

## Twin grey seal pups

**Born at Horsey  
28th November 2015.**



The morning of Saturday 28th November 2015 was overcast and cold and by late morning only a handful of visitors had arrived at Horsey. None of them and no wardens, either, were present to witness the birth of the two seal pups pictured above with their mother. But they were found and photographed within minutes of the actual birth. Remnants of the birth sac or afterbirth can be seen in the photo.

Most unusually, this mother had made her way to the highest part of the dunes to give birth just outside the roped-off viewing area above the viewing platforms' eastern steps. But this birth was never going to be usual because here was a chance to confirm that these pups were twins.

It's not unknown for grey seals to have two pups, but it is seldom seen in remote rookeries and the chance of survival of both pups is very low. Scientists will only accept a twin birth if there are witnesses to it or if

there is DNA evidence to prove the relationship of the pups to the mother. Grey seals have evolved to give birth to a single pup and to produce just enough rich milk for it to be sufficiently fed and accumulate enough stored fat in 18-21 days of suckling to sustain it over the next period of life. With the mother's milk exhausted, she comes into oestrus and is ready to mate and return to sea.

The pup, now three times its weight at birth, is left alone to complete a moult, shedding its white baby coat and growing darker waterproof adult fur. This takes up to three weeks and only then is it ready to go into the sea and fend for itself.

Imagine then, the drain on the resources of a female seal trying to rear two pups. There just isn't enough for both to reach survival weight. In the wild one of the pups would be favoured over the other or rejected at birth. But in the case of the female at

Horsey, though puzzled to find herself with two pups, she did accept and started to feed both. Inevitably, after 10 days she had no more milk and left them.

They were two healthy pups and were well away from the rest of the rookery, so it was not difficult for FoHS wardens to lift them off the dunes and transport them to RSPCA East Winch Wildlife Centre where they could be fed by hand until they reached the weight necessary for their best chance to survive as adults.



## Proving the relationship



David Vyse, former Policeman and now a member of FoHS committee, was wardening on 28th November and came across the new pups soon after birth. Seeing the chance to gather evidence for research, David took samples of blood and tissue from the 'scene'.

Hoping to find out how to get this recorded as a twin birth, David first contacted Sea Mammal Research Unit at St Andrews University, but was told twin births didn't happen. Further research put him in contact with The Marine Research Institute in Norway who proved keen to take on the task of DNA testing the two pups. Samples of skin and fur were taken from the pups at East Winch Wildlife Centre, which David sent with his earlier samples to Anne Kirstine Frei,

a scientist at the institute, who had offered to do the testing.

Meanwhile the twins, one male, one female, were gaining weight in the care of staff and volunteers at East Winch, who gave them the names of Star Wars characters, R2D2 and C-3PO.

After an anxious wait of a few weeks, David received the news that the tests proved the pups shared the same mother although they were fathered by different bulls. Female seals are known to mate with more than one bull, but this came as a bit of a surprise to the non-scientists among us. Nevertheless, the proof was there, they were twins!

David and FoHS committee were very grateful to the Institute of Marine Research, and the scientist, Kirstine, for their generosity in carrying out testing at no charge to FoHS.

The press gave much attention to the story, designating the birth of these pups as 'the

first record of wild grey seal twins in the world'. Unsurprisingly the media reports attracted extra visitors.

The final part of the story occurred on 22nd March 2015 when the pups were released at Horsey to live again as wild seals.

You can read the BBC News report, with a short video clip, by clicking on the link below.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-35875182>

