

SEALS

Seals are not a "plentiful species around our coasts" this is a common, cultural misconception. Our native seals were hunted to near extinction before they became protected by law. Their population is slowly recovering towards a healthy, national population. Ireland has an approximate population of 8,000 - 10,000 Grey seals and 3,000 - 4,000 Common seals, compared to the UK which has 120,000 Grey seals and 36,500 Common Seals. It is important to bear in mind there are only 300,000 Grey Seals globally, fewer than both African Elephants and our beloved Red Squirrels, so the populations we find around our coastlines are vital to global conservation efforts. As Apex Predators in Irish waters, healthy seal populations are essential for maintaining ecosystem balance. However, they face numerous threats from land and sea; including Human Disturbance, Habitat Loss, Climate Change, Water Pollution, and Entanglement in used and discarded fishing gear.

Some people love seals while some fishing folk might not be over fond of them because of the damage they can do to fishing nets. I am fortunate to live in a lovely forest area where I frequently go for a stroll in Courtown woods, the home of Seal Rescue Ireland.

This organisation does tremendous work in rescuing injured and abandoned seals from all over Ireland and nurse them back to health. It is a lovely sight to see the rejuvenated seals being released back into the Irish Sea when they are back to full health. They are anxious when they are brought in their baskets down to the sea. Then once the front shutter is open, they waddle their way down to the sea and once they touch sea water they are happy to take off back into the freedom of the sea.

I have been present at about 6 of these seal releases. In pre-Covid times a seal release was a huge family event. Family groups travelled from all over the area to get a glimpse of the seals and share in the great experience. When the moment for the release was announced families clambered to get the best vantage point to photograph the great event. Children ran into the water and then we saw the doors of the pens raised and the crowds applauded. The poor seals made tentative moves towards the water without the showmanship of Fungi.

Then the moment of contact with the Irish sea came and our seal clan floated and flipped away. The overhead drones captured their movements. They appeared reluctant to leave their temporary recovering location. They dallied about for a while as if bidding farewell to the seal followers who turned up on the day.

Now in Covid 19 times I was present at two releases in the past month. They were much more low-key. There were no crowds present except for the Seal Rescue Ireland team and a few regular beach walkers. I was privileged to be asked to stand guard and open the door of the cage to release one of the seals.

This released a lovely grey seal back into the wilds and dangers lurking in the Irish Sea. He looked around nervously and then waddled his way down to have his first bath in sea water. He immediately adapted to his surroundings. He swam back in again towards the shore as if to say a final good-bye and off he went swimming around and foraging for fish. I got some very nice video footage and photos of this particular seal release as they struggled along the sand on Courtown beach waddling down to the water. The Project Manager from Seal Rescue Ireland, Jeshua Taucher, took some excellent drone footage as he followed the seals journey out to sea.

I spoke to Jeshua about the seals that had just been released. They had both been abandoned by their mother's as a result of unseasonal stormy weather. Seal Rescue Ireland nursed them until they were healthy, competitive and had reached their target weight of 35 Kilograms, which will allow them to survive in the deep.

It was also interesting to learn that they use their front flippers for steering and their hind ones for propulsion. They can dive for any length of time from 5 to 15 minutes and in depths from 30 to 70 metres. Seals are unique, semi aquatic marine mammals that breathe air and share their time between the sea and shore. They are the acrobats of the sea. If you see a seal coming toward, remain calm and slowly make your way back to shore, seals are generally gentle animals and they are unlikely to be aggressive towards humans, unless provoked.

Seal Rescue Ireland is located in Courtown Woods. It has its own separate baths and reception area and shop. When you are walking by you can get the very distinctive fishy smell and hear the yelping particularly at feeding time. The following are all the contact details for this very worthwhile organisation.



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You might even like to adopt a seal

Ta súil agam go mbainfidh sibh taitneamh as an ròn ag Ionad Rón Tarrthála na hÉireann

Mick O Callaghan 6/1/2021

