

# Marine Code of Conduct

## *Pinnipeds (seals)*

### **Distribution**

Two seal species reside in the UK - the **Atlantic Grey seal** (*Halichoerus grypus*) and the **Common or Harbour seal** (*Phoca vitulina*). Globally, common seals outnumber grey seals but only account for approximately 5% in the UK. Grey seals in the UK account for up to 40% of the World's population (*Special Committee on Seals [SCOS], 2017*) and outnumber common seal species. Both seal species are protected in the UK under the Conservation of Seals Act 1970 and the Marine Scotland Act 2010).

### **Breeding**

Common seals can swim as soon as they are born but grey seal pups mostly remain on dry land before being weaned at around three weeks old. Pups rely on their mother's milk for the first few weeks of their lives and are maternally dependent. During this time, grey seal pups are vulnerable to disturbance.



Grey seal pup © Richard Bointon

The pupping season for grey seals is between September and December but this can vary depending on location (with breeding in the south beginning earlier than in northern colonies). In some areas the grey seal breeding season may begin in early August. The pupping season for common seals is between June and August (again subject to location within the UK).

Seal pups make a plaintive crying sound which is individually distinctive. Vocal recognition enables mothers to discriminate between their own and other pup

calls. Mothers will display aggression if approached by a pup that is not her own offspring.

Mother seals remain close to the pup's side, either resting on land or remaining vigilant in the surf a short distance away, and will only return to the open sea towards the end of the weaning period.

Before being weaned, some pups may become orphaned or stranded, especially after storms, and weaken quickly. The likely outcome if a seal pup is orphaned before it has weaned is that it will starve without its mother's milk. A seal pup should never be encouraged to go back into the sea as it may be too young to swim or injured, ill or exhausted.

It is important to note that although pups may appear to have been left alone, the mother may be resting in the surf or waiting to come ashore. It should also be noted that, towards the end of the weaning period, mother seals will leave pups on dry ground whilst they go off to forage, sometimes for many hours.

Many seal pups are taken into captivity because of cases of mistaken abandonment.

When a lone seal pup is found, it should be monitored for several hours from a safe distance to determine whether it has been abandoned. If there is no sign of the mother, the pup will need to be cared for at a rescue facility and bottle-fed every 4 to 6 hours.

The lanugo or 'baby fur' of common seals is shed in the womb before birth. Grey seal pups are born with a white coat of soft, downy hair and this is gradually replaced with a new coat.



Grey seal coat © Richard Bointon

Common seals can swim soon after birth. Grey seals will tentatively venture into the sea with their mother for impromptu swimming lessons but they don't venture

far from the shore and will not leave the shelter of the bay until they have weaned.

## **Moulting season**

Seals haul-out for resting, breeding and moulting and haul-out sites are carefully chosen to ensure protection from the elements. Seals are vulnerable to disturbance when they haul out in large numbers to moult and grow a new coat. Common seals haul out to moult at the start of July or August whilst grey seals haul out in early spring. During this time they may face disturbance from people, pets and boating activity. Human disturbance may lead to permanent abandonment of haul-out and breeding sites.

Seals also haul-out throughout the year to rest and digest their food.



Annual moult haul-out site © Richard Bointon

## **Disturbance**

One study suggests that behavioural changes caused by the presence of tourists could lead to negative consequences for seal welfare and may affect reproduction and survival (Öqvist, *et al*, 2018).

One of the biggest threats to seals is during the breeding and pupping season. Disturbances can interrupt lactation and cause mother and pup to become separated. It may lead to a mother abandoning her pup.

Threats come from many sources including the following:

- ! Recreational water sports (e.g. jet skis, kayaks, paddleboards)
- ! Dogs, walkers and photographers
- ! Tour boats and fishing
- ! Wildlife watching



- ! Drones
- ! Industrial development

Seals also face threats from plastic waste, pollution and entanglement with discarded fishing gear or flying rings (usually dog toys) which can result in injury and death.



Discarded fishing nets © Richard Bointon

Any source of disturbance can flush seals from resting places into the sea before they are ready.



Resting grey seals © Richard Bointon

## Stress responses

Seals may become habituated to repeated disturbance. This dilutes their natural responses to threats and may lead to decreased vigilance. Humans should not attempt to feed seals as this will eventually lead to the seal becoming habituated to human contact and result in the animal approaching people for food on land and on the water.

In the same way as humans, seals undergo stress ‘fight or flight’ responses when exposed to danger. This may manifest itself in increased heart and breathing rates and an increase in stress hormones (Creel et al., 2002).

When sensing danger on land, seals exhibit alert responses and increased vocalisation.

Responses	
1	The first response is to raise their heads and look in the direction of the disturbance
2	The second response is to start moving away from the disturbance
3	The third response is to move from the resting place and enter the water

## Flushing

When seals are disturbed into leaving their resting place and entering the water it is referred to as **flushing** and this may occur before the seal has rested sufficiently to recover oxygen supplies or energy.

## Tombstoning

Disturbance may cause seals to stampede to the safety of the water. In some cases this has led to young seals being trampled. When panicked, seals will jump from great heights (such as from large boulders) in an action known as **tombstoning**.

This can cause many injuries and even fatalities.

## Responsible behaviour

### On land

Seals should be viewed from a distance and dogs should be kept on leads to prevent disturbance, especially during pupping or moulting season.

When taking photographs use a zoom lens camera and stay out of sight.

**Remember that if a seal makes eye contact with you, you are too close!**

Do... ✓	Don't... ✗
✓ Be aware of behavioural and stress responses	✗ Let your dog off the lead near breeding seals
✓ Keep your distance, especially during breeding season and use binoculars to gain a good view	✗ Remain too long
✓ Avoid eye contact	✗ Impede a seal's access to the sea
✓ Allow seals to access a beach or haul out site	✗ Attempt to swim with seals
✓ Maintain a safe distance from seals (minimum 100 metres)	✗ Touch a seal or try taking selfies near one
✓ Be aware that noise levels disturb seals	✗ Feed a seal
✓ Minimise noise and use calm and controlled movements	✗ Move quickly towards a seal

- Seals can move quickly over land in short bursts so don't be fooled by their apparent docility.
- Seal bites can be painful and result in a bacterial infection known as 'SEAL FINGER' which creates a painful swelling that must be treated with antibiotics

### On water

Be aware of behaviour and stress responses of seals when in proximity to boats. It should be noted that seals need time to prepare for a dive to regulate breathing rate, heart rate and oxygen circulation so it is important that a seal has prepared before diving. If approached too quickly in the water, seals will dive with a noisy splash called 'crash diving'. Take the following precautions when on the water.

- ! Do not follow a seal in a boat
- ! Keep your boat at a steady speed and course
- ! When close to seals, slow down to a speed that does not create a wake (below 5 knots) and be aware of the danger of propeller strikes
- ! Do not land your boat at haul-out sites or try to go ashore
- ! Leave a good distance between your boat and the seal (minimum 100 metres).

Anyone concerned for a seal's safety should not approach but should call the BDMLR Rescue Hotline 01825 765546.