

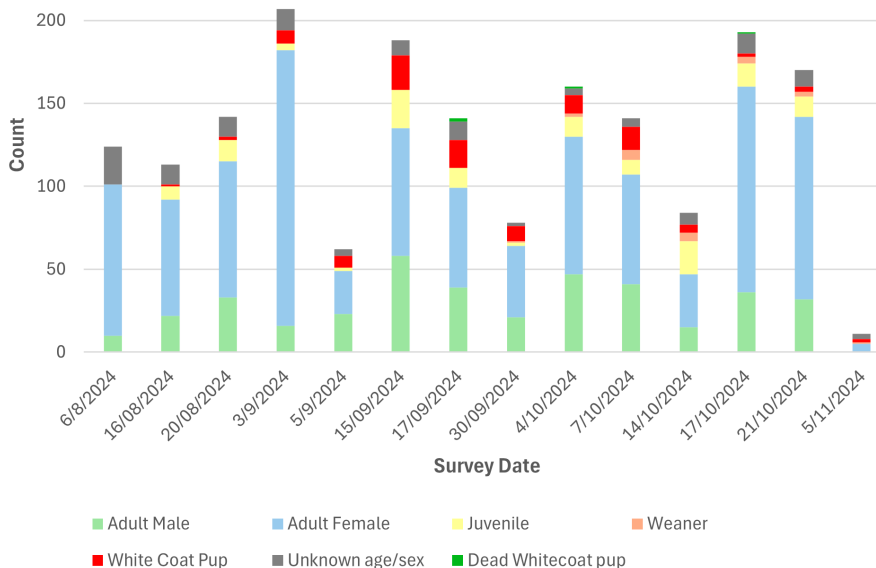
ATLANTIC GREY SEAL *HALICHOERUS GRYPUS* POPULATION AND PRODUCTIVITY STUDIES IN 2024

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The Atlantic Grey Seal population has been monitored consistently on Lundy since 2011, with evidence of *ad hoc* counts and monitoring recorded beforehand. This monitoring has historically been carried out by the conservation team, keeping the data for the island's own records. They would survey during peak breeding season to understand the distribution, population dynamics and productivity of the Lundy Grey Seals. In 2016 the survey method was reviewed to enable the data collected on Lundy to contribute to wider seal population assessments, such as the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) national seal surveys.

Population survey results

Fourteen population surveys were completed over the 2024 season between 6th August and 5th November. The highest population count of Atlantic grey seals, *Halichoerus grypus*, recorded on Lundy in 2024 was 207 individuals (166 females, 16 males, 4 juveniles, 8 white-coat pups, 13 individuals of undetermined age or sex), on 3rd September. This is 28 less than last year's recorded peak population count. Two whole island surveys were conducted this year, with only a few individuals recorded along the west coast during these surveys. The east coast continues to be an important habitat area for Atlantic grey seals. Three-Quarter Wall Bay remained an important haul-out area: the largest haul out the season was recorded there and consisted of 53 seals.



▲ Results of population surveys.



▲ Large haul-out of 53 seals recorded on 17th October 2024 at Three-Quarter Wall Bay consisting of 32 adult females, 12 adult males and 9 juveniles (not all pictured) (Photo: Ben Long).

Across the season, the majority (22%) of recorded seals were sighted in Three-Quarter Wall Bay. This was followed by Brazen Ward Battery (7.5%) and Gannets Bay South (6.5%). The largest recorded haul-out of the season consisted of 53 individuals (32 females, 12 males and 9 juveniles) at Three-Quarter Wall Bay on 17th October.

Productivity survey results

A record 71 pups were born on Lundy in 2024. The first white-coat pup was sighted on 11th August on Ladies' Beach. However, on 14th August a fully moulted and weaned pup was sighted in the Landing Bay. Thus, it is likely that due to the age of this pup when it was found, the pupping season on Lundy in 2024 officially started at the end of July. September was the busiest month for pup births, with 65% of pups born during this month. White Beach remained an important pupping area, with most pups first sighted here.

Despite a record year for pup numbers, mortality was high due to pup births coinciding with numerous easterly storms throughout the season. Observed mortality was calculated at 21%, much higher than the 8% recorded in 2023.



▲ Pup 8 on Ladies' Beach (Photo: Ben Long).



▲ Bobinett (80564) in the Landing Bay on 25th September 2024 (Photo: Paul Dean).

Tagged seals

Two tagged seals were positively identified during the 2024 season. The first individual was an adult female encountered on 25th September in the Landing Bay. This female was identified as individual 80564, also known as 'Bobbinett'. She was cared for at RSPCA West Hatch and later released at Coombe Martin, North Devon in January 2022. She has been sighted on Lundy three times previously, including last year, when she was sighted on Rat Island on 3rd August 2023.

A second individual was encountered on 21st October in Gannets' Bay South. This female was identified as individual 80408, also known as 'Tutti Frutti'. Tutti Frutti has previously been sighted on Lundy, in August 2021, as well as in West Cornwall.

Photo Identification

With guidance from the Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust, albums were created containing close-up shots of seals sighted during seal surveys and pup checks. These were then sent away for photo identification to establish where individual seals had previously visited and if any mothers had previously pupped on Lundy.



LUN345 'Moth eaten cookie cutter' was previously sighted in 2018, with her pup (number 21) on Ladies' Beach. She was also sighted in 2019 in Lametry Bay, but there was no record of whether she had a pup or not. This year, her pup was born on White Beach on 27th September 2024 and then later moved to Ladies' Beach, but we are unsure if the pup survived to stage 5. We hope to obtain more positive identifications in the coming months.

◀ LUN345 'Moth eaten cookie cutter' and her pup on Ladies' Beach, 7th October 2024 (Photo: Ben Long).

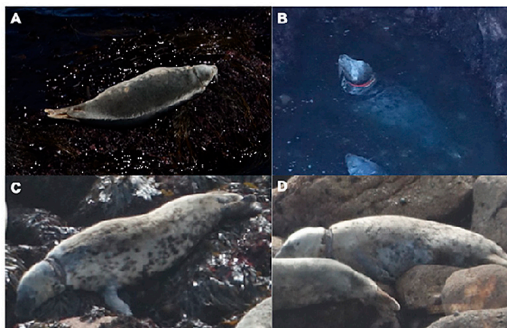
Entanglements

Four entangled seals were sighted in 2024, all entangled in marine pollution from anthropogenic sources. An adult female with fishing line around its neck was encountered on the 20th August at Gull Rock (image A right), and a second adult female with a plastic ring around its neck was observed on 17th September at North Gannets' Rock (image B right). On the 17th October, two separate individuals were seen with fishing line entangled around their necks hauled out at Halfway Bay (images C and D right). Both individuals were suffering from deep, open wounds. The Seal Research Trust were made aware of these individuals.

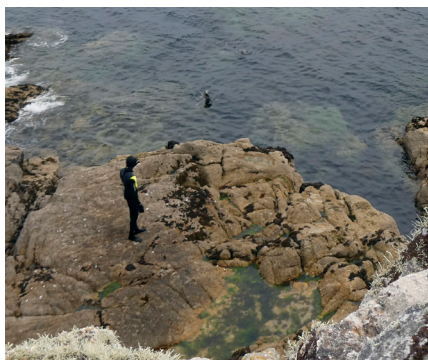
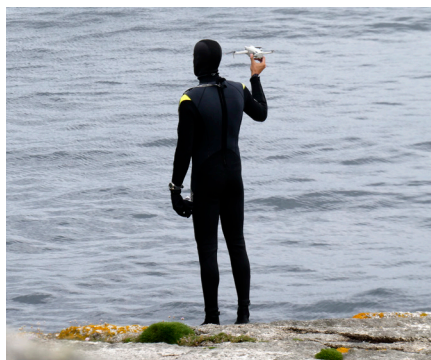
Disturbances

Outside of disturbance surveys, which did not contain any major disturbance issues, two incidental observations of disturbance were recorded. The first was observed on 17th August by Patrick Penny, a Lundy Ambassador. The incident involved a visiting dive group who were using a drone from a boat to film seals hauled out at Brazen Ward Battery. When the drone crash-landed at Brazen Ward, one of the divers swam ashore to retrieve it. This caused seven hauled-out seals to flush off the rocks and crash-dive into the sea. Lundy's Code of Conduct prohibits recreational drone use without permission on and within 100 metres of the island. Local charter boats were made aware of this incident and the detrimental effects disturbances such as this can have on seals. This incident has raised wider issues concerning drone usage in the Marine Protected Area.

A second incident occurred on 7th September, observed by the conservation team aboard MS Oldenburg. Three paddleboarders passed between Mouse and Rat islands at low-tide and thus within 100m of 11 hauled-out seals on Mouse Island. This caused the seals to flush and crash dive into the sea. The people involved were unaware of the disturbance they had caused.



▲ A) Adult female with fishing line entangled around its neck at Gull Rock on 20th August 2024. B) Adult female entangled in plastic ring at North Gannets' Rock on 17th September 2024. C) Adult female with fishing line entangled around its neck at Halfway Bay on 17th October 2024. D) An individual of undetermined age and sex with fishing line entangled around its neck at Halfway Bay on 17th October 2024.



▲ Man with retrieved drone on Brazen Ward Battery. ► Seven seals flushed into the sea after being disturbed by drone use while hauled out at Brazen Ward Battery (Photos: Patrick Penny).

Engagement

Regular engagement on Lundy's seal population comes from the tri-weekly talks led by the island's wardens. The talks, which centre around the island's wildlife, educate visitors on the population status and ecology of the island's grey seal population as well as informing visitors of the effects of seal disturbance, and how to prevent disturbance events. In 2024, additional talks from visitors, including Gareth Richards (Gower Seal Group) and Carole Lee (Seal enthusiast) provided further insight into the biology and conservation of the UK's Atlantic grey seal population.

During the pupping season, signs informed the public that Devil's Kitchen, Quarry and Landing Bay beaches were closed to prevent disturbance of seal pups. Signs were also used to convey information to visitors on best practices when observing seals; these were set up outside the Landing Bay boat building and in the Marisco Tavern. This information was also presented in free leaflets available in the Tavern and in the Landing Bay boat building. Lastly, engagement with the public came through conversations during surveys and nightly wildlife logbook meetings. Overall, engagement with the public was well received and talks were well attended. Conversations were positive, with many visitors interested in the status of the island's Atlantic grey seal population and the progress of pups.

Engagement with water users

Due to increasing concerns about seal disturbance from boats and recreational activities such as 'snorkel with seals' boat charters, the conservation team decided to set up a mailing list to promote best practice.

Initial contact involved a brief introduction to the island conservation team as well as sharing best practices from DEFRA and the Seal Alliance. Subsequent emails contained updates on seal and pup numbers and discussed the effects of significant disturbance events that had occurred and social media posts showing bad practice. We then mentioned what actions had been taken following the event(s). In one case, our escalation, with help from the Seal Research Trust, led to an email being issued to a charter boat company from Natural England after we were alerted to a post on social media which showed a snorkeler 'hugging' a seal.

Conclusion

Overall, a year of record pup numbers on Lundy which unfortunately coincided with a year of unfavourable weather conditions, including multiple easterly storms. Despite this, it was great to see many moulted and weaned pups hauled-out and swimming around in the Landing Bay later in the season!

Disturbance from water users continues to be an issue on the island. However, by expanding outreach and education surrounding the issue, we hope to ensure better behaviour from water-users. Disturbance levels will continue to be monitored.

Acknowledgements

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