



The wild seals of Rathlin Island



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk



**Rathlin
Development
& Community
Association**

Northern Ireland's seals



Two species of seal inhabit the coast and seas around Northern Ireland. The harbour seal is smaller, has a dog-like face and prefers more sheltered habitats whereas the grey seal is larger, has a longer head and is more often seen in exposed areas.

Seals haul out to rest, warm up and breed; they are very sensitive to disturbance, especially during the pupping season. As with any large, wild mammal, they may also inflict a powerful bite if they or their young feel threatened.

In August 2018, an aerial survey detected 1,012 harbour seals and 505 grey seals around the coast of Northern Ireland.

Both species are fully protected by law from killing and intentional or reckless disturbance.

Sheltered home

The quiet inlets around Rathlin Island afford visitors wonderful views of charismatic seals, especially around low tide. Grey seals and harbour seals find sheltered habitats here to rest, breed and rear their

young within the relative safety of areas such as Church Bay and Rue Point. These beautiful marine mammals spend much of their lives at sea but can be seen and enjoyed by all when they haul out ashore.

Harbour seals, the smaller of the two species, give birth around May-June; their newborn pups moult their 'baby' coat in the womb and are able to swim almost immediately. By contrast, grey seals are born later in September-November. The pups have a fluffy white coat and usually stay on land for three to five weeks before venturing into the sea.

An aerial survey of seals in August 2018 used a thermal imaging camera attached to a helicopter to record numbers during the annual harbour seal moult. It recorded 123 harbour seals and 46 grey seals around Rathlin Island, although grey seal numbers can be highly variable from day to day and animals sheltering in sea caves or underwater are particularly difficult to detect.



Harbour seal swimming at surface
- Tom McDonnell, Northcoast Nature



Grey seal entangled in plastic sand bag,
Rathlin Island



Grey seal, Rue Point
- Tom McDonnell, Northcoast Nature

Vulnerable animals

Seals are fully protected by law from intentional or reckless disturbance and great care should be taken not to disturb these vulnerable animals.

Enjoy the wonderful views but please keep a respectful distance from seals, letting the animals decide how close is acceptable to them.

Please note the following guidance when watching or photographing seals from land:

- Any approach must be visible and sensitive;
- Be responsive to how the seals are reacting to you;
- Do not creep up on seals, crowd or encircle them, or make loud noises to prompt them to look toward you;
- Never attempt to touch or feed seals;
- When one or two seal heads are raised, approach no further;
- If any seals scramble into the water, you are too close and should retreat!



Grey seal keeping a watching eye from the sea
- Arthur Ward



Harbour seal hauled out in rough seas
- Tom McDonnell, Northcoast Nature

If approaching seal haul outs by boat, kayak or other watercraft, follow the WiSe Scheme (Wildlife Safe) principles:

- Ensure that you approach slowly and quietly from an oblique angle, making no wake;
- Never approach directly or too close; keep your distance (50m minimum);
- Watch out for signs of disturbance - heads going up, seals becoming agitated or moving toward the water. If you see any of these signs, back off slowly and quietly;
- Keep noise aboard to a minimum;
- Know the locations of important haul out areas, such as Mill Bay, Doon Bay and Ushet Point;
- Don't feed seals with fish; it can alter their behaviour making them vulnerable to injury from boats;
- Do not stay longer than 15 min.

Insensitive boat handling that leads to disturbance or injury of protected species may lead to legal action against you.

Protected environment

The sensitive wildlife and habitats around Rathlin Island are highly protected and carefully managed. The island is designated a Special Area of Conservation, Special Protection Area, Marine Conservation Zone and Area of Special Scientific Interest. Many of its wonderful animals and plants are protected in their own right, regardless of where they live.

Officers from DAERA Marine & Fisheries regularly patrol the coast around Rathlin Island, by land and sea, to monitor and enforce the protection of its special environment.



Seals are fully protected by law* from intentional or reckless disturbance. The penalty for these offences can be up to £5,000 or up to six months imprisonment, or both.

*The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 (as amended).

Useful Links

Wide ranging advice on marine nature conservation and the work of Marine and Fisheries Division is available at:

www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/marine

For advice on viewing marine wildlife sensitively, visit the WiSe Scheme website at: **www.wisescheme.org**

Information on Marine Protected Areas is available at:

www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-protected-areas

Further information on visiting Rathlin Island is available on the Rathlin Development & Community Association website at

www.rathlincommunity.org

The European Marine Site Management Scheme and Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Rathlin Island are available at:

www.rathlincommunity.org/page/nature-land-sea#emsms



**Adult grey seal
hauled out to rest
at low tide**

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