

Seals across the South West in 2019

Sue Sayer

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Introduction

This report has been produced to review the events of 2019 in relation to seal sightings, advocacy and action. Key to this has been the input from 'regions' around the south-west compiled by different authors as follows:

- Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly – Sue Sayer
- Somerset – Sue Sayer with data submitted by Vanessa Lloyd, Sea Watch Foundation
- North Devon: Lundy - Dean Woodfin Jones, Lundy Island Warden
- North Devon: Mainland - Kate Williams with data collected by Dave Jenkins
- South Devon - Sarah Greenslade, 'The Seal Project'
- Dorset - Sarah Hodgson of Dorset Wildlife Trust
- Channel Isles: Alderney - Dr Mel Broadhurst-Allen, Alderney Wildlife Trust
- Ireland - Sam Brittain, Animal Care Manager, Seal Rescue Ireland

This is an important step in the way we report our understanding of the seals in the south-west and all the authors and their teams of volunteers are to be commended for a fantastic effort. This report provides a summary for seals in the south-west, followed by short descriptions from each of these regions. We hope you find it useful and it would be great to hear any feedback that you have.



Overview – Seal Species in the South West

Common seals:

CSGRT had 82 reports of 88 common seal sightings from 12 different locations These were reported by 26 different individual volunteer recorders and as well as one of CSGRT's systematic Photo ID Project in Looe.

Grey seals:

All other records were grey seals

Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust

CSGRT continues to grow in all respects.

We ended 2019 with 4 paid rangers fully funded until end of July/August 2020 all thanks to money from the Heritage Fund, People's Postcode Lottery (Postcode Local Trust), Natural England, TEVI, LUSH cosmetics, TESCOS Bag of Help, Seal Protection Action Group, World Animal Protection, National Trust, Polzeath Marine Conservation Group, Aspects Holidays, Mungo Lils on the Hill, the Bowgie Inn, SeaChangers, Three Bays Wildlife, Hayle Lions and our incredible volunteer fundraising efforts and donations.

Our Rangers are:

- Amazement and Discovery/Photo ID Ranger (Marion Beaulieu)
- Creativity and Activity Ranger (Emily Pollitt)
- Sanctuaries at Sea Ranger (Sarah Millward)
- Research Ranger (Katie Bellman)

We hope to sustain our Rangers into the future by making our Business Plan targets a reality, through our online shop (gifts and clothing), our Wild Seal Supporter Scheme, donations and further grant funding applications.

Huge thanks to everyone who has contributed to this incredible achievement.

Our recording base grew to 376 volunteers, all of whom submitted at least one survey (with the Lizard team managing daily surveys for yet another year!) We received a total of 4459 discrete surveys in 2019 (that's over 12 each and every day) including 9 Looe Photo ID Project surveys, 9 boat Photo ID Project transects and our quarterly seal census, all of which covered 399 different seal locations. Our 20 PID Hubs processed a truly gobsmacking 120,743 photos in 2019 into 3284 survey albums resulting in 8722 seal identifications.

Seal advocacy informing management

All this data provides CSGRT with a robust evidence based from which we wrote 13 major reports, 9 public consultations submissions, designed 3 public signs at coastal locations and delivered input for 93 meetings with volunteers, partner organisations, business networks and statutory agencies. This included 2 meetings with the DEFRA policy advisor for seals and seabirds – in Truro and at the Home Office in London and we hope these will lead onto the creation of a Seal Network UK.

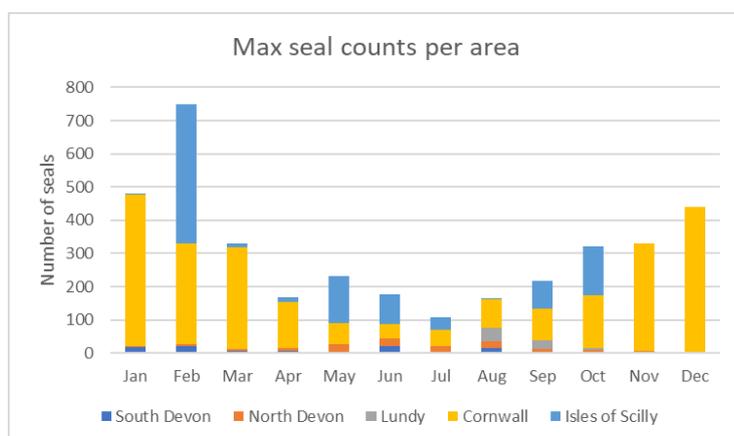
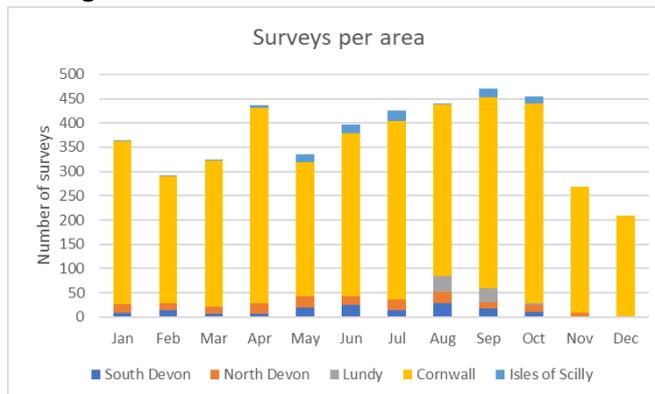
A key report on seal disturbance around the UK was compiled by Research Ranger Katie Bellman on behalf of the Seal Alliance NGO. She also collated a Ghost Gear literature review. As in previous years we continue to share evidence, information and advice with 4 global partners – World Animal Protection, the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, the Pinniped Entanglement Group and the 5 Gyres Trawlshare Microplastics Project.

SW regional seal data summary

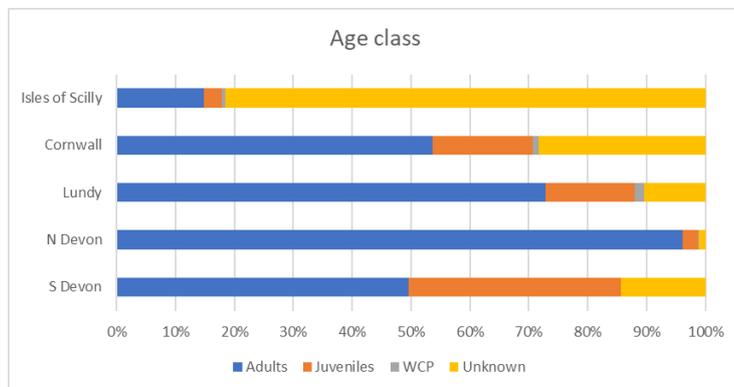
There are five main areas for seals within the southwest region

- North Devon
- Lundy
- Cornwall
- Isles of Scilly
- South Devon

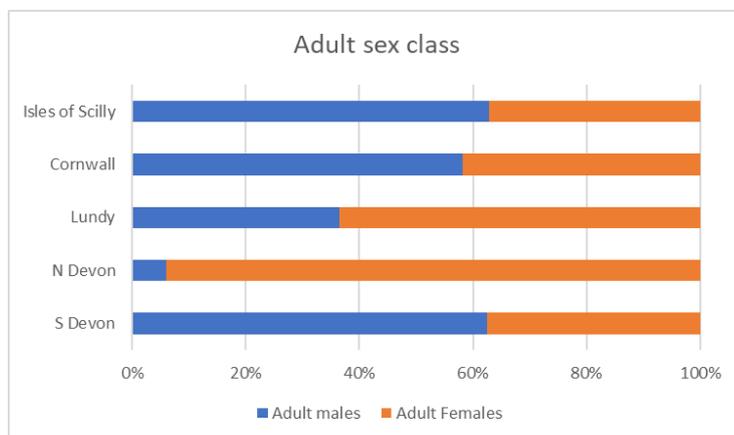
From these five areas, CSGRT received a total of 4415 surveys in 2019, all through the year with the least surveys conducted in December and the most conducted in September.



There was considerably more seasonal variation in the max counts of seals numbers across the year than survey effort. Seal counts peaked in the winter between December and February and was lowest during July, April and August.



Surveyor ability to age and sex class the seals observed varied across the region with a high proportion of seals being recorded as unknown on the Isles of Scilly (82%) and least number of seals of unknown age and sex being in North Devon (1%), where the vast majority of seals were adults (96%). In contrast, a much higher proportion of juveniles were recorded in South Devon (36%). Similar proportions of juveniles were recorded in Cornwall (17%) and Lundy (15%).



Where it was possible to age and sex the adult seals, their proportions were calculated and show considerable variability across the region, with proportionally more adult males being recorded in the Isles of Scilly (63%), South Devon (63%) and in Cornwall (58%). In contrast a higher proportion of adult females were recorded in North Devon (94%) and Lundy (64%). This suggests there may be a degree of spatial segregation by adult seals of different sexes.

Seal sightings and highlights

In January, 5 year old ex entangled ‘Lucky Bunting’ grabbed our attention with the 6 boyfriends she had, finally choosing to mate with 9 year old ‘Three Scars’. We tracked her progress all year and saw her in early September, but we have yet to find out where she chose to pup. Adult female ‘Legs’, who pupped at West Cornwall in 2018 suddenly became entangled in monofilament net in January and by the end of the month we were devastated to see that it had cut right through the skin encircling her neck. We also recorded a young male with the first deformed flipper we have ever seen. He was re-identified throughout the year so is thriving despite this. Through February and March we had new evidence of links made by travelling seals identified at both Cudden Point and the Lizard ‘Monkey wrench’ and our first seal link ever with the offshore lighthouse at Wolf Rock as the Lizard’s adult male ‘Splat’ turned up snoozing there. On 25th March, we were gobsmacked to discover during a single survey, at a single site on one day, seals that had previously been identified across Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset, England, Wales, France and Ireland! This emphasised the importance of a network of joined up sites being essential for the survival of this species.

In April to put a smile back on our faces, ex entangled adult male ‘Kettle’ who we have known since 2003 returned to West Cornwall and was seen sparring with the much younger adult male ‘Cat’ after a longer than usual absence. In May a welsh satellite tagged seal was photographed at North Cornwall where he seems to have journeyed from Pembrokeshire, before surprising us all by swimming straight back there. Two new seal links were discovered between mainland Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly in the form of ‘Frog Mouth’ and tagged seal ‘Wolf’. June was celebrated with two great IDs – adult female ‘Cable car’ (an entangled seal) still going strong. She has only been identified 23 times across 4 sites in the 16 years we have known her since her first ID in 2003. For the first time our volunteers have been able to effectively survey offshore islands at Pendeen and were rewarded by an ID of adult male ‘White ring teddie stripes’ – his 5th ID site. In July, adult male seal ‘Flying bird’ put in only his fourth appearance on Cornwall’s south coast in 18 years! He seems to

prefer it there now, as he has not yet returned to his usual haunts on the north coast. Beautiful adult female ‘Angel’ was identified at an offshore site near Trevoze, which was her 21st appearance in 6 years. This is the fourth time she has stopped off here to rest on her commute between the West and North Cornwall sites.



‘Tulip belle’ is a stunner and in August she amazed the seal world as we discovered not only had we known her since 2001, but that she had routinely visited the Isle of Man 450km away and where she had pups in 2012, 2013, 2016 and 2018! But it was back to reality with a bump, as we had photographs of adult female ‘Trunk’ being hooked for the fourth time just this summer, as

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Jan												2	2	4	2	1	1	2	5	19
Feb								2	1				2	2	2	1	1	2		13
Mar							1					1	2	1			1	3		9
Apr							1	1											1	8
May							1									1				2
Jun								1						1						2
Jul										1	1									2
Aug							2	2	3							1		1		9
Sep								2	1							1		2		5
Oct												1						7		0
Nov	1											2	2			3				1
Dec																				0
	1	0	0	0	0	0	5	8	5	1	1	6	11	8	4	10	3	19	6	70

an indirect result of people feeding her in Newquay Harbour. September’s highlights of our Lundy visits included identifying adult female ‘Hedge’ and 3 adult males – ‘Cat’, ‘Wolf eyes’ and ‘Heart BB’ – all from West Cornwall. Despite her painful entanglements, we were delighted to finally discover where ‘Trunk’ (who we’ve known since 2003) has her pups. There was another shock in store for us in October as Rupert Kirkwood photographed a common seal in the Fowey – this turned out to be an ex rehabilitated seal called

'Micky' from Holland! In peak pupping season, we celebrated the return of adult female 'Ghost' (after her worrying absence in 2018) as she returned to have her 16th pup in 17 years on exactly the same beach. Still a world record breaking achievement to the best of our knowledge! Other highlights included the entertaining juvenile male 'Nudger' originating on the Lizard, moving onto Looe and now the Roseland. Adult female 'Lightning' who has mostly been identified in Looe and who had pupped on the north coast in 2009, suddenly appeared after a storm with a pup in Mullion Harbour on the south coast – she has obviously not read her pupping handbook! We had more excitement as Dorset Wildlife Trust revealed that adult female 'Gambolling lamb' had returned to Portland from Cornwall. In November and December, ex rehab young adult female 'Orion' was videoed demonstrating adolescent 'crazy girl' behaviour that we think might be linked to hormonal changes as she matures. Sadly, we lost adult male 'Arc dot' who was found dead at Widemouth, but we took some solace from the fact that 'Tulip belle' had become a national celebrity seal!

Disturbance at all sites across the SW

We started the year with a serious disturbance incident at West Cornwall, part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest where seals are a special interest feature. This was reported to, and followed up successfully, by the Police and Natural England. During the peak season, Katie Bellman coordinated an incredible 82 systematic seal and human interaction surveys across four sites. From these dedicated disturbance surveys, 392 different disturbance incidents were recorded with 1956 individual seal reactions, all of which were likely to impact their metabolisms and physiology. High levels of disturbance occurred at all 4 sites with on average disturbance once every 14 to 29 minutes.

Entanglement at all sites across the SW

There were 707 sightings reported of entangled seals with a maximum of 16 different entangled seals being recorded on a single survey at West Cornwall on 05/12/19. Over 10 different entangled seals were recorded on 14 discrete surveys (all at West Cornwall). A total of 104 different entangled seals were observed and identified in 2019 (including LP517 adult female 'Severe nettie J' shown in the main photo below and juvenile 'Sad spikey' inset, who is unlikely to survive through to adulthood).



British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) activity across the SW

Across the UK, BDMLR had the highest number of call outs on record in 2019 – a total 1916, largely driven by rapidly increasing awareness of BDMLR, along with increasingly frequent, severe Atlantic winter storms driven by climate change, and apparently poor health in the East England common seal population.

Cornwall and Isles of Scilly 2019

Species

Common seals:

CSGRT had 55 sightings of common seal (all just of one common seal at a time although multiple individuals were seen across the sites) from seven different locations. These were reported by 21 different volunteer recorders as well as by one of CSGRT's systematic Photo ID Project in Looe.

Grey seals:

All other records were grey seals

Seal sightings and highlights

With huge public support, in 2019 alone, CSGRT received 4007 seal records from 319 different volunteer recorders and four systematic PIP teams (nine LISPIP; in addition to two STAPIP, four CASPIP and three POLPIP boat surveys across a 115km stretch of Cornwall's north coast).

Disturbance at all sites

Across Cornwall in 2019, there were 243 different disturbance incidents recorded with 1500 seals demonstrating level 3 responses (classed as severe) to a wide range of land, sea and air based stimuli. Most disturbance incidents were recorded in July to September and April when most people seals are present during the school holidays and most seals were severely disturbed during April and January when most seals are present and moulting at mainland haul out sites. Both these metrics represent an increase on 2018, although CSGRT have undertaken additional 82 systematic seal and human interaction surveys across four sites which increased recording effort.

Entanglement at all sites

In 2019 across Cornwall there were 475 records of 103 different entangled seals. The most shocking of the is adult female 'S524 Legs'. Known to CSGRT since 2012, Legs delighted us having a pup at the West Cornwall site in 2018. By 10/01/19, Legs has somehow managed to become entangled in a small amount of lost fishing gear around her neck. Within three weeks this had cut through her skin right around her neck. She was not seen again until the end of the year and by this time the net was causing a deep constriction around her neck.

Strandings (data from Cornwall Wildlife Trust's Marine Strandings Network)

In 2019 a record number of grey seals were recorded dead around the Cornish coast – 244 in total (just one less than the number of dead cetacean strandings). Most of these occurred between September and

S524 Legs – newly entangled ☹️
10/01/19



S524 Legs
31/01/19



S524 Legs
02/12/19 ©



February. The proportion of dead white coated pups peaked in September and October coinciding with the peak pupping season and moulted pup deaths peaked between October and January, most likely during their post weaning dispersal phase.

There were 4 matches with seals known to CSGRT that were reported to CWT MSN. These were young adult males 'Lobster tagine', 'Fright night' and 'Arc dot' and young adult female 'Boo'.

Lobster tagine had been known to CSGRT between 2015 and 2019 and was thought to be around seven years old and was last live sighted 23 days before his dead body was found.

Fright night was first identified in 2015 and had been seen another 53 times since at West Cornwall. His death at Watergate in September was a surprise to us all as he was thought to be less than ten years old.

The oldest of all the seals, adult male Arc dot was found dead at Widemouth at the end of the year. He was thought to be in his prime at around 12 years old. At death he did seem to be very thin. We had known him since 2012 but he obviously spent most of his time somewhere else as we only saw him at the start and end of the year at West Cornwall.

DP582 Arc dot

DP582	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Jan								0
Feb		1						1
Mar		1						1
Apr			1	1				2
May								0
Jun								0
Jul								0
Aug								0
Sep								0
Oct								0
Nov			2				1	3
Dec	1				1			3
	1	2	3	1	1	0	1	10



Boo was an ex British Divers Marine Life Rescue seal who was rehabilitated at the Cornish Seal Sanctuary. She had been identified by CSGRT since her release between 2013 and 2019 and had been identified at three different north coast sites. She was known to have had a pup in 2018 at West Cornwall (see below).



Seal call outs (data from British Divers Marine Life Rescue)

In 2019, BDMLR had a total of 429 seal call outs in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, resulting in 139 rescues.



Dramatic rescue of lucky seal pup from remote site 30/09/19 by CSGRT and BDMLR (Photo Adrian Langdon)

Post Mortem Examinations (PME) (summary of post mortem findings in grey seals in Cornwall 2019 by James Barnett, veterinary pathologist for the Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme at the University of Exeter)

16 grey seal pups, three juvenile grey seals and two adult grey seals that stranded on the coasts of Cornwall in 2019 were subjected to post mortem examination at the Environment and Sustainability Institute on the University of Exeter's Penryn Campus.

Of the 16 pups, 11 were found alive and died or were euthanased at rescue or in the first week of rehabilitation. The findings in nine pups were consistent with infectious disease, conditions seen including parasitic and bacterial pneumonia, pyothorax, mandibular osteomyelitis and glossitis secondary to oral trauma, septicaemia secondary to pelvic abscessation and to gastric ulceration, and purulent arthritis and tenosynovitis. All four pups where the primary condition was head trauma, including mandibular fracture, maxillary fractures, skull fracture and an intracranial bleed. Two pups had lesions that couldn't be classified readily as infectious disease or trauma; one pup had intestinal impaction and acute renal medullary necrosis, and the other had gastric impaction with feathers and is likely to have ultimately drowned.

Two of the three juvenile seals were found dead and had traumatic injuries associated with fisheries interaction, with both being found in nets. The first was found in a small amount of monofilament netting encircling the chest and histopathology was consistent with an acute death, suggesting the animal was cut out of the net after being bycaught. The second had 35kg of net and rope encircling the neck causing a deep, wide wound that was aged at 2-3 weeks on histopathology and was probably the most severe case of net entanglement I had seen in a seal. The third juvenile seal died of infectious disease; suppurative meningoencephalitis.

One adult male seal was found alive and euthanased due to its lethargic state; this animal had succumbed to infectious disease, having a large abscess in the mesenteric lymph node and associated peritonitis, the infection probably originating in the intestinal tract. The second adult male seal was found dead and had acute renal tubular injury that was most likely toxic or hypoxic in origin, the precise cause not being possible to determine.

Somerset - data submitted by Vanessa Lloyd Sea Watch Foundation

Seal sightings and highlights

2019 had a total of 5 casual sightings of grey seals and 4 effort-based sightings of grey seals recorded as part of the Sea Watch Foundation land watches. All sightings were recorded between May and August from Hurlstone Point, and all seals were in the water.

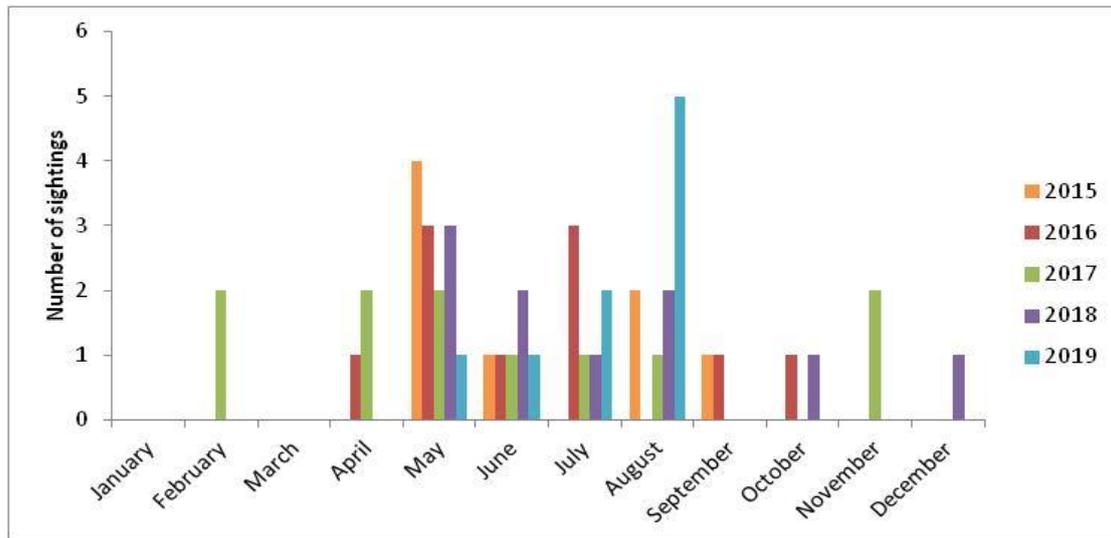


Figure 1. Somerset seal sightings 2015-2019 per month



Research reports, projects and plans

All seal sightings were collated as part of a Sea Watch Foundation Regional Coordinator volunteer role for Somerset & Exmoor which started in 2014. Overall, sightings records and survey effort have been low along Somerset's coast, except for at one sighting hotspot at Hurlstone Point. For 2020, in collaboration with the Somerset Wildlife Trust, effort surveys have been organised every month at a different location to help boost sightings data and to provide a clearer picture of abundance and distribution of marine mammals along Somerset's coast. In addition, several training days in survey methodology and marine mammal identification will take place with the aim to help increase the number of regular volunteer observers completing effort surveys independently.

North Devon: Lundy - report by Dean Woodfin Jones Lundy Island Warden



Seals on Rat Island with one animal badly entangled in a discarded fishing line © Dean Woodfin Jones

The Atlantic Grey seal population has been monitored annually on Lundy since 2011 and to a varying degree beforehand. Previously, the surveys have been carried out by the Conservation Team throughout the breeding season in order to understand the distribution, population dynamics and productivity of this iconic Lundy mammal (Jones, 2017). In 2016 the survey method was reviewed to enable the data collected at Lundy to contribute to wider seal population assessments, such as the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) national seal surveys. It was not possible to undertake observations by boat in 2019 therefore all results have come via land-based observations.

Seal sightings and highlights

The highest count of seals within the survey period was 206 animals (125 females, 34 males, 29 juveniles, three weaners, seven white-coat pups and nine adults of unknown sex) on September 15th, 17 fewer animals than the highest count of 2018, 30 more than the highest count of 2017 and 35 more animals than the mean highest counts since 2006. Similar to the surveys of 2018 & 2017, the majority of animals around the island within each survey were females with some of those, from observational notes, showing obvious signs of pregnancy in some of the popular haul out areas, especially at the start of the land-based surveys.

Unlike counts from the previous two years however, this highest count of 2019 occurred in September rather than at the start of the main pupping season. If we do not consider the ten pups, the number of animals present on September 15th is very similar to counts from the start of the monitoring period e.g. August 4th – 194 animals (152 females, 25 males, eight juveniles and 18 adults of unknown sex). As you can see from these two examples, after the initial counts at the start of the season, the number of female seals dropped slightly, possibly due to some of the pregnant females moving into the island's inaccessible coastal caves to pup or to other areas in the SW after conditioning themselves in Lundy waters. Again similar to the previous two years, there was an obvious increase in males around the island by mid-September compared to the start of August, possibly turning up later than the females to patrol beaches and females in order to conceive next year's pups.

Unsurprisingly, the distribution of seals around Lundy is heavily influenced by both weather and sea state. From observations at times when the winds came directly from either the north or south, animals seemed to disappear and move off from some of the more popular haul outs e.g. Rat and Mouse Island either to areas away from the island or to some of the caves or more sheltered bays on the island (e.g. Three-quarter Wall Bay).

The highest number of animals hauled out from the 46 sub-sections (Jones, 2017) within the survey period was from the Mousehole and Trap area on August 4th – here 45 individuals were counted hauled out on the rocks immediately below the buttress (highest count area in 2018 was North of Gannets Rock). On average however the rocks and small islets at Puffin Slope and Kittiwake Gully (Three-Quarter Wall Bay and Brazen Ward in 2018) were found to be the most popular throughout the study period (a mean of 17 animals throughout the season).

Other notable haul outs recorded outside of the main surveys included the rocks just north of the Devil's Slide on July 3rd – here 31 seals were hauled out together during a period of strong easterlies. Additionally, and unlike the last two years, a number of rather significant haul outs were noted on Quarry Beach on a number of dates in November e.g. 35 animals on November 28th. The lee of Rat Island also became a popular haul out site during a prolonged period of SW gales in October –here between 34 and 40 animals were counted each day between October 5th – 12th (Dean Jones & Martin Thorne).

The first pup of 2019 occurred on July 28th within Gannets' Bay (Rob and Sue Waterfield) - 21 days earlier than the first of 2018 (August 18th from Ladies Beach) and 13 days earlier than the first in 2017 (August 8th at Whites Beach).

A total of 43 individual white-coat pups were recorded in 2019, 17 more pups than both the 2018 and 2017 totals. (Correction from 2018 report; post review of photos of suckling mothers on Ladies Beach, PUP16 was found to be PUP12 thus reducing total number of pups in 2018 to 26). This however is an underestimate of the overall productivity for Lundy, as there would be many more pups present hidden within the island's inaccessible sea caves. Despite this, 2019 saw the highest number of white-coat pups ever to be recorded on Lundy exceeding the previous record of 38 pups in 2012, a count which included pups born in sea-caves and moulted pups of unknown origin (not included in the 2019 surveys).



LUN315 (Lady Three) suckling her new-born pup on one of the island's east coast beaches © Dean Woodfin Jones

We think that the rather dramatic increase in the number of recorded pups this year - other than the possibility that 2019 was a good year for productivity a - had partly come about via the displacement of animals from inaccessible coves and caves by storms and high spring tides in mid-late September, into some of the conspicuous east coast bays e.g. on September 27th after a period of foul weather and big tides, several large white-coat pups and two weaners turned up in the Landing Bay (all other known pups from the east coast were present in their original sites on this day also).

The last white-coat pup to be recorded was on November 28th from Quarry Beach, seven days later than the last of 2018 and 26 days later than that of 2017.

This season saw an increase in survey effort as members from Cornwall Seal Group and Research Trust submitting numerous observations whilst here with the Septimus exhibition in St Helen's Church for six weeks.

Rescue, rehabilitation and release

One such displaced pup subsequently became separated from its mother at around one week old and after a number of days of observations (no sign of any mother and rapidly deteriorating in health); the animal was caught and sent off for rehabilitation (October 3rd). Special thanks to the BDMLR and RSPCA West Hatch for all their help and advice with regards to this rescue. The rescued seal was given the name of Lady Lundy and developed very well under care and was released on January 3rd 2020 at Combe Martin after being fitted with a red flipper tag 80383.

LUN514 Tag Red 80280 Skoda White V



LUN514 (Skoda) one of the re-habilitated seals re-sighted on Lundy. Observed by Rat Island on 07/10/19 with two other tagged seals (Coyote (see below) and orange tag 083 origin unknown – now LUN512) ©Photos Martin Thorne.

Strandings

Furthermore, a number of conspicuous dead pups were seen floating offshore this year, some near cave entrances in the NE, which if alive may not have been accounted for in 2019. The general impression from observers and volunteer staff was that the level of mortality of young pups was rather high in 2019 with a least 11 pups (26% of all pups) being found dead throughout the season.

Human impacts (entanglement, disturbance, bycatch etc)

Three records of entanglement were recorded in 2019 involving three different animals (six in 2018) being ensnared with discarded fishing equipment (one adult male, one adult female and one juvenile).

Seal disturbance was recorded during one out of eleven land based surveys though there numerous other disturbances recorded outside of these. This primarily involved visiting dive boats but also kayaks, stand-up-paddle boards, one instance of a visiting group of jet skis who were cautioned by the police after illustrating a complete disregard for the islands wildlife and other users of the MPA, as well as people approaching animals close to the shore – particularly at Brazen Ward. Worryingly this also included one instance of disturbance of a number of pregnant females along the east coast - flushed from the shore by a local and Lundy accredited charter (contacted via email on September 19th). A re-fresher course for all Lundy accredited vessels has been planned for 2020.

Seal sightings and notable highlights

A total of 14 Lundy animals were re-sighted in 2019 which includes seven breeding females from previous surveys – details can be found below. Additional to this, six animals were re-sighted from areas elsewhere in the SW as well as a number of tagged seals (re-habilitated animals), two of which we have been luckily to receive information on thanks to the keen eyes and camera skills of Martin Thorne. For details on photo identification of seals, please refer to the Cornwall Seal Group and Research Trust website (CSGRT, 2019).

Lundy Breeders

LUN250 (Landing Bay Lady) – Re-sighted on 10/09/19.

2019 – Mother to PUP12, location unknown, re-located to Landing Bay.

2018 – Mother to PUP05 on Ladies Beach, re-sighted on 07/09/18 (re-located to Landing Bay).

2017 – Successfully raised a pup on Landing Bay Beach in 2017 (initial identification).

LUN315 (Lady Three) alt name LuF1 3 – Re-sighted on 02/09/19.

2019 – Mother to PUP06 on Ladies Beach.

2018 – Mother to PUP03 on White Beach, re-sighted on 07/09/18.

2007 – First identified on 17/01/07 – location not noted - by Coxyson Scubadoos.

LUN316 (Spotty/Crazy lobster) – Re-sighted on 13/09/19.

2019 – Mother to PUP17 on White Beach.

2018 – Mother to PUP04 on White Beach, sighted on 07/09/18 (initial identification).

LUN327 (Black Nose/Short legged Dog) - Re-sighted on 13/09/19.

2019 – Mother to PUP16 on White Beach 2019.

2018 – Mother to PUP11 on Ladies Beach, re-sighted on 18/09/18.

2012 – Matched up to LUN159 in the Catalogue from 03/08/2012 (initial identification).

LUN343 (Little Faucet/Two Legged Crab) – Re-sighted 19/09/19.

2019 – Mother to PUP20 on Ladies Beach.

2018 – Mother to PUP20 in Lametry Bay – 03/10/18 (initial identification).

LUN 345 (Cookie Cutter) – Re-sighted on 23/09/19 in Lametry Bay.

2019 – Not recorded with a Pup but was showing signs of heavy pregnancy when she was recorded.

2018 – Mother to PUP21 on Ladies Beach - 18/10/2018.

LUN332 (Omega) – Initial re-sighting was on 20/09/19 at Ladies Beach (Jan Whittington).

2019 – Not recorded with Pup but breeding possible.

2018 – Mother of PUP14 on Ladies Beach - 24/09/18.

Other Lundy re-sightings.

LUF146 (Pale spook)

2019 – Seen East Mid Island on 22/8/19 – Sue Sayer and Marion Beaulieu.

2017 First recorded on 29/7/2017, No location - Alison Shearer.

LuF150 (Nettie x c)

2019 – Seen bottling in Landing Bay on 24/09/2019 – Sue Sayer & Marion Beaulieu.

2017 – First recorded 29/07/2017, No location – Alison Shearer.

LUN244 (Cloud Spot)

2019 – Seen East Mid Island on 23/8/19 by Sue Sayer and Marion Beaulieu and 25/8/19 Halfway Wall Bay Terry Carne.

2015 – First recorded 23/7/2015 Lundy East side (from boat) Dave Jenkins.

LUN277 Scythe

2019 – Seen East Mid Island on 23/8/19 by Sue Sayer and Marion Beaulieu.

2015 – First recorded on 23/7/2015 Lundy East side (from boat) Dave Jenkins.

LUN285 Horse and rider

2019 – Seen East Mid Island on 22/8/19 by Sue Sayer and Marion Beaulieu.

2018 – First recorded 25/5/2018 Lundy Frenchman’s Creek by Sue Sayer, Kate Williams and Marion Beaulieu.

LUN286 Caterpillar with earmuffs

2019 – Brazen Ward on 18/8/19 by Caitlin Cunningham. Also seen at Morte Point, North Devon 15/8/19 Dave Jenkins (MPF541).

2018 – First recorded on 25/5/2018 Lundy Frenchman’s Creek by Sue Sayer, Kate Williams and Marion Beaulieu.

LUN335 Five Dice

2019 – Recorded on Ladies Beach on 22/09/19 by Jan Whittington.

2018 – First recorded on 26/9/2018 on Ladies Beach (not recorded as having a pup).

Sightings from elsewhere

DP400 Wolf Eyes (Male) RSPCA (Taggie)

2019 – Gannets’ Combe on 10/09/19. Last seen in West Cornwall 07/03/19 by Sue Sayer & Kate Hockley

2017 – First recorded in West Cornwall 17/02/17 by Sue Sayer & Kate Lockley

S2128 Hedge (Female)

2019 – Brazen Ward on 22/08/19. Last seen in West Cornwall 21/02/19 by Sue Sayer.

2018 – First recorded in West Cornwall 15/02/18 by Sue Sayer

DP380 Heart Bum Bites (Male)

2019 – Landing Bay on 12/09/19 (Beachmaster). Last seen in West Cornwall 07/04/19 by Katie Bellman.

2009 – First recorded in West Cornwall 31/08/09 by Sue Sayer & Terry Hocking.



DP380 (Heart Bum Bites):
First recorded in West Cornwall on August 31st 2009 by Sue Sayer & Terry Hocking, an area where he had been seen every year since (Last seen in West Cornwall April 7th 2019 by Katie Bellman)- took over LUN252 as this year’s Landing Bay Beachmaster
©Photos Sue Sayer.



S1280 Cat Conductor (Male)

2019 – North End on 23/08/19. Last seen in West Cornwall 05/04/19 by Sue Sayer.

2014 – First recorded in West Cornwall 22/12/14 by Sue Sayer.

Skoda - Flipper Tag 80280 (BDMLR name- Phoenix).

2019 - Re-sighted on 07/10/19 next to Rat Island by Martin Thorne. Skoda was admitted to RSPCA West Hatch via BDMLR from Hayle in Cornwall on 24/12/2018. He was very thin and had multiple minor wounds and weighed 12.75 kg. After treatment and rehab, he was released at Combe Martin in N. Devon on 12/04/2019 weighing 41kg.

Coyote - Flipper Tag 80357

2019 - Re-sighted on 07/10/19 next to Rat Island by Martin Thorne. Coyote was admitted to RSPCA West Hatch via BDMLR on 12/01/2019 from Donderry Beach, Whitsand Bay in Cornwall with an abscess and numerous wounds. Again after treatment and rehab, he was released at Combe Martin on 11/04/2019. He also weighed 41kg at release

Seal call outs (data from British Divers Marine Life Rescue)

In 2019, BDMLR had a total of 22 seal call outs in North Devon/Lundy resulting in 6 rescues.

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to all who submitted seal counts and disturbance records in 2019. Special thanks to Samantha Nieto (Volunteer Assistant Warden) for all her hard work and enthusiasm towards this year's surveys. Thank you also to the following for assistance with fieldwork and the islands photo identification catalogue, short term volunteers Caitlin Cunningham and Gareth Richards, Jan Whittington, Martin Thorne, Dave Jenkins, Terry Carne, Sarah Millward, Tina Robinson, Bex Allen, Jim Wilson, Andrea & Steven Worley, Jonathan Bowell, Kevin Gibbs, Paul Dean and Nicki Hattingh.

Finally a massive thank you to Sue Sayer, Kate Williams, Marion Beaulieu, Rob Wells and all of the volunteers from the Cornwall Seal Group and Research Trust for all their amazing work with regards to training volunteers, taking and processing masses of photographs for the islands identification catalogue and for their general and endless kindness and passion for these wonderful marine mammals.

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North Devon – mainland report by Kate Williams (data collected by Dave Jenkins)

Research summary

Surveying of grey seals around the North Devon coast continued through 2019 producing the tenth year of survey data for this area. Numbers were consistent with previous years with most seals recorded being adult female and seen in peak numbers through the summer months before dispersing to pup. Nursing mothers were surveyed on Lundy Island from August through to November but no photo ID matches were made to seals recorded along the North Devon coast suggesting that the North Devon coastal seals do not use the island to pup on. Seals that spend their summer months in North Devon have been recorded with pups in West Cornwall and also recorded there post pupping.

As at the end of 2019, 82% of the different seals in the North Devon photo identification catalogue were female. The number of seals in the catalogue and the number added to the catalogue each year does not indicate population size. This site is part of a network of sites connected by seals across the Celtic Sea so the numbers vary because different seals are identified each year.

Seal sightings and notable highlights

During February and March four seals that have previously been linked to Lundy Island reappeared.

In April and May a lot of the regular females started to arrive including the most regular visitor “Scarfe” (named for her entanglement scar) – see below.



In April, another female seal “Sitting Bull” was recorded - this seal appears once each spring and once each autumn so perhaps she is travelling to and from her preferred summer location.

June was a busy month for tourists with trip boats from Ilfracombe touring the north coast sometimes on an hourly basis. Knowing that the entertainment of their customers relies on seeing seals they are usually careful with their approach and it is unusual for the seals to be disturbed. Disturbance is more often caused by the unexpected approach of small craft, in particular kayaks that hug the coast and appear suddenly, surprising the seals. The regular trip boat visits continued right through the summer.

In July one an adult male seal “Rocket” appeared and stayed until the end of September. He was recorded visiting north Devon in 2017 and 2018. In August a second, younger male seal arrived “Ford” who was first recorded as a juvenile male in 2017 and now is looking quite adult. He spent time frolicking in the water with a couple of the younger females.



“Ford” (male) and Bunting” (female)

During September, The Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust visited Lundy Island with the “Septimus” exhibition and with more volunteers on the island there was an increase in photographs received for ID. Links were made to four seals that have been seen in West Cornwall. Two red flipper tagged seals were seen and identified, both had been rehabilitated at RSPCA West Hatch after being rescued as white coat pups in West Cornwall (see Lundy section). This information thrilled the staff at West Hatch, one was a 2018 pup and the other a 2019 pup. Both had been released in North Devon. Surveying of the pups born on Lundy by the warden and his team was very successful, re-identifying seven females who had pupped on the island in previous years.

Seal sightings dropped off in November but one adult female, a regular in North Devon, made two trips to West Cornwall and back to North Devon. She is the first seal in the North Devon photo ID catalogue, the one that started all this hard work!

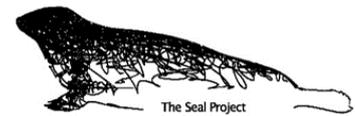


North Devon	20/08/2019
West Cornwall	07/09/2019
North Devon	03/10/2019
North Devon	20/10/2019
West Cornwall	02/12/2019

Seal call outs (data from British Divers Marine Life Rescue)

In 2019, BDMLR had a total of 22 seal call outs in North Devon/Lundy resulting in 6 rescues.

South Devon: Report by Sarah Greenslade 'The Seal Project'



Research reports, projects and plans

At 'The Seal Project' we record seals in the area on almost a daily basis, with intentions to extend our area of reach. We had a variety of engagements and educational based projects organized, including a variety of talks and collaborations with Fishcombe Cove Café, Operation Cetacean, Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award Students, Brixham College and Plymouth University.

We are now recognized within the Brixham area as the 'go to' people to contact if anyone has concerns about seals in the area. We have a good an ongoing relationship with MDL Brixham Marina who allow us free access to the Marina to survey the seals within the wavescreen. This relationship works well, however even they are aware of the ongoing issue of seal awareness in the area. A situation sometimes taken advantage of. Hence the Marina themselves do not promote seal sightings as this caused some considerable "rubber necking" water-based traffic over the summer season last year. This was not just from other private vessels but also pleasure boats. This is something we do need to work on, with the local pleasure boat companies.

We intend to get involved in more educational projects and engage more people in surveying our shores, recording the seals and building up more data which we share with the Seal Research Trust, whilst educating as many people as we can about these amazing creatures. Our talks in educational settings so far have been very well received and as soon as we can, we will strive to get back out there and work with as many interested parties as we can.



Our current situation means our seals as, well as ourselves are living in a very different world. Brixham seals use a man-made structure to haul out on which in itself is unusual. At this present time they are few in number. It is strange to see such a setting for resting seals – on a man-made haul out directly opposite one of the country's biggest fishing ports. Town mouse and Country mouse springs to mind. These seals learn to live with the noise and the chaos of a busy port, yet I've seen seals in Cornwall panic at a mere coughing from people on cliffs above them. This does however give them the benefit of not having to worry about incoming or outgoing tides. The wavescreen rises and falls with the tide, and therefore seals can go totally undisturbed. This means surveying them at specific tide times really doesn't work here.

This position also gives them clear view of any potential threat. They are protected on three sides by the wooden structure, but at any time can access the deep water below them and escape.

Brixham Marina Wavescreen, Brixham (Oct 2019).

Common and grey seals Report submitted by Ellie Knott (CSGRT Photo ID Co-ordinator for S Devon Hub)

Common seals are mainly found around the coast of Scotland, particularly in the Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland, and the east coast of England around the Thames estuary and The Wash. However, a few are occasionally found around the south coast of Devon.

It is difficult to say how many there are, as it is not always easy to tell a common seal from a grey seal, and they are often just spotted once. It could be that the common seals are calling in to south Devon on the way to somewhere else. Rupert Kirkwood saw three common seals hauled out together on the pontoons in the Dart Estuary in March 2019 (see photo below) but they haven't been reported since so have probably moved on. However, a common seal known as Zorro (for a Z shaped mark on his neck) was a regular on the pontoons in Brixham harbour between May and July 2019.

Common seals are also present in the Exe Estuary, and these do seem to be staying in the area. The seal known as EXC1 was seen regularly in 2012 and 2013, hauled out on the sandbanks, and may have been recorded in 2016 (though this could not be confirmed). EXC9 was first recorded in 2016, and was spotted again in February 2020. Common seals, like grey seals, have a unique pattern of spots, so individuals can be identified from photos.

Seals that have spent some time in a rescue centre are tagged when they are released, and this can also help track where they have been. A juvenile female common seal was photographed hauled out at Bull Hill, Exe Estuary in November 2018. A tag on her hind flipper showed that she had travelled from France, as the tag came from the seal rescue centre in Normandy. Staff at the rescue centre said that she had been rescued on 12th of July 2018, and released on the 6th of October at Yport, France. By the 22nd of November she had made it to Devon and the Exe Estuary; where she went after that nobody knows.



Seal sightings and notable highlights Report by Sarah Greenslade from 'The Seal Project'



BRX16 Boat W Little Fox Flying gull AKA Speardy

This seal was my first BDMLR (British Divers Marine Life Rescue) Marine Mammal Medic call out in September 2017. A seal with a spear in her back. This made international news. I followed her around the Bay on numerous callouts for a couple of weeks. She miraculously has survived without intervention and the spear came away seemingly by itself. She is regularly seen in the same haul out spot at low tide at certain times of the year.

BRX16 at Fishcombe Cove, Brixham (September 2017).

BRX16 at Fishcombe Cove, Brixham (August 2019).



BRX41 Rocky

Rocky appeared in 2018 and became a regular call out issue. She favored hauling out high on the rocks along Brixham Breakwater, which left her visible and accessible to humans and dogs. Her highlight was when she appeared on the side of Shoalstone Sea Water pool – eventually fell in and left via the plug hole! She had obvious bald patches – which made her recognizable when she returned later in the year – glowing orange! When she was last seen, the orange had gone.



BRX41 Rocky on breakwater (Mar 2018).

BRX41 Rocky on breakwater (Apr 2019).

BRX53 Flame

Flame chose steps on Brixham Breakwater as her favoured haul out and was again, distinctive by her markings and an orange ‘flame’ like coloration. Observed numerous times throughout 2019/20, showing good rate of growth. This seal has now lost her orange tint and was last observed in Torquay Harbour on 18th April 2020 eating Cuttlefish. Regular on the Breakwater and the Marina Wavescreen.

BRX53 Flame on breakwater near anglers (Jan 2019).

BRX53 Flame on breakwater (Jul 2019).



BRX104 Zorro (Common Seal)

This Common Seal chose the same haul out spot for several weeks. Seen regularly at daybreak from May to June. Always leaving the confines of the Marina area before 6am. Only coming back to haul out next to the Lifeboat after dark.

BRX104 Zorro Lifeboat Station Steps, Brixham (May 2019).



Juno (tagged seal)

In December 2019 we came across a tagged seal on the Marina Wavescreen. On sending this to the Seal Research Trust, this orange tagged seal was recognized as JUNO Number 198. Rescued from Tresco on the Isles of Scilly in December 2013. Released in May 2014 on the west side of the Lizard in Cornwall and identified in Brixham in December 2019.

JUNO Marina Wavescreen, Brixham (Dec 2019).



Strandings: two examples Sarah Greenslade from 'The Seal Project'



01/12/2019 Breakwater (beach), Brixham (Deceased)

Seal pup washed up on Breakwater beach following a bout of inclement weather. Authorities notified and removed. Deceased seal pup on Brixham Breakwater beach (Dec 2019).



29/10/2019 Elberry beach, Brixham (Deceased)

White coat seal pup (around 2 weeks old) washed up on Elberry beach following a bout of inclement weather. Authorities notified and removed. Deceased white coat seal on Elberry beach (Oct 2019).

Rescue to rehabilitation: two examples:

03/02/2019 Outer Harbour, Brixham (alive)

Call received to assess a lethargic seal pup hauled out on the outer harbour slipway at Oxen Cove. This is a busy working area and popular route for dog walkers. Seal pup was underweight (19.2kg) with minor trauma to his back and rear flipper. Extracted and taken to RSPCA West Hatch Wildlife Centre for vet intervention. Making good progress with recovery. Due for release soon.



Seal pup on slipway at Brixham outer harbour (Feb 2020).

Seal pup ready for transit to RSPCA West Hatch Wildlife Centre (Feb 2020).



03/01/2019 Breakwater (North end), Brixham (alive)

Seal pup dehydrated, undernourished (19.7kg) with infected mouth assessed and monitored. Extracted and taken to RSPCA West Hatch Wildlife Centre for vet intervention. Made a full recovery. Release back into the wild 4 months later.

Seal pup with infected mouth on Brixham Breakwater (Jan 2019). The Seal Project surveyors at work.



Seal call outs (data from British Divers Marine Life Rescue)

In 2019, BDMLR had a total of 30 seal call outs in South Devon resulting in 6 rescues.

Dorset - report submitted by Sarah Hodgson of Dorset Wildlife Trust



Seal sightings and notable highlights

In 2019, a total of 85 casual seal sightings were recorded in Dorset. This figure has gone down since 2018 but it's difficult to know whether this is indicative of a decrease in seals in the area as these are casual sightings and no effort-based surveys have been conducted.

Grey seals were spotted most frequently, 50 times. Common seals were recorded on 19 occasions and the remaining 16 sightings were unconfirmed species.

Seals were recorded along the length of the Dorset coast throughout the year. Last year there was a drop in the number of sightings between June to August. The highest number of seal sightings were in May (n=14) and September (n=12).

A further 12 seals were added to the Dorset Seal photo id catalogue during the course of the year bringing the total number of catalogued individuals to 62. There were several re-matches including a large adult male grey seal that was spotted in February, March and April hauled out on pontoons in Lyme Regis.

The first seal to be added to the Dorset seal photo ID catalogue in 2014, 'Fiver', was matched a further 3 times during 2019 at the same spot and has now been recorded 33 times over 6 consecutive years. Molar aka Gambolling lamb (right taken by Sarah Hodgson), the only seal to be matched in both Dorset and Cornwall, was recorded at Portland Bill again in the autumn, 3 years since her first and last visit.



A very young common seal was spotted in Poole Harbour in September. This was a new individual which was seen interacting and hauling out with the other resident seals in the area. There were a flurry of sightings from members of the public and the juvenile was captured on the remote camera set up to monitor the haul out but after a few days it wasn't seen again.

Rescues and rehabilitation

In November BDMLR medics were called to the report of an injured grey seal pup that had hauled out onto Chesil Beach. The seal was underweight and with a deep wound on one of its fore flippers so was lifted from the beach, taken into a local wildlife rescue facility overnight before being transferred to West Hatch the following morning. The wound had gone right down to the knuckles and the bones were infected so the decision was made to euthanise the seal. It's possible that the injury could have been caused by entanglement in monofilament line or similar. It later transpired that the RSPCA had been called earlier in the day to the pup on another part of the beach but due to disturbance from people getting too close it had been flushed into the sea preventing rescuers from reaching it sooner.

Strandings and Post Mortem Examinations (PME)

Three dead seals were discovered along the Dorset Coast in 2019: 1 grey seal, 1 common and 1 unidentified. No necropsies were carried out, so the cause of death remains unknown although there were no obvious signs of trauma or entanglement.

Seal call outs (data from British Divers Marine Life Rescue)

In 2019, BDMLR had a total of 4 seal call outs in Dorset resulting in 1 rescue.

Channel Isles: Alderney

Authors: Dr Mel Broadhurst-Allen, Alderney Wildlife Trust

Research reports and projects

For 2019, the Alderney Wildlife Trust (AWT) completed monthly land and vessel based observation surveys for marine mammals across Alderney (Channel Islands), throughout the summer. A grey seal population assessment was also completed during their breeding season (October – November).

The land-based surveys provided a limited number of marine mammal observations.

The vessel based surveys for 2019, however, produced the largest number of grey seal sightings to date. Approximately 40 sightings of grey seals were spotted, from April – August, with individuals usually seen in groups of approximately 12 around offshore islets, including the Renoquet Reefs. The population assessment was also a success, with several females and our charismatic large male seal hauled out on these islets during each visit (within their breeding season).

Photographs of grey seal individuals were taken during surveys (see below taken on 29/08/19 by Dani Clifford) and also opportunistic sightings to help build a (basic) seal photographic identification catalogue. This is shared with UK, Channel Islands and French seal experts to identify seal movements/visits/group dynamics across the Channel.

Seal sightings and highlights

The notable highlight for 2019 was good weather and tides (!) for us to be able to complete the regular vessel based surveys, compared to previous years. These surveys are in collaboration with marine conservation bodies across the other Channel Islands and France, such as La Société Guernesiaise. Initial information suggests the abundance of grey seals is highest on Alderney during the breeding season, compared to the other Channel Islands and French survey sites.

Management actions

The update of current marine mammals proposed in 2018/early 2019 has since been postponed. The local government, the States of Alderney, are looking to create new wildlife and conservation legislation, which will look to encompass terrestrial, bird and marine habitats/species, including marine mammals. We look forward to more information on that in the coming year!



Ireland

Author: Sam Brittain (Animal Care Manager, SRI).

Figures obtained from 2019 and January to March 2020.

Research reports and projects

In Summer 2019, we successfully completed a research project attaching heart rate monitors to our common seals. The aim was to discover what processes of rehabilitation and being in the centre were causing stress to the seals and how we might be able to lower their stress in care. It was determined that practises involving handling causes high heart rates. Having many visitors increased that and caused a longer recovery time. Other problems included loud banging causing heart rate spikes, and it was determined to be metal drain covers being slammed. Sensitivity training has been added for all staff for this issue.

The main project of 2020 is to survey and hopefully gain protections from disturbance on a beach in Co. Wicklow called Limekiln Beach, on Brides Head.

The beach is in constant use by grey seals for resting. In Autumn, there are several pups also born here among the haulout and then into late winter it becomes vital as a place for them to rest and moult. We are seeking year-round protections for the beach and thus far in surveying humans visiting the area, it seems the overwhelming majority are in support of this.

The seal numbers vary hugely but there have been reports of up to 120 on the beach at a time but there have been days with as little as two seals. What's important is there is consistently some grey seals using the habitat and the low numbers could be due to unseen disturbances outside of survey times.

Common and grey seals

2019's overall tally of seals is 111 (30 common seals and 81 grey seals). This is similar in numbers since the previous year's total of 117 seals (34 common seals and 77 grey seals). In Winter/Spring 2020, SRI rescued an additional 35 grey seals and 1 ringed seal. In Ireland, current data indicates there is roughly 5,000 grey seals and 2,500 common seals.

Seal sightings and notable highlights

There have been several reports of re-sighted tags from this season:

- Frangipani (P. vitulina, rescued 22/06/19, released 17/11/19) was spotted in Benllech, Wales, and then later in the Menai Straights, Wales, on 16/12/19. She was healthy and wary of humans
- Shamrock (P. vitulina, rescued 30/07/19, released 06/10/19) was found deceased on 10/11/19 in Bettystown, Co. Meath
- Our seal Snapdragon (J-005, P. vitulina, released Nov 2019) was found dead on the pontoon of a salmon farm in January 2020, reported by SMRU
- Our seal Shamrock (J-012, P. vitulina, release Oct 2019) was found dead in Co. Meath Ireland one month after release
- Our seal Aloe Vera (H. grypus, released Feb 2020) was spotted several times in March and April 2020, appearing to have contracted lungworm. She eluded capture each time
- Our seal released four years ago named Gamora (Red tag, F-010) was found during our surveys of Brideshead Beach, Co. Wicklow. She was released summer 2016 and was perfectly healthy when spotted
- Another seal of ours was spotted in Brideshead named Crush (SRI-G-075) released Summer 2017

We have had several seals visiting from the UK:

- Pong was rehabilitated as an orphan in Cornish Seal Sanctuary and released on 02/12/19. He was spotted in Carne Beach, South Wexford on 26/12/19. He was healthy and resting on a beach before returning to the sea the same night. He is tagged Yellow / SL 101 / LBF
- Baloo appeared a few days after Pong and a few miles north of where Pong appeared. They were released on the same day from Cornwall. Baloo was thin and dehydrated and was rescued and fattened up by Seal Rescue Ireland before being re-released on the 4th March. He is tagged Yellow / SL 106 / LBF
- During a Brideshead survey, a seal with a tag Red 337 was spotted. This seal was named Wet Wet Wet and released from Cornwall in Feb 2019
- On the same survey day in January 2020, a red tag was spotted number ending in 21 identified as Slughorn, released from SSPCA hospital in April 2019

Other Species:

In Early January 2020, an adult male hooded seal was found in County Cork. It was seemingly of healthy body weight but unfortunately, passed away on the beach a day later. He was collected and brought for necropsy but frozen until time and resources allow for full examination.

A ringed seal pup was spotted the same week as well as a snow owl. The ringed seal eluded capture but a week later stranded 100KM from the original spot and was rescued and rehabilitated with us. She was released from the North Coast of Ireland at the end of March 2020. It was in planning to move her to arctic waters but due to the covid-19 lockdown this was not possible and she was in danger of getting too hot here as the weather warmed.

Strandings and post mortem examinations

In 2019, there were 96 dead seals reported to us. We decided in January 2020 that we should investigate ways to make sure we are getting as many reported to us as possible due to the fact that there is still evidence of violent behaviour and attitudes towards seals in Ireland.

It was decided to promote the program as a citizen science initiative. Since posting it we have started receiving better information and more frequent reports.

In January, there were 22 dead seals reported to us. 15 of these were pup/subadults age, there were one confirmed adult and the rest were unknowns from a lack of photos and good info provided or being decomposed beyond recognition. It was reiterated this month to have people check for tags on seals after it was discovered some people were not asking this question consistently. There were 4 reports from Wexford, 8 from Kerry (interesting, in the wake of the calls to cull the seals), 4 from Waterford, 1 from Kerry, 1 from Dublin and 1 from Sligo. In February, there were 19 dead seals reported to us. 5 of the seals reported were pups. There were 7 adults reported and 7 unknowns.

There were 11 reports from Wexford alone. This is most likely do the prevailing wind, storm conditions and there were multiple reports from Raven's Point, Co. Wexford, where there were 4 separate seals washed ashore and one Dolphin. There was a tag on one of the seals (not ours, Yellow 55113 – still awaiting confirmation of previous rehab). Other places where seals were reported include 3 in Cork, 3 from Mayo, and one from Kerry (which had a clean straight decapitation – reported on Wildlife Crime).

In March, there were only 2 dead seals reported to us. They were subadult grey seals. Most likely the low numbers was due to Covid-19 lockdown.

We are starting to investigate methods of field necropsy and how to improve the information received.

Human impacts (entanglement, disturbance, bycatch etc)

From our Brideshead survey days the early data suggests that up to 3% of seals have entanglements or ex entanglement. Furthermore, disturbances from humans happen almost daily at this site despite the protections we have gained. From loose dogs to people ignoring signage and fencing to enter the beach or people simply being too loud.

Throughout Season J (June 2019 – present) we have rescued 2 seals with active entanglements that thankfully they could be saved from. Both seals have now been released again.

As for disturbance leading to rescue this is pretty frequent. In 2019, 6 of our rescued were caused by plain harassment leading to abandonment. 8 were listed as bad location, meaning the seal chose a very busy spot to haulout among humans leading to harassment. 29 were listed as abandonment and it is safe to say that these are also most likely due to harassment.

Bycatch figures are impossible to report on here as most smaller fishing boats (with make up the majority of the fishing fleet) are not required to report on bycatch. Further study into the stranding noted following the passing by of trawlers and super trawlers is necessary.

Rescue, rehabilitation and release

As of the end of December 2019 there were 36 seals in care. By the middle of April 2020 there are currently 10 grey seals in care.

Season J (May 2019 - May 2020):

Since the arrival of our first orphaned neonate common seal (“Moss”) on June 19th 2019, we have rescued 92 seals (including Moss). This amounts to 29 common seals and 63 grey seals. On our rescue hotline, since the beginning of the season we have received 461 calls concerning seals in perceived distress and 26 calls concerning other wildlife, which have been deferred to other wildlife organisations relevant to species and location. This means only approximately 20% of called in seals require assistance. This does not include seals deemed to require rescue that eluded capture or were pushed or scared into the seal by the public and dogs.

This season our successful rehabilitation rate thus far has been around 75%. This includes seals that are surviving and are finishing their rehabilitation.

Management actions

Rescue & Transport:

Due to the ever-increasing reports of strandings and rescues of seals annually, we continued to train new volunteers. From January to December 2019, we have increased our Rescue and Transport network by 194 trained volunteers. When available the volunteers offer assistance in assessing, picking up and transporting seals to our centre under our guidance and supervision. Give or take people changing availability and leaving the network, we currently have 976 active Rescue and Transport volunteers.

In 2019, we received 704 calls to our rescue hotline concerning seals. Rescues were arranged for 16% of these calls. In Winter/Spring 2020 (our quiet season) we received 200 call and 17% of these lead to rescues.

We will continue to work on surveying Brides Head throughout the year, once lockdown is eased. Hopefully, we can reach a deal with the local councils to put in more effective protection measures and to close the beach year-round.