



Common Seal © northeastwildlife.co.uk

Working with Wildlife

## Common Seal (*Phoca vitulina*) Species Action Plan

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### Description

Common seals vary in colour from brown, grey or tan, with a uniform pattern of small darker patches. Males reach up to 2 metres in length and 160 kilograms in weight and are slightly bigger than females who reach approximately 1.7 metres and 130 kilograms. Common seals have a rounded head with no external ear flaps. Their eyes are situated halfway between the nose and the ear openings. Their nostrils form a 'v' shape when viewed head on, helping to distinguish them from the grey seal, whose nostrils slits are nearly parallel.

Common seals are known to eat a wide variety of fish, molluscs and crustaceans. They feed at sea, making short regular dives. As seals are at the top of the food chain they tend to accumulate pollutants such as heavy metals and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) which can affect breeding success. Male common seals have a shorter life span than females; up to 20 years as opposed to 30 years. This is believed to relate to the stresses incurred through fighting in order to increase their chances of breeding.

Rocky shores, mud flats and sandy beaches are favoured haul out sites for resting, though common seals do not tend to gather in such large groups as grey seals. Females give birth to a single pup in June or July each year. Pups are very well developed at birth and can crawl and swim within a few hours. This enables common seals to breed in estuaries where sand banks are exposed for only part of the day. Pups grow rapidly from the rich milk that they suckle from their mothers. The mother will mate again immediately after weaning, with courtship and mating taking place under water. The annual moult of fur takes place after breeding in August.

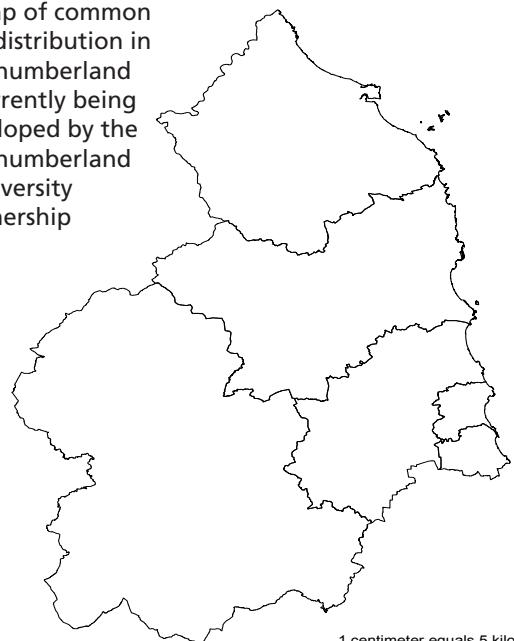
The distribution of the common seal extends across the North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans. Common seals in Europe belong to a distinct sub-species. In the UK the most important haul out areas are around the coast of Scotland and on the east coast of England, particularly in the Wash. Seals can become entangled and drown in fishing nets and in the UK it is legal to shoot any seals that come near fisheries if you have a licence. The conservation of Seals Act provides a closed season for the common seal during its pupping season when it is illegal to kill or take seals without a licence.

### Conservation Status

EC Habitats Directive, Annex II and V  
 Bern Convention, Appendix III  
 UK Biodiversity Action Plan Species  
 The Conservation of Seals Act 1970 – close season end May until end August  
 Habitats Regulations, Part III and schedule 3

### Current Extent in Northumberland

A map of common seal distribution in Northumberland is currently being developed by the Northumberland Biodiversity Partnership



1 centimeter equals 5 kilometers

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With an estimated UK population of approximately 34,000 breeding adults, the local population is small, and difficulties in monitoring the animals means there are no estimates of the regional population. There is a small breeding population on Lindisfarne of about twenty individuals, with single pups seen in 1993 and 2006. There is also a resident population of about five to six individuals in the Blyth estuary. They prefer estuaries and inlets rather than the open sea, preferring to haul out on mud flats and sand banks, though they will inhabit protected rocky shorelines in the more remote areas. Breeding density is very difficult to estimate as the pups usually take to the water within their first hour of life and are often missed when monitoring populations.

### Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- Waterfront development of harbour/dock areas and land bordering estuaries, limiting quiet haul out sites
- Spread of PDV through contact with Weddel seals as a result of global warming
- Shooting of seals around fishing nets and salmon traps

### Associated Action Plans

Coastal Saltmarsh and Mudflat  
Rocky Shore, Reefs and Islands

### Further Information

The Mammal Society - <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal/index.shtml>

Seal Conservation Society - <http://www.pinnipeds.org/>

### Targets

**Maintain the current range of common seals in Northumberland by 2010**

Code	Priority Actions	Date
CS A01	Collate all existing information on common seals in Northumberland and identify their regular haul out sites.	2008
CGS A02	Promote the importance of Northumberland's seals through publicity material, events and training to help to ameliorate the negative attitudes towards them and reduce disturbance to juveniles	ongoing
CGS A03	Seek to establish a code of practice for sight seeing boats and pleasure craft with specific reference to seal breeding areas	2009
CGS A04	Create an information leaflet on the procedures for dealing with a stranded, hurt or dead seal	2008
CGS A05	Promote the economic value of seals to the rural economy as part of the overall nature based tourism of the county	2009
CGS A06	Increase dialect with local fishing communities regarding the legal shooting of seals	2010