

Aquatic Life

Seals

Seals, sea lions, fur seals and walrus are marine mammals and belong to a group known as PINNIPEDIA (meaning wing-footed) and are referred to as PINNIPEDS. They differ from most other marine mammals in that they live both on land and in the sea. Of this group only seals are commonly found around the Irish coast.

In water, pinnipeds swim and dive for food. Between dives they can often be seen resting on the surface. Their bodies can behave like a cork and rest in a vertical position with their heads out of the water. This gives them time to breathe and allows them to keep an eye on their surroundings.

On land they can be seen, often in large groups, laying around in the sun with their hindflippers stretched out, fanning themselves, keeping cool. They can also be seen sleeping on the shore, although they can also fall asleep in the sea in a resting position!!

Basic facts about Seals

They are not fish

Adult males are called BULLS

Adult females are called COWS

Their young are called PUPS

They are adapted for life both on land and in the water.

They often gather on land in large groups called PODS

They breathe air

They have streamlined, torpedo shaped bodies

They are carnivores

They usually consume their prey whole on in large chunks.

They have large eyes which help them see clearly both in the water where there is little

light, and on land

Their eyes remain open when diving

They close their ears and nostrils when diving

They have a layer of fat under their skin called BLUBBER

They all have a fur coat that differs in colour and pattern between species.

They have a coat of oily fur which also helps them to keep relatively warm and dry.

Most species of seal pups are born with a white 'woolly' coat called LANUGO

Most pinnipeds come to the shore to mate, give birth and to moult.

The amount of time spent on land differs between the species.

Their main enemies are killer whale, shark and Man.

Grey or Atlantic Seal

Halichoerus grypus

This seal has a long donkey-like muzzle and an arched nose. Its nostrils are widely separated and from the front look like they are shaped more like a W than a V. The position of the nostrils can be used to identify this seal from the Harbour seal. In most adults the coat, as the name suggests, is grey with many random spots. However, this can vary and be creamy white in some females to almost black in some males! Their pups shed their lanugo coat after about 2-3 weeks and grow a coat similar to that of the adults. These seals are often very noisy and have loud wailing and grunting sounds.



Photo: Robbie Murphy

Common or Harbour Seal

Phoca vitulina

This seal has short flippers and is relatively small in size. Its cat-like head is large and rounded, with a short muzzle. Its nostrils are closely set together and form a V-shape. The adult Harbour Seals' fur coat ranges from yellow-grey to dark brown with coloured spots, while its pups are born with a spotted silver coat. The adults are known to be quite silent but may give a clear short bark, while the pups have a high pitched wail. They may be seen on land in groups as big as a thousand but are usually solitary when in the water.



Photo: Andreas Trepte, Marburg.

© 2006 Sherkin Island Marine Station & its licensors. All rights reserved.