

Seal Disturbance Factsheet

for Guides, Leaders and Coaches

What is meant by seal disturbance?

Disturbance can take many forms and is not always easy to spot. In most cases, disturbance to seals is caused when you are too close, too visible and too loud. With time spent near or in the ocean, there comes a responsibility to respectfully share this habitat to allow for positive encounters with these wild animals.

The effects of disturbance are often invisible but are always a waste of energy for seals. Some of the physiological impacts of disturbance include increased stress and cortisol levels, a rapid heartbeat, increased breathing rate, coldwater shock, cracked ribs, damaged and ripped out claws, open wounds, and longterm impacts on unborn and new-born pups as well as moulted pups who are still teaching themselves to hunt. As many paddlers have experienced, seals can be very inquisitive and may approach your board – this would not constitute disturbance as the seal would have chosen to do this on its own terms. If a seal attempts to get on your board, stay relaxed and gently use your paddle to prevent this from happening; the seal should move off on its own. If a seal is following you, keep moving. They are incredibly curious animals but will quickly lose interest if you do not engage with them.

The following signals indicate a seal is aware of your presence and is at risk of being disturbed:

Vigilance - If a seal has noticed you, its fight or flight response has been activated, and its stress levels have already gone up. Whilst this may seem minimal, seals have been known to stay alert for up to an hour after being disturbed, meaning energy is being wasted instead of reserved.

Stampeding - If seals rush quickly into the sea, a serious disturbance event has occurred, which can lead to severe injury and pup abandonment.

Tombstoning - If a seal is well above the water line and feels threatened, it may throw itself from a great height into the water. This is extremely dangerous for both seals and people and can result in broken jaws and ribs, which can be fatal.

Flipper splashing and vocalisation - This is a seal's way of telling you that you are too close, and it is feeling threatened.

Crash diving - A seal may immediately undertake a crash dive if suddenly distracted whilst feeding in the water. This is a common sign of distress that can alter their oxygen levels, as they will not be fully prepared for the dive, and their heart will be racing. Swimming seals mustn't be disturbed, as this can cause them to stop feeding, impacting their energy supply.



Some additional visual signs



If you spot any of these behavioural reactions, slowly and quietly back away to avoid increasing the chances of disturbing them further. Allow seals the space they need within their habitat.

Some seals will show signs of habituation, whereby they have become used to the presence of people and do not demonstrate a natural, cautionary response to their presence. However, this does not mean that they are immune to the impacts of disturbance. Some seals will not react to a single paddle boarder, but after their third or fourth encounter with human activities, they will start to show signs that they are not fully relaxed. This is known as sensitisation, where the seal responds to cumulative activity rather than a single event.

Impacts of seal disturbance

Pregnant and pupping females: Common seals will have their pups in the summer months, and grey seals are heavily pregnant (they pup in autumn). This coincides with many coastal areas being at their busiest. Rushing over sharp rocks can have severe long-term impacts on unborn pups that are not immediately visible.

Pups: Mothers who waste energy fleeing from disturbance cannot pass on the nutrients their young need, and therefore the chances of pups making it through their first winter are drastically reduced.

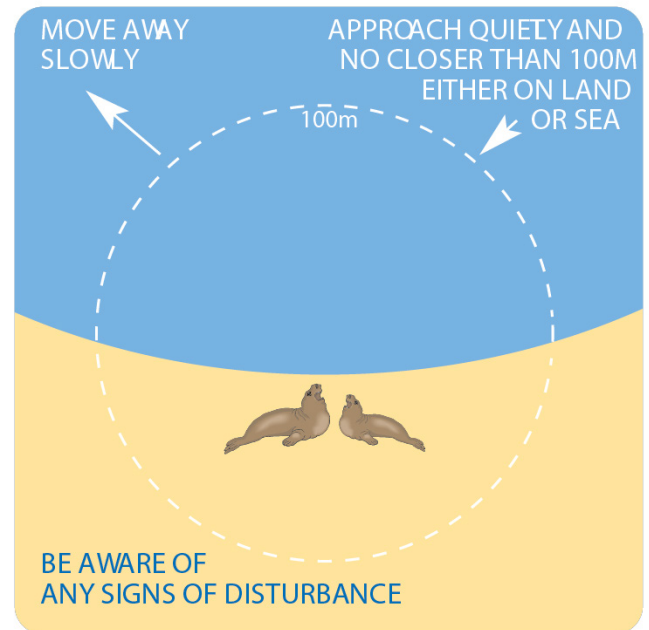
Juveniles: With fewer fat reserves, they must conserve energy whenever they can. Younger seals are usually more skittish and don't have the spare energy to waste when fleeing from people.

Dominant beachmaster males: These males feed heavily in the summer, enabling them to fast for up to three months in the autumn. They do this to protect their pupping females without starving; however, disturbance compromises their energy levels and impacts their chances of survival.



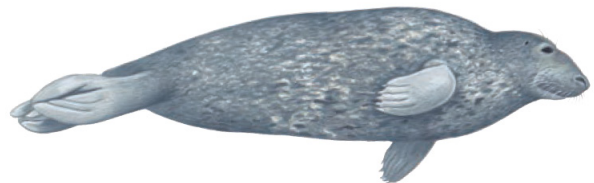
Seals found around the British Isles

Two species of seal come to our shores to breed: the grey seal and common (or harbour) seal. Grey and common seals can be very difficult to tell apart, especially when they are in the water. Look out for the Roman nose and larger spots of the grey seal. Smaller common seals have concave foreheads and snub noses with nostrils joined at the base. Over a third of the world's population of grey seals and a third of Europe's common seals can be found around the British and Irish coasts. Whilst cumbersome on land, seals are athletes when in the water. The seals can swim up to 100 kilometres a day with a top speed of 25km an hour. Average dives are up to 20 minutes to depths of 120 metres.



Grey seal *Halichoerus grypus*

- Large seal (adult 2.1 - 3.3m)
- Head has flat profile i.e. straight line from top of head to nose. In male exaggerated to give a hooked or 'Roman nose'.
- Variable grey coat is covered in thick blotches, unique to each animal. Male usually dark with lighter blotches and female light with dark blotches.
- Nostrils parallel to one another, not always obvious.
- Usually seen in rocky areas, but also in estuaries and bays.
- Breeds on beaches, pups are white.



Common or harbour seal *Phoca vitulina*

- Smaller seal (adult 1.2 - 1.9m)
- Muzzle short and concave. Face has a cat-like appearance.
- Coat has mottled pattern of spots, varies in colour from light grey to dark brown.
- Nostrils joined at base in 'V' shape.
- Frequents sandbanks in estuaries but also occurs on rocky coasts.



Grey seals breed from September to January in traditional sites known as rookeries on British and Irish shores. The female gives birth to a single pup amongst the crowd of sometimes many hundreds of other seals. At birth the pup has a thick, creamy-white coat, but this is replaced by a greyish juvenile coat after about three weeks when it is weaned.

Generally, grey seal pups spend these first three weeks of life on land in safe haul out sites above the high water mark. Common seal pups are born on sandbanks and swim off on the next high tide. Both grey and common seals need to haul out and rest at their traditional sites. Adults spend the winter/spring moulting at haul out sites and it is just as important not to disturb them at this time of year too.

Seals have a natural curiosity and will often watch paddlers pass by, or even take to the water to investigate your presence. Many tour boat owners also make a living from taking tourists to look at sensitive seal sites - seals may stay put when these boats approach.

What does all this mean for coaches?

As a guide/coach/leader, passing on environmental information is a key role and as an educator, it is essential to have a good knowledge around seal behaviour and what to look out for whilst paddling with your group to ensure that no disturbance takes place and for your participants to get the best, natural (albeit more distant) wildlife experiences.

To summarise

10 things paddlers can do to help reduce their impact on seals:

1. Make sure you are well-trained, experienced, alert and in complete control of your board.
2. Research the area you are visiting – are seals likely to be present on rocks or remote coves?
3. Keep quiet, so seals can't hear you and keep downwind, so seals can't smell you.
4. Stay well away (at least 100m); use your waterproof camera or binoculars to get a better look at them - if you only have a phone, please do not approach to take a photo.
5. Take any litter home to reduce the risk of ingestion and entanglement.
6. Do not stop or observe for longer than 15 minutes – they may be waiting for you to move off before getting in or out of the water.
7. Silently signal to others if you see them demonstrating risky behaviour.
8. If you see signs of alertness or disturbance, move away slowly and quietly.
9. If you see a seal that you think may need medical attention, please phone British Divers Marine Life Rescue on 01825 765546.
10. For free information and resources about seals email seals@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk or visit https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tB4_XeUtQ4ahx5FYT0GMrOC4f-5HebQsr?usp=sharing

