

Grey Seal

Latin Name: *Halichoerus grypus* / Irish Name: Rón mór



Male / Bull:	Length: 2.5 - 3.3 m	Weight: 230 - 300kg
Female / Cow:	Length: 1.6 - 2.0 m	Weight: 100 - 150kg
Pup:	Length: 0.9 - 1 m	Weight at birth: 13-14 kg Weight after 3 weeks: 45kg



Seals belong to a group of animals called Pinnipeds. The word 'Pinniped' means 'wing-footed' mammal. The Grey Seal is one of two species of seals found around Ireland's coastline. They are part of the 'True Seal' or 'Earless' seal family. The Grey Seal is a large magnificent animal that shares its time between the land and the sea.

Grey Seal

A seal's body is shaped like a torpedo rounded from head to feet. They have no ear flaps, the ears are a tiny hole on the side of their heads. They have closable ears and nostrils so that no water can fill their ears or nose when they are under water. Their hands and feet are called fore and hind flippers and help the seal glide effortlessly underwater.

Seals have a layer of fat underneath their skin called Blubber. It is important for three things, (1) it keeps them warm in the cold water, (2) helps them to float in the water and (3) gives them energy reserves during times of fasting. For example, a mother will not eat for 3 to 4 weeks while looking after her newborn pup.

Grey Seals have excellent vision. Their large black eyes allow lots of light to enter the pupil, allowing them to see in very dim light conditions. They have a protective third eyelid (like swimming goggles) that wipes sand away. They have no tear ducts, so they produce tears continually to wash their eyes. On land, they are able to restrict the amount of light entering the eye through their pupils.

Seals have sensory whiskers called vibrissae that are very important for hunting and finding food, these vibrissae help them find their prey buried in the sand. They also help detect movement in the water from some distance away.

Grey Seals can be recognized by their large 'Roman' nose and parallel nostrils. The colour of their fur coat can range from light grey to brown, with blotches of a darker colour over their bodies.

Where do Grey Seals Live in Ireland?

The Grey Seal lives along the Irish Coastline. The Grey Seal like to roam around the North Atlantic during the year travelling from country to country like nomads, but return to the same breeding and pupping grounds each year. They are found on offshore islands and around our coastline on rocky beaches and coves such as the Basket Islands, Saltee Islands and Lambay Island.

Where are Grey Seals found in the World?

Grey seals are found in temperate and arctic waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, with population density high around UK waters. There are three distinctive groups, West-Atlantic population, East-Atlantic population and in the Baltic. Although relatively stable in Ireland, they are extremely vulnerable in other parts of Europe.

What do Grey Seals like to eat?

Seals are opportunistic eaters. They will eat whatever food is available and will travel good distances foraging for food. Seals may eat once a day or once every few days and go through times of fasting too. All food is taken underwater. They have sharp teeth present from birth, needed to catch their slippery prey.

Grey Seals eat all types of fish such as sand eels, sole, herring, mackerel and salmon. They also eat squid and crustaceans such as crabs, lobster and prawns. Grey Seals do not chew their food but swallow food whole. Seals will eat their fish head first as they may choke if they eat the tail first.

What sounds do Grey Seals make?

Grey seal pups make a very loud 'bawling' cry almost human in sound. When they reach adulthood they are much quieter. Occasionally they can be heard 'singing' when they gather in groups.

A Special Time for Grey Seals

Every autumn during September and October the Grey Seal mothers return from roaming around the North Atlantic pupping areas on our uninhabited offshore islands. They have their pups on the stony beaches and in caves. During this time, the mother will feed her pup her milk that is approximately 60% fat and as thick as mayonnaise. The young pup will grow three times its size in three weeks. The mother will be fasting during this time and gets very thin surviving on her blubber.

The Grey Seal pup is born with a baby whitecoat called a lanugo. This fur is shed after 3 weeks but until then, the pup cannot swim and should never be put back into the water. After 3 - 4 weeks, the pup will get its first adult coat that is waterproof and denser.

After 3 to 4 weeks, the young pup is weaned and the mother leaves to return to the sea to eat and breed. It is now time for the pup to grow up and discover their new world and home.

Conservation

Threats

- Disturbance to their breeding and pupping sites by people, dogs, development and watercraft
- Pollution and litter in coastal areas, resulting in entanglement and death
- Illegal killing by people - for example, the illegal culling, in the Blasket Islands, 2004
- Over-Fishing - leading to greater competition for resources between marine mammals and people
- Seals getting run over by speedboats, Jet Ski's and other watercrafts
- Commercial Hunting

Seals and the Law

It is against the law to kill or injure a wild seal or to take a seal from the wild. If you ever see a person breaking the law against seals, call your local Gardai or NPWS Conservation Ranger.

What to do if you come across a seal pup in trouble?

1. Never put a seal pup back into the water
2. If the mother is present, do not disturb them
3. If the mother is not present, keep your distance and look out to sea or around the beach for the mother. You will need to do this for at least 15 minutes, as she may be watching you under the water. Grey seals feed their pups on the beach and supervise them from the water.
4. When you are certain the mother is not present, go closer and try to assess the pup
5. Ask yourself, does the pup look healthy or not
 - a. If you can see the pup's neck, folds in the skin, dry patches around the eyes and runny nose, the pup may have been abandoned and need help.
 - b. However, if the pup looks round and fat and acts lively to your approach, then he may be healthy and not require help, it would be best, therefore, to leave the pup alone.
6. Do not pick up the seal pup yourself under any circumstances as they might bite
7. If in doubt, contact the Irish Seal Sanctuary for advice. Make sure you give as many details of the location and physical features of the pup.
8. Keep dogs and young children away as they may frighten the animal
9. Please remember seals are wild animals and not pets and so should be treated as such, with respect.

Did you know?

- Seals are mammals like humans, they feed their young milk, give birth to live young, have fur coats, warm blooded and need to breathe in air.
- Seal pupping sites are called rookeries
- Mothers and pups find each other in the rookeries by their call and smell

Best Time to go Grey Seal Watching

Grey seals spend most time on land during pupping season in September and October and during the moulting season, which is in January for the females and April for the Males. They will haul out on certain beaches sandbanks and rocks, so this is the best time to see them and enjoy them. Grey seals are loyal to their breeding sites and can be encountered regularly at them throughout the year.

There are some harbours where Grey Seals have become residents due to the availability of food. They will breed in coastal urban areas where the public is respectful and maintain their distance.

Most Grey Seals due to their nomadic nature, roam the North Atlantic Sea and other coastlines in between these important periods.

September - October	Pupping Season followed by the Breeding Season
January	Moulting Period for Female Seals
April	Moulting Period for Male Seals

Check it Out! - www.irishsealsanctuary.ie