

Common Seal

Phoca vitulina (Linnaeus, 1781)

Order: Pinnipedia



Common seals are streamlined and sleek when wet and furry when dry. Their fur can be brown or grey all over with a spotted or blotched pattern. Their cat-like heads have large dark eyes. They are generally smaller than grey seals and have a more athletic and agile, flexible body.

It can be difficult to tell male common seals from females. Adult males weigh about 85kg and are around 1.5m long, with females slightly smaller weighing in at around 75kg and 1.4m. Haul trails and scats can give clues to presence of common seals.

Very few common seals have been recorded in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. There have been reports all along the south coast, west to the Isles of Scilly and on the north coast to St Ives Bay. Common and grey seals, especially juveniles, can be hard to tell apart. Grey seals have proportionally much larger heads with longer snouts that have a flat or even 'Roman' profile (common seals have more of a forehead and snub noses.) Grey seals tend to be plain or have spotty patches offering them better camouflage against rocks on more exposed coasts, whilst common seals have a more mottled coat pattern, creating better camouflage on the seaweeds of sheltered shores. The overall shape of a grey seal's head, front on is oval, whilst a common seal's head has a much more circular appearance. Seals that are 'singing' on a haul out are most likely to be grey seals. Finally, close inspection of a seal's nostrils, reveals that greys are more

Common seals are not known to breed in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Female common seals may reach the age of 30 years, whilst males are not likely to get past 20 years old.

Common seals prefer less exposed habitats than grey seals, spending time on sheltered rocky shores, estuarine mud or sandbanks.

Fish dominates a common seal's diet, along with squid, shellfish and crustaceans. Unlike the grey seals approach of bottom feeding, common seals will 'worry' a bait ball of sand eels until one or two break away from the rest of the group, only to be caught by the waiting seal.

In addition to the threats faced by grey seals, common seals are also prone to contracting phocine distemper virus. In recent epidemics in 1988 and 2002, large numbers of common seals died, significantly affecting population numbers.

Local distribution data is not currently available

Local record data is not currently available

Common seals, of the 5 sub-species, are found in coastal waters of the northern Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as the Baltic and North Seas, making them the most wide-ranging of the pinnipeds with 400,000 to 500,000 worldwide.

Common seals are a BAP species in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, they are covered by the Conservation of Seals Act (1970), Common seals are one of the nine UK marine species described as 'UK special responsibility species' in Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive, so we have a moral duty and international legal responsibility to protect the UK common seal population on behalf of the rest of the world. Common seal numbers in the UK have dropped 60% in the last 6 years.

Survey Methods

Coast walk transects

Boat surveys

Common seals are most likely to be recorded during grey seal surveys.

Did you know?

Also known as the harbour seal.

Key references

Anderson, S.(1990). Seals. Whittet

Bonner, N. (1989). The Natural History of Seals. Helm

Duck, C. (2007). Seals. Scottish Natural Heritage

Westcott, S. (1997). The Grey Seals of the Westcountry. CWT