



Summary of the main differences between Harbour and Grey Seals

(From Bonner & Thompson 1991 and Anderson 1991)

	Harbour (Common) Seals	Grey Seals
Size	<p>Nose to tail measurements (cm):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Males 130-161 • Females 120-155 • Pups at birth 79-81 <p>Males generally more heavily built than females, especially around the shoulders, but sexual differences not so pronounced as in grey seal.</p>	<p>Nose to tail measurements (cm):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Males 195-230 • Females 165-195 • Pups at birth 90-105 <p>Marked sexual dimorphism; adult male is half as large again as the female, with heavy neck and shoulders</p>
Colour	<p>Very variable; mottled pattern of darker spots on a lighter background. Males mostly darker than females. Coat fades to brownish tinge prior to moult in late summer.</p>	<p>Males generally uniformly dark grey. Enormous variation in females; generally dark grey on back, with pale belly sparsely scattered with dark patches, but all shades of grey, brown and silver occur. Fawn coloration often also occurs when moulting</p>
Head/nose shape	<p>Proportionally smaller than that of grey seal and with a more rounded crown.</p>	<p>Head large, elongated muzzle, very straight 'Roman' nose. Head shape of young grey seal can be more similar to that of the harbour seal.</p>
Nostrils	<p>Nostrils meet in a V-shape.</p>	<p>Nostrils are parallel and do not meet.</p>
Haul-out pattern	<p>Often adopt characteristic head-up-tail-up attitude (banana position). Haul-out pattern is more dispersed than that of grey seal.</p>	<p>Grey seals haul out in denser groups than do harbour seals.</p>
Breeding behaviour	<p>Pups born June-July and are able to swim almost from birth.</p>	<p>Pups born September-December with a non-waterproof white natal coat. Pups remain hauled out with their mothers, as they are unable to swim until this coat is moulted (usually after 16-21 days)</p>

Breeding

Seals have to come ashore to give birth. In most cases only one pup is born.

Grey Seal:

They are social animals, but not always sociable. Pregnant female grey seals return to a traditional nursery site, known as a rookery. On arrival they select a place above the tideline where they give birth usually within 24 hours. They will fiercely protect this territory against intrusion by other seals.

At birth, pups weigh about 13 kilos and have a soft, creamy-white coat which is not waterproof.

The mother leaves her pup from time to time, recognising it by its smell when she returns to suckle it with her rich (60% fat) milk. Pups suckle for 10 minutes in every hour and gain about 2kg daily. Suckling continues for 18-21 days. During this time the pup, accumulates a layer of blubber under the skin which acts as a food resource when its mother leaves, and insulation against the cold.

Avoidance of stress to nursing females at this time plays an important role in making sure that the pup gets the nourishment it needs to reach an optimal weight for survival while its white baby coat is moulted and waterproof adult fur grows. At this stage hunger plays a part in enticing the weaned pup to venture into the sea and learn how to swim, and become independent.

Males, bulls, arrive at the rookery soon after the females. Their aim is to take over a section of beach and mate with the females on it. Grey seal bulls become sexually active from about 4-6 years of age, but it can be 10 years before they mature sufficiently to command a group of females (cows) as a beach master. Fighting between mature bulls can injure or kill pups which get in the way. Beach masters closely guard their harem for 4-5 weeks, chasing off competing males, and mating with the cows as they become receptive. They do not feed during this period.

Grey seal cows are sexually mature from 3-5 years. After mating there is a delay of about three months before development of the foetus. The pregnancy lasts for close to nine months.

Giving birth in winter, may seem odd, but the female benefits from good feeding opportunities during the summer months while the foetus develops.

Harbour seals are more solitary. They do not form breeding colonies; pups are born in June-July often on rocky islands or in secluded coves or on sand banks. Sand banks which are covered by the tide can be used because pups are well-developed when born and can swim within a few hours.

Longevity

Grey seal: on average, males live to 25 years, females live up to 35 years.

Common seal: males 26 years, females 32 years