

Species of the Week



Grey Seal

Halichoerus grypus
Rón mór

Grey Seals one of the two seal species that call Ireland home. They range across both sides of the North Atlantic Ocean from the east coast of Canada to Iceland to across northern Europe. An adult bull Grey Seal can grow to over 2.5 metres and weigh as much as 300kg. Even though they're named the grey seal, their coats can have a large amount of variation in colour from dark brown to grey to black. The clearest distinguishing characteristic of theirs is head shape. The males have a large, flat elongated head while the females have a flat but much more slender muzzle.

They spend most of their time at sea but can be found on rocky shores resting out of the water. While they are slow on land, in water they are agile and nimble swimmers. They can dive down to a depth of 120 metres and for a time of 8 minutes. They are generalist predators and will hunt and eat a variety of different animals including crustaceans, squid and a variety of fish species like sandeels, cod, sole and plaice. In clearer water with good visibility they will hunt by eye but in deeper darker water with poor visibility they will hunt using their hearing and highly sensitive whiskers. During foraging trips adults can travel hundreds of kilometres offshore in order to feed, with the trips lasting 2 to 3 days at a time.

Female Grey Seals must give birth on land and will come to shore to do so, typically along isolated stretches of rocky coastline. Breeding colonies are called rookeries. Males do not fight for territory but instead fight over access to a group of females, fights can become quite violent. Males will defend females constantly for months and so can lose a huge amount of body weight while not hunting. Females give birth in the autumn with the new born pup weighing up to 14kg. The mother will regularly feed the pup milk for the first three weeks until weaning. The pup can show a daily average weight gain of up to 2kg during this time. After about a month of weening the pup will leave the shore and learn to hunt for itself.