

**A REVIEW OF GREY SEAL (*HALICHOERUS GRYPUS*) PUPPING ON LUNDY,  
AND SOME NEW OBSERVATIONS**

By  
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The numbers of grey seals and their distribution around the Lundy coast has been studied by Clark and Baillie (1973, 1974), and most recently reviewed by Clark (1977). They counted a maximum of approximately 50 individuals in 1975 and considered this to be a resident population using the island the whole time. Other counts have, however, indicated higher seal numbers (e.g. 112 in 1955, 89 in 1956, 80 in 1969, and as many as 120 in 1973. Contained in appropriate L.F.S. reports). Hook (1963-64) was of the opinion that there was a seasonal change in numbers, with a maximum reached in late September. This is an area with considerable censusing difficulties, and before firm conclusions can be drawn further studies need to be carried out.

That 'Seals Hole' is a popular resort of grey seals has long been known (Fig. 1); though Chanter's (1877) early reference to the common seal *Phoca vitulina* must be a case of mistaken identity. He writes 'No less than 5 have been killed at one time in the seal cavern, which is the principal place of resort; but they have been much diminished in the past few years through the reckless persecution of pilots and tugboats'. The first reference this author knows of to seals breeding on the sandy beach at the back of this cave was made by Loyd (1925). Subsequent visits to this cave reported in the various L.F.S. reports have confirmed that one or two pups are born annually, though in 1956 three were reported. Despite searches of other caves, it was believed for many years that this was the only breeding site on the island (e.g. Gade, 1972). However, Clark and Baillie (Clark, 1977) between the years of 1973 and 1975 identified for the first time further pupping areas in Langham's Cavity (also known as Double Headed Zawn in Gibson, 1985), Puffin Gully, and in Halfway Wall Bay (Fig. 1). In 1975 12 pups were found (5 of them dead), and Clark was of the opinion that as many as 25 pups may have been born on the island. Subsequent observations had to wait until 1983 when R. Irving, in an unpublished report to the N.C.C., reported finding 2 pups in Halfway Wall Bay, and 2 in Seals Hole.

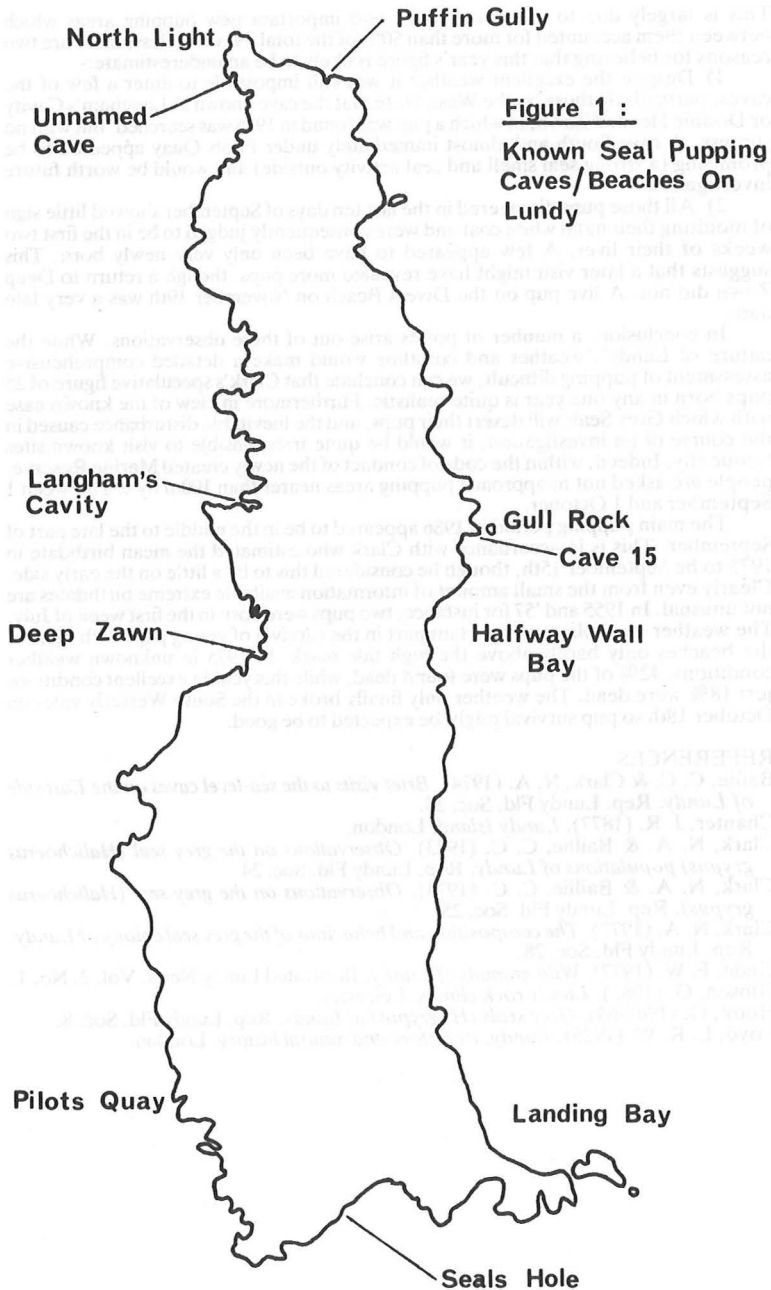
In 1986 the unusually calm and mild September weather allowed further observations to be made both by boat and from the land. These are summarised below (see also Fig. 1):-

Circa mid August Divers found one dead seal pup floating off the North East corner.

August

- 21/9 A single dead pup at the end of a narrow cave immediately South of Gull Rock (Cave 15 in Baillie & Clark 1974). Easily entered at low Spring water.
- 21/9 Two pups in Halfway Wall Bay, one in the North and one in the centre.
- 22/9 A thorough search by land between the Landing Bay and Halfway Wall Bay is possible at Spring low water. No further pups though surprisingly the older pup in Halfway Wall Bay had disappeared, despite being too young to take to the sea, and the perfect weather at the time.
- 23/9 One pup in Seals Hole.
- 26/9 Two pups in Puffin Gully.
- 26/9 4 live pups and one dead one in the large unnamed cave immediately South of the North Light.
- 26/9 4 pups in Deep Zawn (see Gibson) at the back of Jenny's Cove.
- 4/10 4 pups still present in Deep Zawn.
- 19/11 A live pup on the Landing Bay Beach.

This gives a total of 17 pups found for 1986, 5 more than in any previous year.



This is largely due to the discovery of two important new pupping areas which between them accounted for more than 50% of the total. Nevertheless, there are two reasons for believing that this year's figure is likely to be an underestimate:-

1) Despite the excellent weather it was still impossible to enter a few of the caves, particularly those on the West. Note that the cave known as Langham's Cavity or Double Headed Zawn, in which a pup was found in 1975 was searched, but with no success. A cave South and almost immediately under Pilots Quay appeared to be promising (a strong seal smell and seal activity outside) and would be worth future investigation.

2) All those pups discovered in the last ten days of September showed little sign of moulting their natal white coat and were consequently judged to be in the first two weeks of their lives. A few appeared to have been only very newly born. This suggests that a later visit might have revealed more pups, though a return to Deep Zawn did not. A live pup on the Divers Beach on November 19th was a very late date.

In conclusion, a number of points arise out of these observations. While the nature of Lundy's weather and coastline would make a detailed comprehensive assessment of pupping difficult, we can conclude that Clark's speculative figure of 25 pups born in any one year is quite realistic. Furthermore in view of the known ease with which Grey Seals will desert their pups, and the inevitable disturbance caused in the course of an investigation, it would be quite irresponsible to visit known sites frequently. Indeed, within the code of conduct of the newly created Marine Reserve, people are asked not to approach pupping areas nearer than 100m by sea between 1 September and 1 October.

The main pupping period in 1986 appeared to be in the middle to the late part of September. This is in accordance with Clark who estimated the mean birthdate in 1975 to be September 15th, though he considered this to be a little on the early side. Clearly even from the small amount of information available extreme birthdates are not unusual. In 1955 and '57 for instance, two pups were born in the first week of July. The weather must play an important part in the survival of young pups with most of the beaches only barely above the high tide mark. In 1975 in unknown weather conditions, 42% of the pups were found dead, while this year in excellent conditions just 18% were dead. The weather only finally broke in the South Westerly gales on October 18th so pup survival might be expected to be good.

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