



## BIG FIVE KEY FACTS: THE HARBOUR SEAL



\* the harbour seal

- Scientific name:** *Phoca vitulina*
- Gaelic name:** ròn calaidh / ròn cumanta (ròn = seal)
- Common names:** Harbour seal or common seal (the former name is in wider international use)
- Length:** (nose to tip of tail flipper): 1.45m (bulls/males) 1.35m (cows/females); (grey seal bulls up to 2.5m)
- Weight:** 85kg average bull (grey seal bull average 240kg, and up to 300kg), average cow 75kg
- Nostrils:** Their nostrils are v-shaped on a fairly rounded, dog-like head, touching below. (Grey seal nostrils are parallel slits which are separated below. They also have much more elongated heads.)
- Typical diet:** They feed locally around haul-out sites (and within a few tens of kilometres of them) eating a wide variety of prey including sandeels, whitefish, flatfish, herring, sprat, octopus and squid. Much of prey lives on or close to the seabed. They need roughly 3-5kg of food per day.
- Life cycle:** They live for up to 25 years in the wild. Bulls mature at 3-7 years, cows at 2-7. They mate in water in the autumn after completion of annual moult. This moult lasts for 4-5 weeks after the summer pupping season. Bulls display underwater to cows and rivals by making growls and roars on the seabed and blowing bubbles. Delayed implantation of fertilised egg allows pup to be born when conditions are best-suited to its survival, so the gap between mating and birth can be variable, at 9-11 months.
- Pup:** One pup per female is born rapidly (within a few minutes of first visible contractions) in June-July, while mother is hauled-out on sandbank or rock, near water's edge. They can be extremely active immediately after birth (a few may be born in the water) and all pups need to be able to swim at the next high tide, which may be only an hour after birth. Most pups are born with an adult coat, having shed grey-white pup coat before birth. They stay with their mums for 3-4 weeks, suckling on fat-rich milk and making vocal, physical and visual contact.
- Movements:** Animals studied in the north east of Scotland tend to stay within a few tens of kilometres of their haul-out sites, unlike grey seals, which range much more widely (including to other countries). So populations in different firths, for example, may be fairly discrete. They come ashore in sheltered waters, in a pattern that is linked to the tidal cycle.
- Habitat:** Sheltered waters, mostly inshore.
- Status:** The UK has around 45 percent of the European population and 4 percent of world population. Around 80 percent of British population live in Scotland with the most recent minimum estimate being 20,427 for Scottish animals. However their numbers are declining, but with large regional variations. This decline was first noticed in the Northern Isles and the east coast. Populations in Orkney, Shetland and the Firth of Tay continue to decrease.

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There has been an 83 percent decline in Tay population since it peaked in 1992. The Moray Firth population appears to have stabilized. Interestingly, between 2008 and 2011, there was a 52 percent increase recorded in the Western Isles harbour seal population.

**Future prospects:**

The causes of these declines aren't known, but they are under investigation and conservation measures have been introduced, such as the Moray Firth Seal Management Plan. This is now being used as a template for developing the management of seals along other parts of the coast.

**Spotting tips:**



Look for haul-outs on sandbanks in estuaries at low tide. Some of these may be visible from lay-bys along roads that flank the coast (e.g. as is the case in the Cromarty Firth, Dornoch Firth, and Loch Fleet).



A telescope will be useful for seeing variations in their coat patterns and colours between individuals.



Dedicated wildlife watching boat trips are also a good viewing option, provided that the operator observes the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code keeping a reasonable distance from haul out sites.

**Art & culture:**

The best-selling novel 'Seal Morning' by Rowena Farre, televised in 1986, tells the semi-fictional story of how the writer, at the age of ten, lived with her aunt in a croft in Sutherland for seven years with pets that included a harbour seal.