



## Advice for encounters with seals at sea

(Useful for divers, snorkelers, surfers & swimmers)

Chance encounters with wild seals are likely to occur for those of us who spend time in the water undertaking other activities. Follow these guidelines for an unforgettable wildlife experience with minimal negative impact. ALWAYS LEAVE SEALS WHERE AND AS YOU FIND THEM! Minimise your time with them, ideally less than 15 minutes. Often you are the most interesting thing they have discovered all day, so it is easy for your presence to distract them from other essential activities like feeding.

Encounters are most likely at high tide when seals may be close to shore. Please always avoid entering the sea to swim in proximity to hauled seals. Whilst in the water if you suddenly find seals on rocks, please keep your distance – over 100m, to avoid flushing any seals off rocks\*, as they can injure themselves or get stressed and are less likely to stay in the area and interact if they have been spooked. Juveniles are more likely to be skittish and most easily scared in the spring. They also have fewer fat reserves to cover energy used up during an encounter with people. You might also be the first human a juvenile seal has encountered. They learn through play so are the most likely seals to interact with a person in the water.

Let curiosity be the ONLY reason for the seals to visit you, NEVER feed wild seals\*\*. You MUST always let seals be in control of their encounter with you.

Seals are the largest land breeding mammal in the UK and can be very intimidating in the water. You do not need to fear a wild seal in the sea, but like dogs and horses if they sense anxiety, they are more likely to be mischievous! Always let seals make the first move – let them approach you. Sit back, wait quietly and observe. Aim to stay calm and move slowly to avoid spooking the seals and provoking a startled response. Be confident that seals are usually gentle creatures unless they feel threatened. Seals default to choose flight over fight, but they are more likely to be aggressive if you come between:-

- them and their escape route to safety – the open sea. Never surround or corner a seal.
- a seal and its next meal
- a mother and her pup
- two males challenging for a female

Avoid these situations. With very large males that come really close, it may help to avoid eye contact by lowering your head and keeping still. Non-threatening, but confident body language is the key to a safe encounter.

Seals are more likely to approach people in the water if the people are behaving in an interesting manner. For example, if people are making sounds to each other and moving limbs or swimming without being focused on or looking at the seals (as predators would). Seals will explore you with their fore flippers, whiskers and mouths. The more you act like a seal, the more likely they are to approach you! Wearing a wetsuit means that the seals' strong claws and sharp interlocking teeth are less likely to accidentally break your skin. Please never touch seals no matter how much they entice or provoke you to do so. Touching a seal may startle it, be uncomfortable on its fur and skin or transmit infection.

Always watch the seals' reactions closely - if they show signs of being agitated, please back away gently. They are more likely to let you move away if you are behaving in a benign (and so boring) way. If they get intimidating, slowly and gently but assertively move away. Pushing, nudging and vocalisations may be signs that the seal would prefer to be left alone. Swatting their fore flipper towards you or crash-diving means 'go away' in seal language!

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\*Whilst resting on rocks seals are digesting their food, so flushing them into the sea prematurely or repeatedly, upsets their energy budget and increases tiredness and stress.

\*\*Feeding wild seals creates really big problems for seals and humans. Seals are quick learners and just one feed can change their behaviour for life. In their minds, food becomes linked with people and boats. This reduces their natural fear of humans.

Many thanks to experienced divers, Ben Burville, Anna Cawthray and Dave McBride who have helped to create these guidelines, along with Cornwall Marineline Boat Operators.

Our aim is to regularly review and update this advice in the light of experience. Comments are welcome to [sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk](mailto:sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk)