

Grey Seal

Halichoerus grypus (Fabricius, 1791)

Order: Pinnipedia



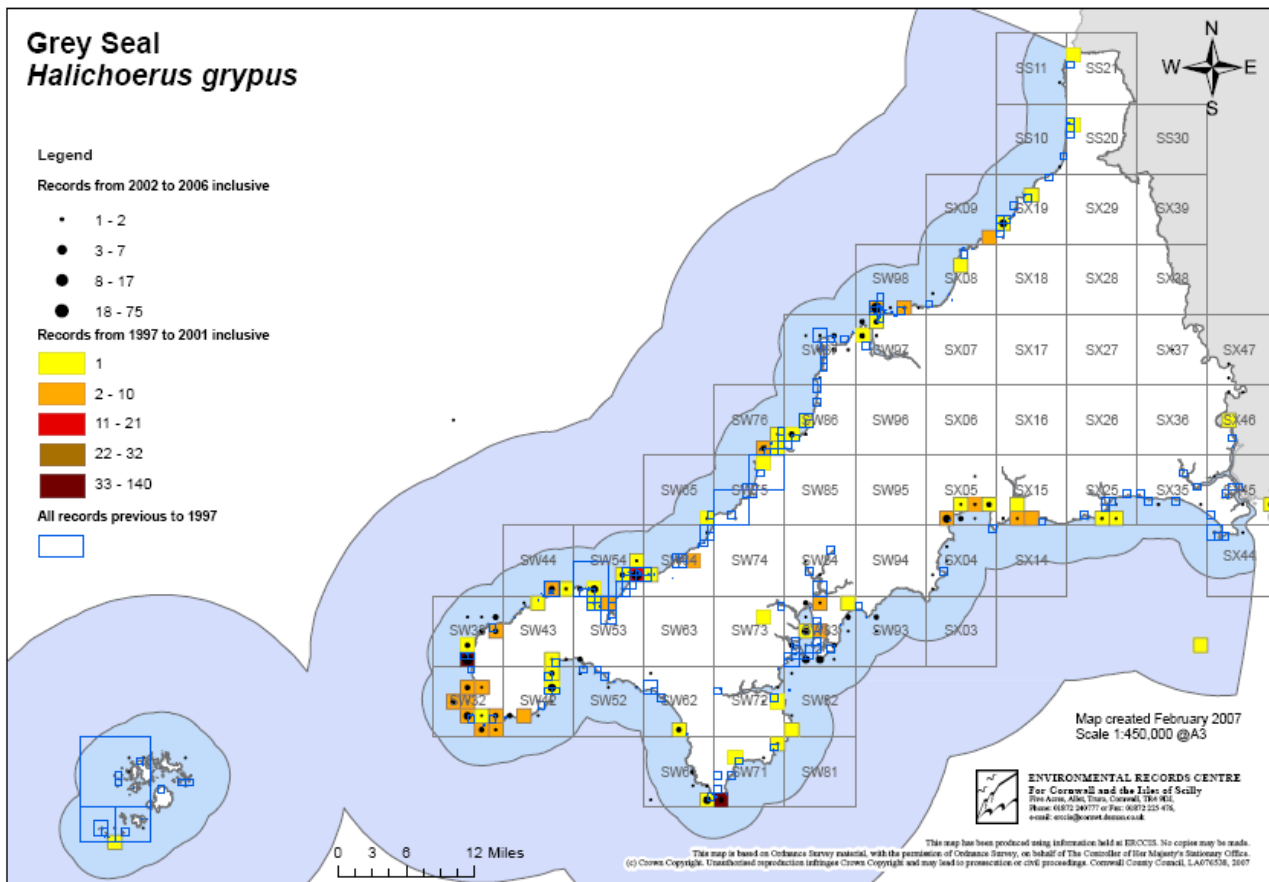
The UK's largest land breeding mammal, grey seals look streamlined and sleek when wet and furry when dry. They range in colour from white to black and cream to chocolate. Individuals can be identified from their unique fur patterns that enable . Their dog like heads have large dark eyes and around of long sensitive whiskers and eyebrows all used in hunting their preferred prey of sand eels. Their muscular necks and torsos are covered in a thick blubber layer. The seal's fore flippers are webbed and paddle shaped with 5 sets of long claws capable of gripping onto slippery seaweed encrusted rock ledges in big swells. Their rear flippers, also tipped with 5 sets of claws, are alternately stretched into webbed fan shapes that generate tremendous thrust for swimming. Male grey seals tend to have darker and plainer fur patterns than females and can grow to over 2.8m long and weigh up to 350kg. Females have shorter snouts and can reach lengths of 2m and weigh up to 250kg. Males may begin breeding at around 10 years old and females at around 5 years. Pups are around 1m long birth, covered in long creamy coloured fur for up to the first 3 weeks of life, which moults at varying rates to reveal their adult coat pattern.

Signs of seals include the haul trails that they leave in the sand, the howls, growls and snarls of their calls, and their sweet musky smell. Their droppings are solid or soft brown, orange or green Grey seals are the most commonly seen seal in Cornwall. Adults can be distinguished from common seals by their large heads with dog-like 'roman' noses, compared with the more snub-nosed and rounder head of the common seal, and their generally plainer coat patterns.

Grey seals are mostly seen when they come ashore to moult in the spring and to breed in the Autumn. Females use traditional breeding sites (remote beaches or sea caves) controlled by dominant 'Beachmaster' males . Single pups are born mostly between September and December in Cornwall. Pups are fed rich milk and between feeds mothers may return to sea for safety, although she will stay in sight of her pup and she will not feed. The pup is weaned at 15-21 days by which time it has grown from 10kg to over 40kg! The female mates again immediately after weaning but implantation of the fertilised egg is delayed for up to 3 months as the females replaces lost weight. Grey seals congregate in large mixed age and sex groupings, some sites are more favoured by one sex. Seals need to haul out to breed and moult, as well as to rest and digest their food every few days. Female grey seals live for up to 35 years, while males live to about 25. Tagging experiments have shown that seals from Cornwall travel as far as Wales and Brittany.

Grey seals need four distinct types of habitat: inaccessible, sheltered beaches to haul out for their breeding and moulting; gentle, sheltered offshore rocky islands for the summer feeding season; and sea caves with some areas above high water for pupping. Feeding habitat may be sandy or gravelly sea beds up to 70m deep and may correspond to sand eel habitats. Finally they need suitable connecting habitats between the first three. Grey seals generally hunt across soft sea beds for their preferred prey of sand eels, although they are also opportunistic feeders. Weaned pups learn to feed themselves by playing in shallow rock pools at first.

The only natural predator of the grey seal is the orca. The other main threats tend to be from humans – net entanglement, disturbance, feeding by humans, pollution and litter and shooting. Many seals have signs of damage from nets and fishing gear.



Grey Seal sightings are commonly reported around the Cornish coast although they are rarely reported from Mounts Bay, between Zone Point and Black Head and east of Fowey.

Number of records per date class
 2002 to 2006 inclusive 204
 1997 to 2001 inclusive 81
 All records previous to 1997 429
Total 714

The Grey seal is one of the rarest seals and the UK is home to about 45% of the world population. There are 3 populations of grey seals in the north west Atlantic, north east Atlantic and the Baltic.

Grey seals are covered by the Conservation of Seals Act (1970), However they may be shot under the 'netsman's defence' under certain conditions. Grey seals are designated as 'UK special responsibility species' in Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive—giving the UK an international role in their conservation. Grey seals are a key species in the Isles of Scilly SAC designation. The Seals Protection Groups are campaigning for more comprehensive protection for seals.

Survey Methods

- Coast walk transects
- Boat surveys

DRAFT

Did you know?

Grey seals breathe out when they dive to avoid the bends, with average dives lasting 12 minutes to depths of 70m. Seals' nostrils are closed when relaxed and muscles need to be contracted to open them to enable the seal to breathe. As CO₂ levels increase during a dive, a rear flipper reflex causes a twitch which automatically returns the seal to the surface to breathe.

In gaelic mythology there are tales of Selkies, grey seals who can shed their skin and appear as humans.

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