

Watching seals at Ytri Tunga

Two species of seals breed in Iceland, harbour (or common) seal (*Phoca vitulina*) and grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*). At Ytri Tunga we have both species, but most of the seals on dry land are harbour seals. Four other seal species are occasionally seen in Iceland as well (harp, ringed, hooded and bearded seal).

Seals are best viewed at low tide when they may be observed lying on the shore. The ideal conditions are mild and calm weather. **Binoculars are very useful while seal-watching.**

Rules of conduct

Wild animals are sensitive to human activity and therefore visitors should bear in mind the following:

- **Please keep a minimum distance of 50 metres to the nearest seal.** If pups are observed, a 100 m distance to the nearest seal is recommended.
- If a seal makes a sound, moves or seems alert, it might be a sign of disturbance. If that happens, please move further away.
- Females often leave their pups temporarily to go hunting. **Please do not attempt to access or touch pups that appear to have been abandoned.** Leave lone pups alone to allow the mother to return to her offspring normally.
- Never position yourself between a seal and the sea. It is important that the seal has easy access to the water to allow it to feel safe and secure.
- When walking towards the animals, do so with slow and calm moves. Avoid loud noises and, if talking, keep your voice low. Leave the area in the same quiet manner.
- Do not throw objects in the area close to the seals.
- Avoid using camera flash when photographing.
- Seal welfare may be negatively impacted by large groups of people in seal habitat. On arrival, if you encounter a large group of people already close to the seals, please wait until some of the people leave.
- Dogs are to be kept on leash at all times.

Following the suggestions above is important for sustainable seal watching, enabling us to observe these interesting animals in their natural habitat for years to come.

Ytri Tunga is privately owned. Visitors to the area are asked not to disturb wildlife, vegetation or geological formations. Please take all your litter home with you.

Enjoy your visit!

Seal harvest in Iceland

In earlier times, harvesting seals was very important to landowners and could be a crucial survival factor through hard times. In general, people had a positive view towards seals and considered them a valuable resource. Meat and blubber (fat) were eaten and oil extracted from blubber was also used as lighting fuel. Pelts were processed and used for clothing and shoes.

For many years, seal fur was a valuable export commodity but the international commercial seal market plummeted around 1980 due to protests against seal harvesting in Canada, Russia and Norway and an import ban imposed by the European Union. During the next decade, the general public’s view in Iceland towards seals changed dramatically. Extensive hunting activity commenced, with the view to reduce seal numbers and hence damage to fishing gear, fish predation and nematode infections in cod and other harvested fish. These controversial measures, along with a number of seal-drownings in fishing nets, are thought to have contributed to the decline of seal numbers in Icelandic waters in recent decades. Changes in environmental conditions could also be important. Seal hunting is still permitted under certain circumstances, but the harvest has decreased. Nevertheless, seal populations still seem to be declining.



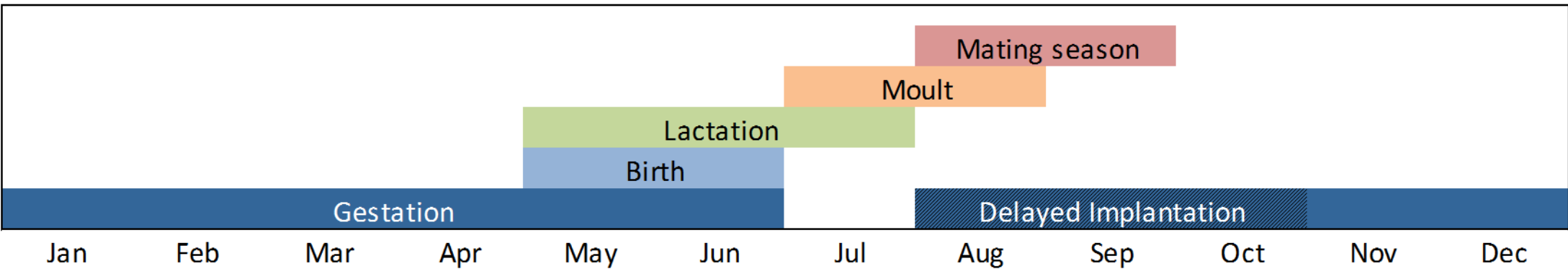
Harbour seal / Common seal

The harbour seal is the most common seal species in Icelandic waters. It is considerably smaller than the grey seal and can be recognized by its shorter snout. There is little difference in size between the sexes. Males weigh on average 100 kg and are slightly heavier than females, which average 90 kg. Male and female lengths are on average 1.7 m and 1.6 m respectively. Coat colour can vary considerably according to season, sex and age. Females are longer-lived than males and can survive for more than 30 years.



The harbour seal is one of the most widely distributed seal species in the world. Their diet consists mainly of cod, but also redfish, sand-eel, pollock, herring, Atlantic wolffish, capelin and flatfishes. It’s an accomplished diver and can stay under water for up to 25 minutes. Most often, it feeds at the depth of 10-50 m but can dive to 200 m or more for short periods.

Harbour seals are social and can often be seen in groups by the shoreline, although rarely in winter. Females congregate in haul-out sites in spring and give birth to one pup, which they lactate for 4-6 weeks. Harbour seal colonies are thought to have evolved as protection against predation. Males come to the haul-out sites in early summer. During the rut they compete for mating access to females and try to attract the females with various gestures. Dominant males will successfully breed with a number of receptive females and pups are born in the following spring. During the winter, males and females rarely mix, and younger animals are seldom seen with older ones.



Previously, harbour seals were more common in Iceland. From 1972 to 1978 the Icelandic population was estimated at 43 000 animals. However, in both 2006 and 2011 the population was estimated at 12 000. According to a count in 2014, numbers were down to approximately 4 000 individuals. These figures reflect a reduction in harbour seal numbers of more than 90% over the past four decades.



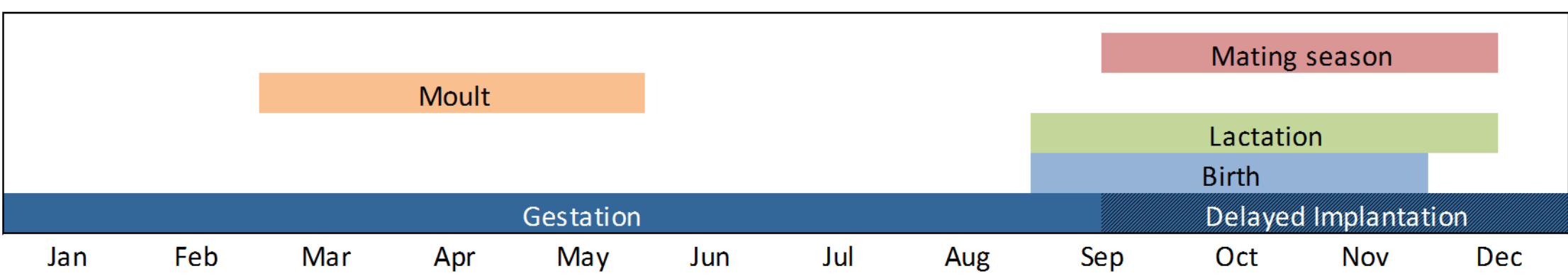
Grey seal

The grey seal (sometimes called horsehead seal) is much bigger than the harbour seal, with grey seal males almost three times as heavy. They have a relatively large and broad head and a long muzzle. Size difference between males and females is extensive, with males measuring on average 280 kg and 2.4 m in length (large males can be 300 kg and 3 m); females are on average 165 kg and 2 m. The coat is often grey or dark grey, different between sexes and age. The pups are born with a dense, soft, silky, white fur, which they replace with a waterproof pelt 3-4 weeks after birth. As for harbour seals, females are longer-lived than males, some reaching at least 45 years.



The grey seal has a more limited and more southerly distribution than the harbour seal. In general, they can be quite shy and commonly keep further away from the shore. They mostly eat cod and sand-eel, along with Atlantic wolffish, shorthorn sculpin, pollock, lump sucker and plaice. They generally forage close to the sea bottom at a depth of up to 100 m, but sometimes dive deeper.

As for harbour seals, dominant grey seal males can have offspring with many females. After giving birth in autumn, the grey seal females lactate for about two weeks. Males defend areas with females and pups and mate as soon as the females are receptive, around pup weaning. The strongest males defend the best breeding sites. Females can be aggressive at this time of the year, which can explain why grey seal breeding colonies are often smaller than harbour seals’. Where female density is low, males sometimes only defend one female. However, grey seals often form big groups when they shed their fur. Outside the mating and moulting periods, they are mostly solitary.



The Icelandic population of grey seals has long been a lot smaller than the harbour seal population. Grey seal numbers were estimated at 10 000 animals in 1982 and 12 000 in 1990. They had declined to 5 000 in 2002 and 4 000 in 2012. This reflects a 67% population decline between 1990 and 2012.

Text and layout: West Iceland Nature Research Centre, www.nsv.is

References:

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- Guidelines and advice for sustainable wildlife tourism in Iceland, Greenland, Faroe Islands and Norway. The Wild North.
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Distribution maps: Næst. First published in Icelandic Mammals (2004, Páll Hersteinsson (ed.)).

