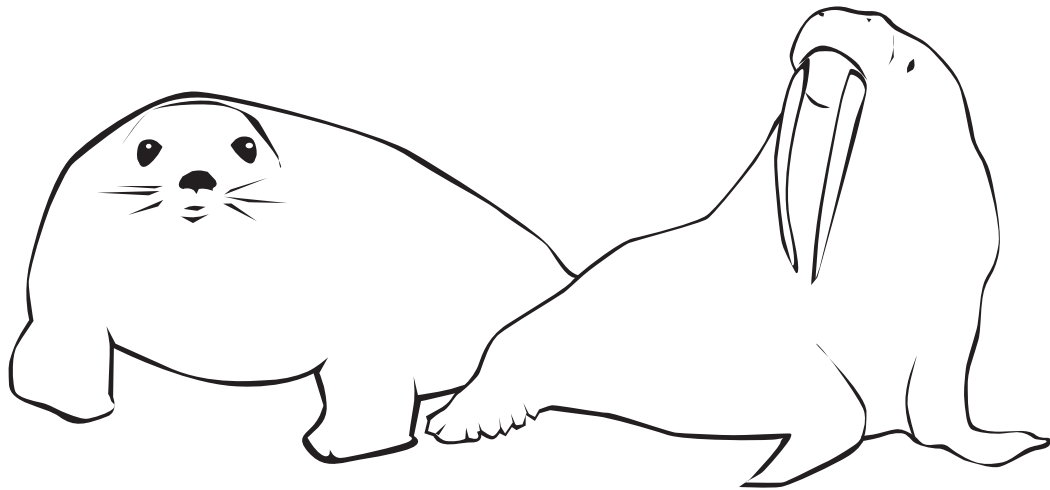


Seals

PUPIL FACTSHEET

Seals are marine mammals and one of three groups of pinnipeds:

- True seals
- Eared seals
- Sea lions and walruses



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 water's 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 tall as 6 metres and weigh up to 3,500 kg. The females are smaller at 4 metres and 800 kg. They are largely restricted to sub-Antarctic waters as far north as the southern tip of South America.

There are two British species of seal - the grey and the common seal. Both are part of the true seal group. True seals move easily in water but are clumsy on land. Unlike eared seals, true seals have no noticeable ear flaps and cannot support themselves with their flippers.

Some 110,000 grey seals breed around the coast of the British Isles, making up a big part of 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. The common seal is smaller. The coats of the grey seals are generally less heavily spotted and they have longer snouts with nostrils which do not meet at the end.

Seals can hold their breath under water for up to thirty minutes.

They are covered in a thick fatty layer of 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, whiting, plaice and founder, but they also feed on squid, lobster and crustaceans. They eat five to six percent of their body weight per day. Food is always caught underwater, with the seal grabbing its chosen prey and swallowing it whole!

Seals (continued)

PUPIL FACTSHEET

Seals use their whiskers to sniff out fish in dark waters. They have a good sense of smell which helps them to detect predators (like some sharks who eat seals!) - and for the 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 the breeding season.

Female seals live up to a maximum of 35 years, and males reach around 25-years-old.

Seals can mate in the water. Male seals 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 large distances at speeds of up to 100 km per day. One grey seal travelled from the Farne Islands off Northumberland to Shetland, the Faeroes and then south to the Atlantic – a total of 3,000 km!

A baby seal or sea lion is called a pup. Pups and calves are born on land or 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 off after nine to 18 days. Common seal pups are dark and having lost their coat before birth can swim within five minutes.

Rescued seal pups are given medical tests and then fed a special liquid food that is like its mother's milk. When the pups are old enough they are fed whole fish.

Once a pup is strong enough and has put on enough 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 – they are sensible rules when you find any abandoned wild animal:

- Do not get too close – seals bite
- Watch from a distance – do not try to handle the pup or put it back to sea
- A fluffy white pup still needs to be fed by its mother
- Remember all you can – especially exactly where the animal is
- Telephone a local rescue centre or the RSPCA

Large scale hunts for grey seals during the breeding season were common until the early twentieth century. A licensed culling – basically, it means killing - programme was introduced by the government in 1962, further reducing 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.

Seals

PUPIL WORKSHEET

People are mammals, just like the seal, but we would not survive in the sea for very long. We would soon get tired of swimming, we would find no food on the surface, and we would not be able to dive down to catch food. 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 somebody dropped you in the middle of the ocean.

1. Sea water can be very cold.
2. You cannot breathe under water. You can only hold your breath for about 30 seconds.
3. You would get very tired if you kept on swimming.
4. You cannot dive very far without a scuba kit of 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 half an hour! They store oxygen in their blood.

(2. You cannot breathe under water. You can only hold your breath for about 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 70 metres deep without a mask or air bottle.
- E.** Seals can detect other animals in the water. Their long whiskers detect the movement other animals make in the water.
- 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.