

Harbour Seal or Common Seal

Latin Name: *Phoca vitulina* / Irish Name: Rón breacach

Male / Bull:	Length: 1.4 - 1.85m	Weight: 55-130kg	
Female / Cow:	Length: 1.2 - 1.5m	Weight: 45-105kg	
Pup:	Length: 0.6 - 1m	Weight at birth: 9-11kg	Weight after 3 weeks: 35-45kg



Seals belong to a group of animals called Pinnipeds. The word 'Pinniped' means 'wing-footed' mammal. The Harbour Seal, also known as the Common 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 Harbour Seal is an intelligent animal that shares its time between the land and the sea.

Harbour 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 and nose when they are under water. Their hands and feet are called fore and hind flippers.

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.

Harbour 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 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 to find their prey buried in the sand and detect movement in the water from some distance away.

Harbour Seals can be recognised by their short snout nose and V-shaped nostrils. The colour of their fur coat can range from grey to brownish with a paler underbelly and black spots over their bodies.

Where do Harbour Seals Live in Ireland?

The Harbour Seal lives along the Irish Coastline. The Harbour Seal like to stay local to their foraging grounds throughout the year and remain close to the coastline like rocky shores and sandy beaches. They are loyal to their breeding and pupping grounds each year. They can be found in sheltered coastline such as in bays, estuaries and inlets, such as Sligo Bay, Galway Bay and Dublin Bay.

Where are Harbour Seals found in the World?

Harbour Seals are found in temperate, sub-arctic and arctic coastal regions of the northern hemisphere in the North Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Within Europe, the Eastern Atlantic Harbour Seal is found around the British Isles and Ireland, south-western part of the Baltic Sea, in the Wadden Sea and on the North Sea coast of Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, and Brittany (France).

Why are they called Harbour Seals?

It is believed that they got this name due to their preference for harbour areas. In colder arctic conditions, the harbour areas are the last places to freeze and sometimes not at all.

How do Seals move?

True Seals, like the Harbour Seal, are relatively slow, clumsy and awkward on land. They are not able to bring their feet around to stand on them, so they move on their bellies. They shuffle and ripple along the sand on their belly using their short fore flippers if needed.

The Harbour Seal is an excellent swimmer. They are very agile in the water reaching speeds of up to 25 miles per hour. Their hind flippers are winged, created by a thin layer of skin joining the toes. They move these winged feet from side to side propelling them through the water. They will also use powerful thrusts of their body to accelerate and sustain speed whether on their front or their back.

Seals are excellent divers too. They need to be in order to catch their food and live at sea. Seals are mammals and can hold their breath on dives into the water for up to 15 minutes. They dive between 30 and 70 metres in depth. They are able to store large amounts of oxygen in their muscles and in their blood, allowing them to dive for longer periods than land mammals like humans.

A Special Time for Harbour Seals

By late May the Harbour Seal mothers are expecting their new pup. Every summer during June and July they have their pups on Ireland's stoney and sandy beaches. During this time, the mother will feed her pup her milk that is up to 50 or even 60% fat and as thick as mayonnaise. The young pups will double their birth weight in three weeks. The mother gets very thin, surviving on her blubber while feeding her pup.

The Harbour Seal pup is born with an adult, waterproof coat, not a whitecoat like the Grey Seal. They lose their whitecoat before birth. This is because they are born often between tides and have to be able to swim within a few hours of birth, before the high tide water returns. They will not be strong swimmers, so may get a piggy-back from their mother and come ashore to suckle her milk. Harbour seals stay with the mother until weaned, if they get separated the pup will die.

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

What sounds do Harbour Seals make?

Harbour Seal pups make a sound not unlike a pigeon's coo. When they reach adulthood, however, they are very quiet.

Conservation

Threats

- Disturbance to their breeding and pupping sites by people, dogs and development
- Pollution and litter in coastal areas, resulting in entanglement and death
- Illnesses - Phocine Distemper Virus Outbreaks
- 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!

- Harbour Seals can live to between approximately 15 - 30 years of age
- Other True Seals in the world are the Elephant Seal, Leopard Seal & Harp Seal
- Harbour Seals mothers have one pup each year but can have twins

Best Time to go Harbour Seal Watching

Harbour seals spend most time on land during pupping season in June and July and during moulting season from July to September. They will haul out onto certain beaches, sandbanks and rocks, so this is the best time to see them and enjoy them. Remember, keep your distance from pupping sites! Harbour Seals are loyal to their breeding sites and can be encountered regularly throughout the year.

June - July
July - August

Pupping Season followed by the Breeding Season
Moulting Period starts with females and young first followed by the males.
Some will not finish moulting until September.

Check it Out! - www.irishsealsanctuary.ie