

ATLANTIC GREY SEAL *HALICHOERUS GRYPUS* STUDIES

Mya Tibbs and Tara McEvoy-Wilding

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.

Population

Twelve population surveys were completed during the 2025 season, with total counts and breakdowns by sex and age class presented in the graph below. The highest total count was recorded on 6 October, with 183 individuals observed (16 males, 122 females, 12 juveniles, 1 weaner, 10 white-coat pups, one dead pup, and 21 individuals of undetermined age or sex). This peak is 24 seals fewer than the 2024 maximum count of 207. The lowest count occurred on 20 October, with just 28 individuals recorded.

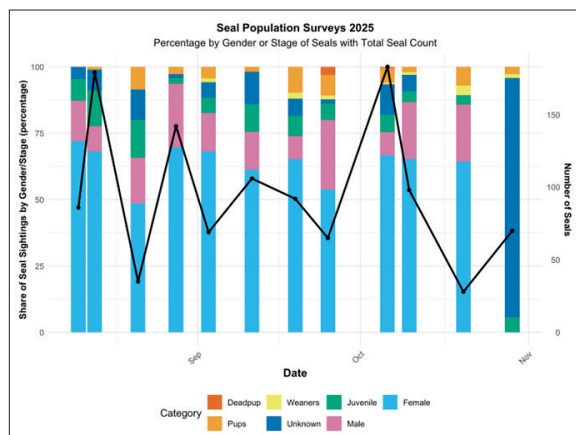


▲ Seals hauled out at Mousehole and Trap, 10 August 2025
(photo: Kai Harper)

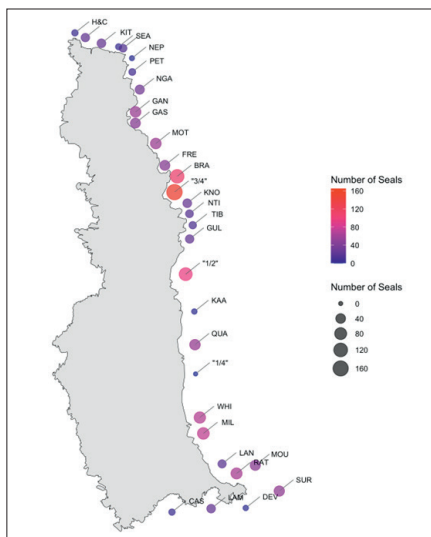
Consistent with previous years, females were the most frequently observed category during every survey except the final survey of the season, which was completed by a different surveyor. Earlier Lundy Seal Reports (2017, 2018, 2020, and 2021) have noted an apparent increase in males around mid-September; however, this pattern was not evident in 2025. As highlighted in prior reports, seal distribution around Lundy is strongly affected by weather conditions and sea state. Surveys conducted during periods of easterly winds showed notable absences of seals at typically popular haul-out sites such as Rat and Mouse Island.

Two surveys were carried out with easterlies: on 25 September, with a total of 65 individuals, and on 21 August, with a total of 35 individuals. These surveys occurred during the peak population period of the season, and total counts are significantly lower than other surveys during this time.

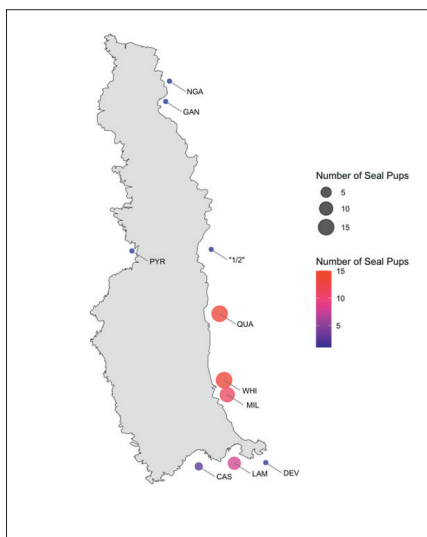
The most popular haul-out spot during the 2025 season was Three-Quarter Wall Bay. This



◀ Results of the 2025 population surveys. Total counts of each survey (right y axis) are shown by the black line, and the percentage breakdown of the age and sex of seals (left y axis) is shown as a bar chart.



▲ Cumulative number of seals seen at each survey point throughout the 2025 season.



▲ Total number of seal pups first sighted at each surveying point

has also been reported as the most popular location in the 2021, 2023, and 2024 reports. The highest count at Three-Quarter Wall Bay was 67 individuals. Seals at Three-Quarter Wall Bay accounted for 14% of all sightings, followed by Brazen Ward Battery with 9.7% and Half Way Wall Bay with 8.5%.

Productivity

Seal pup checks were carried out following the identification of the first white-coat seal pup on 4 August. Surveys were conducted at least five times a week between 4 August and 20 October, as close to low tide as possible. Near-daily monitoring aimed to accurately track the development of seal pups. Only beaches in the South East of the island, from QUA to CAS, were surveyed, as these had been identified as important pupping locations. Pup identification mainly relied upon the identification of their mothers. The age and progress of pups were classified using Smith's Age Classification System.

A total of 64 seal pups were born on Lundy in the 2025 pupping season. This is seven individuals fewer than 2024 and two fewer than 2023, but higher than any record before 2022. This total would be fewer than the actual productivity of the island, as there would be many more pups present, hidden within the island's inaccessible sea caves throughout the season. The first white coat pup, found on the 4 August, was at Castle Bay (CAS), and the last new pup was found on 8 November at Devils Kitchen (DEV). The survey locations with the highest number of first pup sightings were Quarry Beach and White Beach, each with 15 first sightings. This year, to aid fieldworkers with



▲ Pup 2, 'Blackwater' on Ladies Beach (photo: Tara McEvoy-Wilding)



▲ Pup 51 'Craggie' on Ladies Beach (photo: Mya Tibbs)

tracking pup progress we decided to name pups alphabetically after British and Irish rivers; this proved to be helpful and we plan to continue this next year with a new theme.

The observed mortality in 2025 was 11 individuals, with an observed mortality rate of 17%. This is lower than the 2024 observed mortality rate of 21%, which faced strong easterly storms and spring tides that coincided with pup births. Fatalities were much higher when combining observed mortality with assumed mortality, producing a mortality rate of 30%. The combined observed and assumed

mortality in 2024 was 36%, higher than the 2025 rate. Analysis of pup data from 2014–2025 showed a statistically significant increase in the number of Grey Seal pups born on Lundy Island between July and November over this time span.

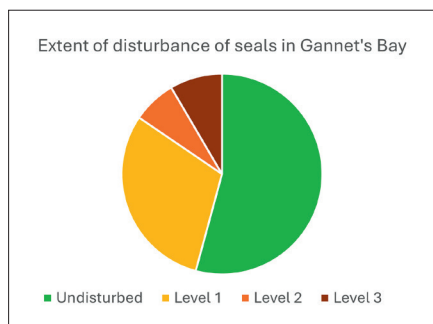
Disturbance

After a trial during 2024, we decided to continue with the disturbance surveys at Gannets Bay, thanks to the assistance of an extra volunteer, Kirsty Cox. Across nine surveys, 46% of seals were recorded to have been disturbed to some extent. Each disturbance event was either caused by a boat coming into the bay or because snorkellers got too close. Disturbance was classified at three levels:

Level 1 – Alert: Disturbed from resting, becoming vigilant

Level 2 – Shifting: Head up, scanning the surroundings, shifting around on their rock

Level 3 – Flushing: Moving across the rocks rapidly, diving into the sea

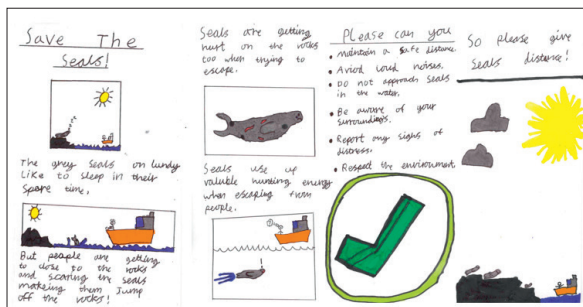


▲ Pie chart showing the proportion of seals disturbed, and to what extent, observed during nine disturbance surveys

The pie chart below shows the proportion of disturbance at each level. The majority of disturbance was at level 1, which isn't a significant issue, but the response level can quickly escalate to 2 or 3 if snorkellers come closer or boat noise continues. Level 3 disturbances can have significant health implications for a seal, both because of short term injuries such as lost claws and lacerations, and long-term consequences if they are regularly flushed off the rocks and losing resting time. For 2026, we plan to increase disturbance surveys further and have recruited extra volunteers to be able to achieve this. We hope to be able to undertake at least two surveys a week from June- August.

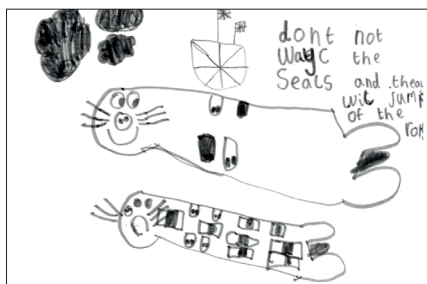
Engagement

To engage with the North Devon community, in 2025 we ran a 'Lundy Seal Champion' Competition. This was a competition for primary school aged children to write or design a creative piece of work to help us raise awareness of seal disturbance around Lundy and to help promote our Seal Code of Conduct. The competition was a success with around 90 entries from seven schools. The winning entries have been displayed in St Helen's Church and will be used in partnership with the North Devon Biosphere to raise awareness of seal conservation.



▲▶ Winning and highly commended entries from the Lundy Seal Champion Competition

On the island, regular engagement on Lundy's seal population came from tri-weekly talks led by the island's wardens. The talks, which centred around the island's wildlife, educated visitors on the population status and ecology of the island's grey seal population as well as informing visitors about the effects of seal disturbance, and how to prevent disturbance events.



▲ Seal pupping sign in the Landing Bay

During the pupping season, signs were used to inform the public that Devil's Kitchen, Quarry and Landing Bay beaches were closed to prevent disturbance of seal pups. Signs set up outside the Landing Bay boat building and in the Marisco Tavern were also used to convey information to visitors on best practices when observing seals. This information was also presented in free leaflets available in the Tavern and in the Landing Bay boat building.

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to this year's Seal Volunteers Kirsty Cox, Kai Harper and Mya Tibbs for all their efforts surveying Lundy's seals. We would also like to thank Lundy's other conservation volunteers Kathleen Power, Ezra Sherwell and Zdena Best for their assistance with surveys and reporting sightings.