

Species Fact Sheet: Common Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Fine spot-patterned grey, black, off-white, or brown fur; rounded head with no ears visible; 'V' shaped nostrils and long whiskers as with the Grey seal.

Size: 140-185cm including flippers of about 20cm.

Weight: 8-16kg at birth; up to 150kg in adults.

Life Span: A female common seal can reach 30 years of age, but males are unlikely to survive beyond 20 years.



Distribution & Habitat

Common seals feed at sea but regularly haul out on to rocky shores or inter-tidal sandbanks to rest, or to give birth and to suckle their pups. The most important haul-out areas for common seals are around the coast of Scotland, particularly in the Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland, and on the east coast of England in the Wash, also around Strangford Lough and in SW Ireland.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Young seals may travel distances of several hundred kilometres but adults appear to remain faithful to favoured haul-out areas from year to year. The particular sites used may however vary with the seasons. Common seals travel up to 50km from haul-out sites to feed and may remain at sea for several days. Here they spend time diving, staying underwater for up to 10 minutes, and reaching depths of at least 50 metres. The way in which common seals hunt is poorly understood.

Diet and Feeding

Known to eat a wide variety of fish, including herring, sand eels, whiting and flatfish. Shrimps and squid are also sometimes eaten.

Reproduction

Females give birth to a single pup in June or July each year. Pups are very well developed at birth and can swim and dive when just a few hours old. This enables common seals to breed in estuaries where sandbanks are exposed for only part of the day. Mothers feed their young with an extremely rich milk and pups grow rapidly, doubling their birth weight during the three or four weeks that they suckle.

Conservation status

The common seal is in fact less common in British waters than the grey seal, at about 55,000 compared with around 120,000 grey seals, but around Ireland the two species are more equally represented: about 3,000 common seals and 4,000 grey seals. The Conservation of Seals Act (1970) protects common seals during their breeding season, although seals causing damage to fishing gear, or taking fish from nets, may be killed under licence. The Act also allows seals to be fully protected when required. Following the 1988 seal plague, common seals in England, Wales and Scotland were given year-round protection.

Common seal pups used to be hunted for their skins, particularly in Shetland and in the Wash. This probably over-exploited populations in some areas and led to the seals being protected in 1970. There is continuing controversy over the impact that seals might have on fish stocks although, in Britain, grey seals have received more blame from fishermen than common seals.

Seals are at the top of the food chain and so tend to accumulate pollutants such as heavy metals and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) which are persistent in the environment. Female common seals feeding on fish with high levels of PCBs may fail to breed and pollution could thus hinder the recovery of some populations which have been reduced by disease.