Sea Empress* in February 1996 when some seals were oiled. Long-term studies will assess any problems that may have resulted.

Research

Grey Seals studies on Skomer began in the mid 1960's, with the colony being closely monitored since 1973, one of the longest Grey Seal studies in the world. Marking showed that young Grey Seals from the Pembrokeshire colonies are great wanderers they can during their young lives, reach north into Liverpool Bay, south to Devon and Cornwall, to Brittany and even the north coast of Spain, while others crossed to Ireland even as far as Galway Bay on the west coast.

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World wide distribution

The world population of the Grey Seal has been estimated at about 125,000 animals. Elsewhere in the British Isles there are small numbers in south-west England, but much larger numbers in the north-west of Scotland, including lonely North Rona, an island less than half the size of Skomer, but home to some 8,250 Grey Seals. Grey Seals also occur in the Faroes and Iceland, Norway, in the Baltic and in

Canada, but without question the headquarters of this our largest mammal, are the British Isles.

Seal Code of Conduct

Grey Seals are protected by law in the U.K. under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Conservation of Seals Act. The most critical period in any seal's life is its first few weeks. Mothers can be observed nearby or in the sea keeping a watchful eye on it's pup, sometimes mother's will go off to feed and leave pups on their own for a number of hours. This does not mean they have been abandoned.

Help us protect seals by following the code of conduct.

- Keep well away from seals and pups by land or sea; withdraw immediately if you encounter a pup or seal on a beach.
- Never enter caves or pupping beaches during the autumn.
- Do not stray from footpaths; cliffs are extremely dangerous.

If you find a seal pup that you think is in distress, injured or sick call the R.S.P.C.A. which is supported by local organisations and volunteers to deal with the situation.



Pictures by Chris Taylor and Dave Boyle