

Tuesday Club Nature Notes

with Jan Flamank

GREY SEALS

Halichoerus Grypus, from Greek, meaning 'hook-nosed sea pig'

Whilst the majority of mammals already have their offspring by now, grey seals give birth to their pups between September and December, and November is the favoured month for female grey seals to return to land to give birth. The UK is home to over half of the world population of these lovely creatures, and the Norfolk, Northumberland and west Scottish coasts are really important beaches during the breeding season.

Much larger than the Common Seal, female Grey Seals are up to 2.5 metres in length, with males often 3 metres, weighing up to 440 kg. That is an impressive size, and especially when weaning their pups, we need to respect them and keep a good distance away. Mothers are very protective of their pups until they are weaned, and will attack human intruders if provoked. Rightly so, I reckon.

The pups are born above the high tide mark, and weigh about 14kg at birth. They grow rapidly on the rich milk from their mother, which is 60% fat, enabling them to put on 2kg a day, laying down thick layers of blubber to insulate them from cold seas. They have delightful white fur for the first two to three weeks of life, but are abandoned by their mother at 3 weeks old to fend for themselves.

Weaned pups spend the next few days and weeks resting, without eating or drinking, and are vulnerable to being trampled by the male bulls, washed off rocks in stormy weather, or disturbed by tourist invasions. Rookeries, where all the pups are born and weaned, are very noisy places. Pups cry like babies, mothers howl at each other, and the bulls grunt and whiffle, sounding like steam trains!



Moulting their white fur, pups reveal the mottled grey coat of the adult. Driven by hunger, they take to the offshore sea, rapidly developing their hunting skills and taste for fish, crustaceans, eels and squid. They are protected to some extent by the Grey Seal Protection Act of 1941, after they were hunted almost to extinction; but still they are allowed to be shot in the 'open season' by fishermen and fishery owners who compete for the fish they eat.

Once weaning is over, the huge males mate with the females, after often bloody battles with other males for dominance. The female then does this amazing thing of delaying implantation of the fertilized egg, keeping it safe inside her body for months, so that she will give birth at the same time each year, after a pregnancy of about 7 months. Females live for up to 45 years, the males less at 25, as they are battered by their yearly territorial and mating disputes.

If you are lucky enough to see seal colonies and pups at this time of year, make sure you stay at least 20 metres away, keep dogs on a lead, keep quiet and don't ever play with frisbees (as if!) as they cause awful damage to seals when caught round their neck.