

SEAL WATCHING

around
SKOMER MARINE NATURE RESERVE

A guide to observing seals and pups



When: August through to December.

Where: On beaches of the Marloes Peninsula and Skomer Island.

How: Seals are easily disturbed. Please keep as still, quiet and inconspicuous as possible. If viewing from the cliff-top, keep low and take care not to cast your shadow on the beach below. Never approach seals close up.

If disturbed, mothers will keep away and the pups will miss feeds. Sometimes the mother may even abandon her pup.

SEAL AND SEAL PUPS

The Pembrokeshire coast is home to hundreds of Atlantic grey seals. The females give birth to their single pups on quiet beaches and in caves, from August through to December.

The white, furry pups spend their first three weeks on shore, feeding and sleeping. Some can be quite active. A few go for frequent swims, even when less than a week old.

Mother seals come ashore to feed their pups three or four times a day. Pups must treble their birth weight in their first three weeks, so they need every feed. By the time the pup is weaned, the mother has lost up to a third of her body weight.

After about three weeks, the pups are left to fend for themselves. By this time they have shed their white coats. They leave the beaches, but return to shore regularly to rest.

Mating takes place as soon as the mother has left her weaned pup, though the male seals often harass females while they're still feeding a pup.

After mating, pregnancy is delayed for three months. The gestation period is then nine months. Mature females may have a pup every year.

When not feeding or travelling, grey seals "haul out" on rocks or beaches, or rest in the sea at the surface or underwater.

HOW TO TELL A SEAL PUP'S AGE



CLASS I (0-5 DAYS)

Body shape thin, neck well-defined, skin in loose folds around body.
Coat may be stained yellowish.
Movements are rather uncoordinated.



CLASS II (6-10 DAYS)

Smoother outline. Neck still visible but no loose folds on body. Coat whiter. Very vocal. (The pup shown has been marked with dye for research purposes).



CLASS III (11-15 DAYS)

Body rounded or barrel-shaped. Neck not visible. White coat.



CLASS IV (16-20 DAYS)

Shape like III but patches of white fur have moulted. Weaned or near weaning.



CLASS V (21 DAYS PLUS)

White fur fully moulted.
Loses some weight after weaning. Often segregated from breeding area.

MALE AND FEMALE SEALS

Female seals (cows) live for about 35 years, males (bulls) for about 25 years. Both become sexually mature at four to five years. Successful mating males are likely to be 11-16 years old.



Male seals can be recognised by their larger size and the "Roman nose" shape of their muzzle. Females often have a lighter background colour on the neck.

Males rarely fight each other but compete through threat gestures and vocalisations. Dominance hierarchies are only seen during the breeding season.

To find out more about seals, join a Pembrokeshire Coast National Park guided walk, listed in the free newspaper "Coast to Coast", or visit the exhibition at the address below.

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