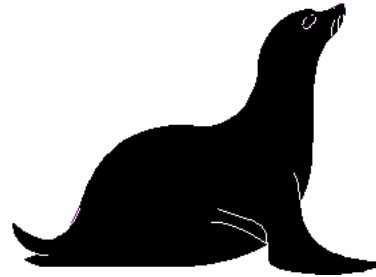


Seals

PUPIL FACTSHEET



Seals are Marine Mammals and one of three groups of pinnipeds

- True Seals (family Phocidae)
- Eared Seals ~ Sea lions and Fur seals (family Otariidae)
- Walrus (family Odobenidae)

Pinnipeds share five common characteristics with other mammals. They are warm-blooded, give live birth, nurse their young, breathe air and have hair. Just like you!

Like Whales, Turtles and Penguins, Seals spend most of their time in the sea, but cannot breathe underwater like fish. This means they regularly visit the waters surface for air.

Different kinds of Seals live all over the world. Each kind has adapted to its particular "habitat".

Male elephant seals, the largest of all seals, can grow as long as 6 metres and weigh up to 3,500 kg. The females are smaller at 4 metres and 800 kg. Northern elephant seals are found in Californian and the southern tip of South America.

There are two British species of seals – the Grey and the Common seal, both are part of the true seal group.

True seals move easily in the water but are clumsy on land. Unlike Eared seals, true seals have no noticeable ear flaps, and cannot support themselves with their flippers.

Some 120,000 Grey seals breed around the coast of the British Isles, making up about 40% the world's population. There are around 40,000 Common seals.

The Grey seal is the largest meat-eating mammal in the UK. The male can reach a length of up to 2.5 metres, with the females being slightly smaller with lighter fur. The Common seal is smaller. The coats of Grey seals are generally less heavy spotted, than the coats of the common seals, and their snouts are longer with nostrils which do not meet at the end.

Seals can hold their breath under water for approximately 1½ hours.

They are covered in a thick fatty layer called blubber to keep them warm in cold water.

They need their big eyes to see in dark and dirty waters.

A seal's main prey is fish such as sand eels, herring mackerel, whiting, plaice and flounder, but they also feed on squid, and crustaceans. They eat five to six percent of their body weight per day, depending on the time of year. Food is always caught underwater, with the seal grabbing its chosen prey and swallowing it whole.



SEA-LIFE

Seals (continued)

PUPIL FACTSHEET

Seals whiskers are long so they can feel for fish in dark waters; they have a good sense of smell which helps them to detect predators (like some sharks that eat seals!) – and for mums, to find their pups on a crowded beach.

Seals have very good hearing in and out of the water. They make growls and grunts underwater especially during breeding season.

Female seals average life span is 40 years, but the eldest recorded female was found to be 46 years of age and pregnant. Male's life span is approximately 10 years less.

Seals can mate in the water. The males often fight over females.

Seals play an important part in ancient folklore in Scottish, Irish and Welsh history. According to tradition, it is unlucky to kill seals, as they are the children of the King of Lochlann, who are now under a spell. Their stepmother was jealous of the children's great beauty and changed them into seals.

Seals can travel great distances at speeds of up to 100 km per day. One grey seal travelled from the Farne Islands off Northumberland to Shetland the Faroes – a total of 3,000 km!

A baby seal or sea lion is called a pup. Pups are usually born on land, rarely in the water. They grow rapidly on their mother's rich milk. Soon they enter the sea to develop their survival skills. They learn to swim, dive and catch prey.

Grey seals are born with a silky white coat and are helpless until the coat falls out at approximately 18 days.

Common seal pups are dark, because they usually lose their coat before birth.

A rescued pup is examined and fed a special liquid food that is as near to its mothers milk as possible. When they are old enough they are fed whole fish.

Once a pup is strong enough and has put on weight it can move outside for vital exercise and play with other seals.

There are rules to follow if you find an injured or abandoned seal:

- Do not get too close – seals bite
- Watch from a distance – do not try to touch the pup or put it back into the sea
- A fluffy white coated pup, needs to be fed by its mother in the wild
- Remember all you can – especially exact details of where the pup is located and its condition.
- Telephone to RSPCA or a local rescue centre.

Large scale hunts for grey seals during the breeding season were common up until the early twentieth century. A licensed culling – basically, it means killing – programme was introduced by the governors in 1962, further reducing the numbers of grey seals in the UK. This annual hunt continued until 1979, when it was stopped in the face of strong public protest – a great example of people helping defenceless animals.



SEA-LIFE

Seals (continued)

PUPIL WORKSHEET

Humans are mammals, just like seals, but we would not survive in the sea for very long. We would soon be too tired to swim; we would find no food on the surface and would not be able to dive down to catch food on the seabed. And if the sea was very cold we would soon die.

Seals, however are clever mammals that have adapted brilliantly to living in the sea.

Here are some problems you might have if someone dropped you in the middle of the ocean.

- 1: Sea water can be very cold.
- 2: You cannot breathe naturally under the water, and can only hold your breath approximately 30 seconds.
- 3: You would get very tired if you kept on swimming.
- 4: You cannot dive very far without a scuba kit, mask and air.
- 5: You might be in real trouble if you wear glasses; suppose they fell off.
- 6: You might be in danger from other animals swimming on the surface of the sea.

Seals would have no such problems – match the seal solution to the human problem.

We have done the first one for you.

- A: Seals can hold their breath for up to 1.5 hours! They store oxygen in their blood.
- (2: You cannot breathe underwater, unaided, for more than approximately 30 seconds)**
- B: Seals can sleep in the water. They turn on their backs and bob up and down like a life buoy. If they go under water their nostrils close automatically.
- C: Seals have a very thick layer of fat or blubber under their skin to keep them warm in icy water.
- D: Seals can dive up to 1.5 km, without a mask or air bottle.
- E: Seals can detect other animals in the water; their long whiskers detect the movement of other animals.
- F: Blind seals can survive very well in the sea, they have an amazing sense of smell and they use this together with their whiskers to find food.



SEA-LIFE