Seals | Raunyn

Biodiversity Action Plan
Cummey Yannoo Beiyn-Feie

Manx Background

As of 2024 there are two species of seal typically seen in Manx waters: the Atlantic Grey Seal (*Halicoerus grypus atlantica*) and the less frequently seen, recent arrival, the Common (or Harbour) Seal (*Phoca vitulina*). In recently decades seals have undergone a remarkable recovery in Manx waters however remain highly susceptible to human disturbance.

Grey Seal: There is no documentary or other evidence of their historical status, but it is thought possible that they have been present during much of the Holocene (the 12,000 years since the last ice age).[1] The first formal Manx record is from 1881 with the next in 1925. As a result of historic hunting and possibly disease, Grey Seal numbers were probably at an all-time low in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, by 1963 the Port Erin Marine Lab wrote, 'Frequently to be seen swimming, at all times of the year, around the south end of the Isle of Man, where the resident population is roughly estimated at 50 seals. Hauls out, on the falling tide, on to the rock-ledges, as at Stroin Vuigh (SW coast), on the Calf of Man, and on the Black Rocks, E. of Port St Mary. Breeding: pups seen in Nov. and Dec., and one in July.'[2] In 1971 the Calf Warden wrote, 'Always present around the [Calf] and quite possibly breeds, although this has never been proved. A quite small calf was seen in the sea in October 1968 which must have been born on or close to the [Calf].'[3] By 1978 the species was described as 'quite a common sight [on the Calf]… they do come ashore on to the rocks of the island [Calf], and are thought to breed.'[4] In 1990 it was written 'there is a breeding colony of Grey Seals which has risen to its present numbers since the 1880s. Despite lending their name to several coastal features, such as Gob ny Rona in Maughold, seals had not bred in Manx in later historic times'.[5] Since then the population has continued to grow. Today, a population of several hundred seals is present throughout Manx waters, with the major aggregations at the Calf and Sound but also, more recently, the Point of Ayre. *1,871 Manx records*.[6]

Common Seal: Writing in 1963, the Port Erin Marine Lab discounted all historic records of Common Seal as misidentifications.[7] The first known plausible Manx record was of one at the Calf in 1971[8]. Recorded again at the Calf in 1999, by 2006 it was noted as a very recent breeding species.[9] Common Seals remain infrequent around the Island and are mainly reported from the Calf, Maughold and Ramsey. *258 Manx records*.[10]

Ringed Seal (*Pusa hispida*): A single record of one stranded alive at Port Erin, December 1940.[11]

Grey Seal © Eleanor Stone, MWT.

Description

Grey Seal: The larger of the two Manx species, females can weigh 200kg while males can reach over 300kg and over 2m in length. The scientific name, *Halicoerus grypus*, means hook-nosed sea pig. Accordingly, adults possess a long, 'Roman-type' nose with the males having more pronounced features making them easily recognisable once they reach maturity. Grey Seals are not only identified by their larger build; their nostrils notably run parallel to each other compared to the tapered "V"-shaped nostrils of the Common Seal. As their name suggests, their colouring is predominantly grey, generally darker on their backs with a lighter grey on their stomachs; with large, sparsely covered spots which are unique to each animal allowing ease of individual identification.

Common Seal: Noticeably smaller than its counterpart, only weighing between 65 to 150kg. There is no significant variation in sexual dimorphism, males being only slightly larger. The scientific name, *Phoca vitulina*, means calf-like seal, alluding to their smaller, more charming features. Their colouration tends to vary, exhibiting limited counter-shading, being slightly darker on top, however the intensity varies within individuals. They are covered in multiple small spots.

Determining species: While dry when hauled out, identification by colouration alone is difficult; the body size and shape of the face are more reliable features. The Common Seal's facial features are much softer, with larger eyes, a shorter snout, a concave forehead, and the tapered "V"-shaped nostril.

Global and Regional Population & Distribution

Grey Seal: Globally, the population is generally believed to be increasing, currently estimated at around 316,000 mature individuals with three reproductively isolated groups. The UK population represents about 40% of the world's population (124,000 individuals in 2000), some 95% of the European population.

Common Seal: The current global population trend is data deficient, however the population is estimated at 315,000 mature individuals, with 36,050 individuals in the UK. Since 2000, declines of up to 50% have been recorded in parts of Scotland, such as the Northern Isles, and north and east coasts. The cause of this is unclear, whilst the Scottish west coast population appear stable.

Both species are distributed across Britain & Ireland (Fig. 1) with the largest populations of both being in Scotland. There are large populations of Grey Seals along the east coast of England, the west coast of Ireland, and around the Irish Sea. Common Seals have isolated pockets in eastern England.

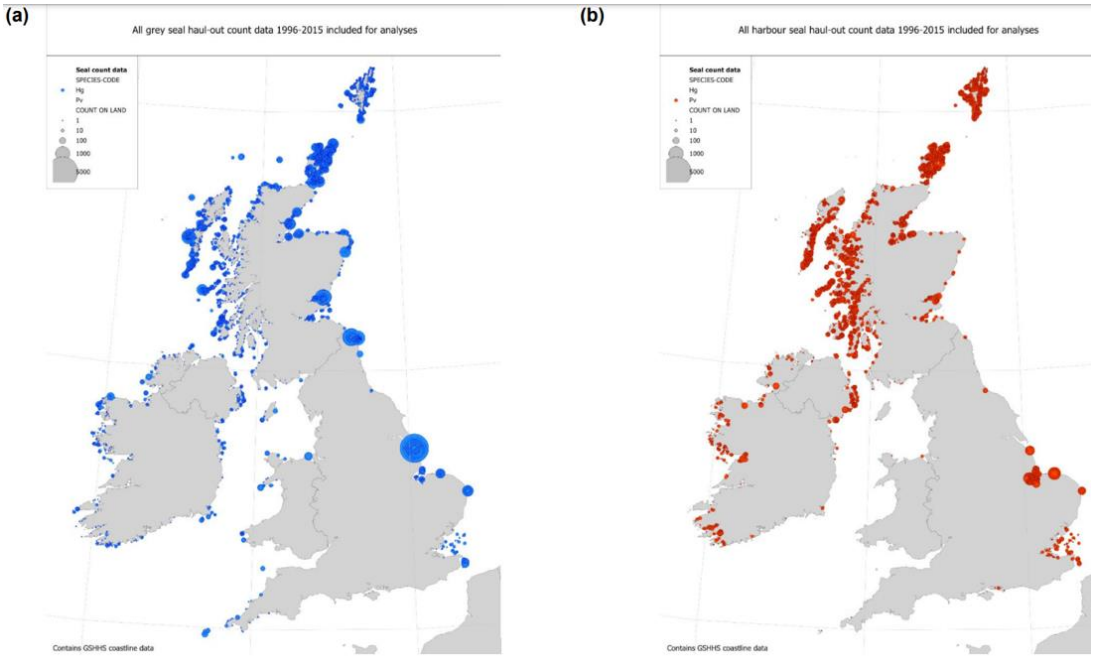

Fig. 1. The distribution of Grey Seal (a) and Common Seals (b) via haul out counts across Britain & Ireland during 1996-2015 (https://data.marine.gov.scot/sites/default/files/SMFS%200825.pdf).

Isle of Man Distribution

The last comprehensive Island-wide population survey for seals was undertaken in 2006 & 2007 by the Manx Bird Atlas (now known as Manx BirdLife), contracted by DAFF (now DEFA). The report shows that the total number of seals observed varies from between 135 and 405 in any one month. The main areas where seals were observed were Derbyhaven, the Calf of Man and the Sound and around the Maughold Head area. The Calf of Man was noted as being the Manx hotspot for pup breeding. It is likely smaller number of pupping sites are found around the Manx rocky coast in largely inaccessible inlets and coves.

A more recent survey undertaken by Manx Wildlife Trust (MWT) in October and November 2017 recorded 364 Grey Seal and one Common Seal. The Grey Seal figure is slightly elevated compared to the 2007 report of 207 (Oct.) and 254 (Nov.) which could indicate an increase in the population between 2007 and 2017. Since 2016 MWT have monitored seals Island-wide (Fig. 2), showing that the shingle banks at the Point of Ayre are now host to a relatively new and growing Grey Seal haul out of national significance, which is now regularly observed. A high count of 160 was recorded in 2023.

Since 2009, the productivity and survivability of Grey Seal pups has been monitored on the Calf of Man by Manx Wildlife Trust (MWT), which now forms the longest and most important Manx dataset for this species. Pup numbers have steadily increased since surveys began and largely stabilised at approximately 60 pups per annum (Fig. 3). In addition, photograph identification work has also been undertaken to build an understanding of the ecology of our adult population. From this work, we know that the females breeding on the Calf show a degree of site fidelity, with many returning time and time again to breed on the Calf, often at the same pupping location. However, a proportion each year are new individuals that are not in the MWT catalogue; either new individuals or returning pups who have reached sexual maturity. In additional, we know through photo identification work and satellite tagging in other places that the Irish Sea population is mobile, with Grey Seals from Manx waters also being recorded in Strangford Lough, the Dee estuary and more recently, Cornwall. However, nothing is known about Common Seal movements.

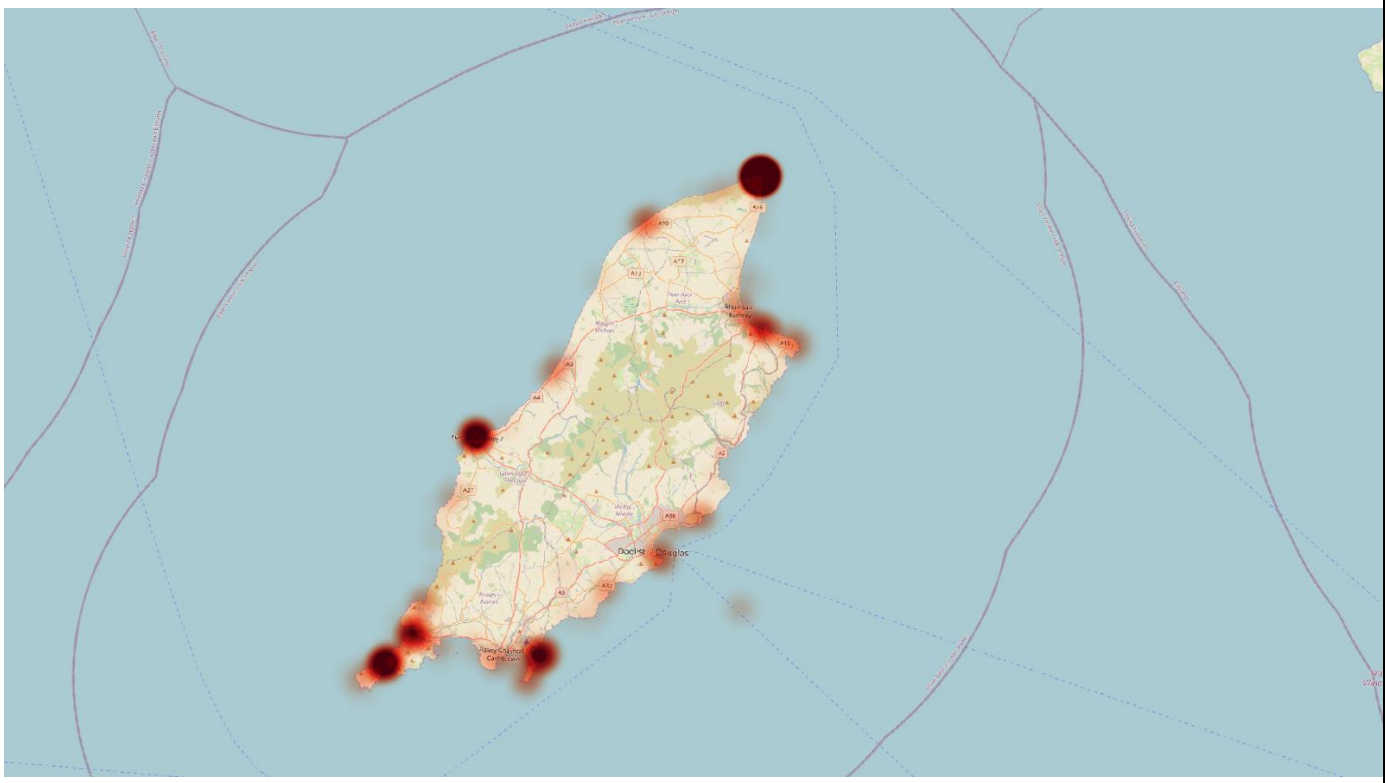

Fig. 2. Seal population heat map based on public sightings from 2016 to 2023. Hotspots include the Point of Ayre, Calf of Man, Peel, and Langness/Derbyhaven. N.B. this figure only represents reported public sightings and is therefore not a fully comprehensive distribution.

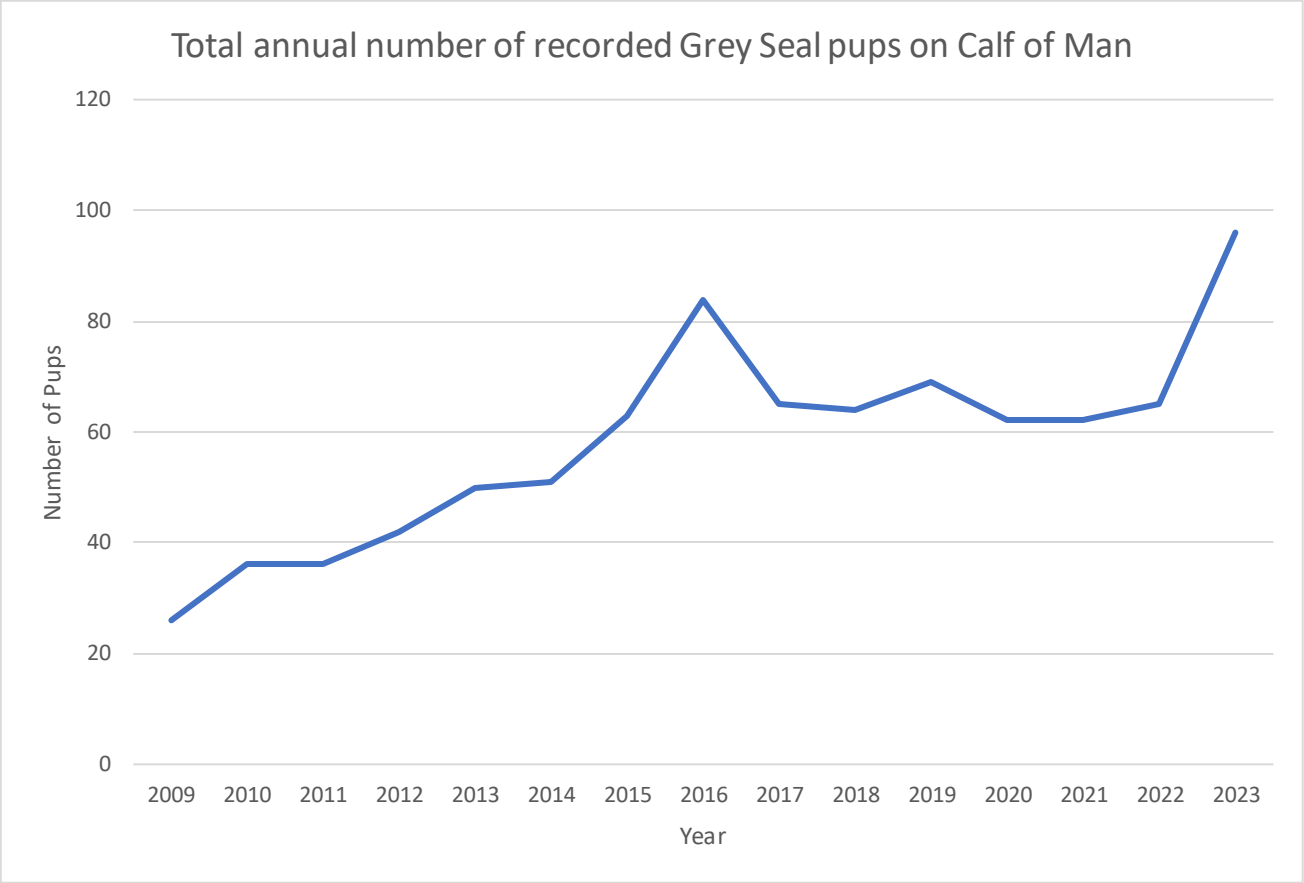

Fig. 3. Graph showing the trend in Grey Seal offspring production from 2009 – 2023 on the Calf of Man collected by a range of Manx Wildlife Trust volunteers and wardens during the annual pupping surveys.

Habitat

On the Island, our seals haul out and pupping locations are situated largely on rocky shores, often with limited human interference, like the Calf of Man, Kitterland and Langness. The recent advent of a large communal haul out at the Point of Ayre bucks this trend.

Little is known about the offshore habitats of our seals; however shallow littoral waters are thought to be of importance.

Ecology and diet

Seals play a key role in our marine ecosystem. As apex predators the maintaining trophic balance within their ecosystem. If seal numbers decline drastically, ecosystem wide impacts may occur, and therefore it is imperative that seals are protected and monitored.

Their diet consists mainly of sand eels (*Ammodytes* spp.) and larger fish species such as Coal Fish (*Pollachius virens*), Herring (*Clupea harengus),* Cod (*Gadus morhua)* and Pollock (*Pollachius pollachius*). Being opportunistic feeders, they will generally eat most fish and some crustaceans.

Seals generally spend two-thirds of their time in the water, hunting, playing, and socialising.

Adults come together in the autumn to give birth which is followed by the next mating shortly thereafter. A moult takes place on land during the winter months.

Migration

There is recent evidence indicating that the Irish Sea seal population is highly mobile and commutes seasonally (Fig. 4). Satellite tagging and photographic identification matches have shown individuals moving between Strangford Lough, Hilbre Island (Dee estuary), and as far south as West Penwith, Cornwall. One female ('Tulip Belle'/079) regularly moves between Cornwall and the Calf of Man, pupping on the Calf, before returning to Cornwall for the remainder of the year.

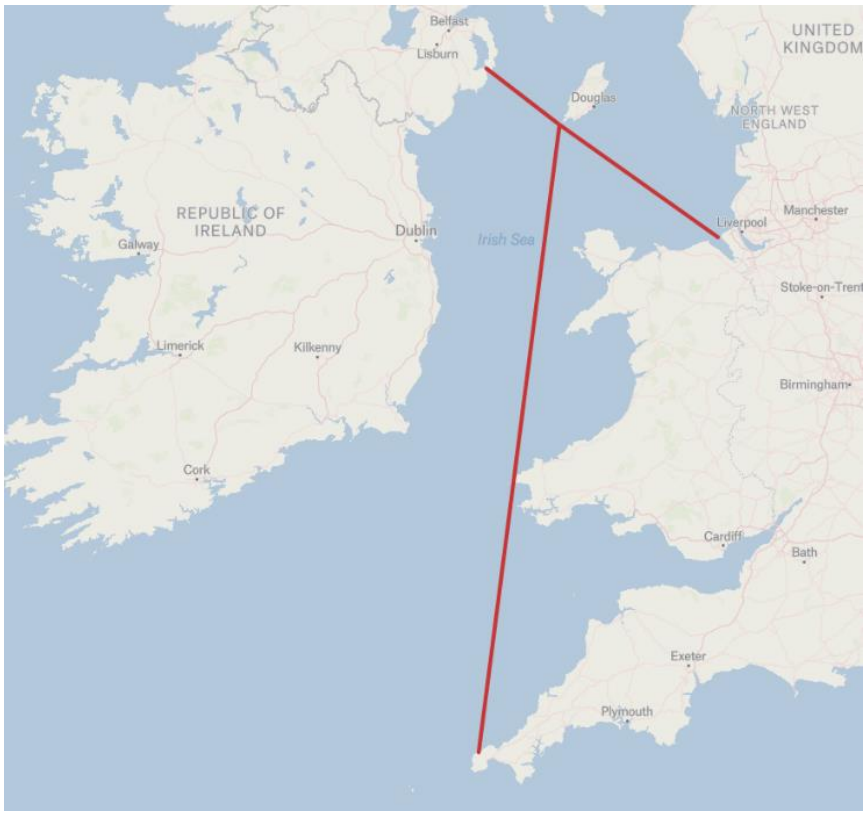

Fig. 4. Documented movements of Manx Grey Seals within the Irish Sea and Celtic Sea.

Breeding

Grey Seal: breeding takes place in the autumn between September and November. Grey Seal pups are known to breed at various locations around the Isle of Man, but the key area is the Calf of Man with approximately 60 pups born each year. Females give birth to just one white fur-covered pup which grows rapidly before being weaned at around 21 days. Once weaned, the mother will leave the pup to fend for itself and likely mate with one of the males before moving away to feed and restore their fat reserves. Pups will likely shadow a non-parental guardian who will teach them how to hunt. Survivability in the first year is thought to be low.

Common Seal: breeding takes place earlier in than the Grey Seal. No births have been observed on the main Isle of Man, however live and dead pups have been recorded locally in very low numbers.

Legal protection & policy

All global Pinneped seal species are strictly protected by Manx law under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife Act 1990 (as amended). Where any person intentionally or recklessly kills, injures, disturbs, or takes any Schedule 5 wild animal without reasonable excuse, they shall be guilty of an offence. Any structure or place that seals use for shelter or protection is also legally protected, and no seal can be obstructed from any such structure or place. It is also an offence to be in possession of, sell, offer or advertise a seal (live or dead), or any part thereof. Common Seal are also afforded further protection under the Bern Convention (Appendix III).

Grey Seals are a notified 'Reason for Designation' for the following ASSIs: Central Ayres (occasional haul out and regular feeding in intertidal waters); Langness, Sandwick, Derbyhaven (haul out); Maughold Cliffs & Brooghs (haul out and breeding).

Grey and Common Seals are notified 'Designation Features' for the following MNRs: Calf & Wart Bank; Langness; West Coast; Ramsey. Grey Seal (in isolation) are a Designation Feature of Niarbyl MNR.

While not inferring any legal protection, a large area of Manx waters has been internationally recognised as being of global importance for marine mammals as part of the Central Irish Sea Important Marine Mammal Area, which includes three **Grey Seal** criteria on its designation document (*Aggregations*; *Reproductive Areas* & *Feeding Areas*), see Fig. 5.

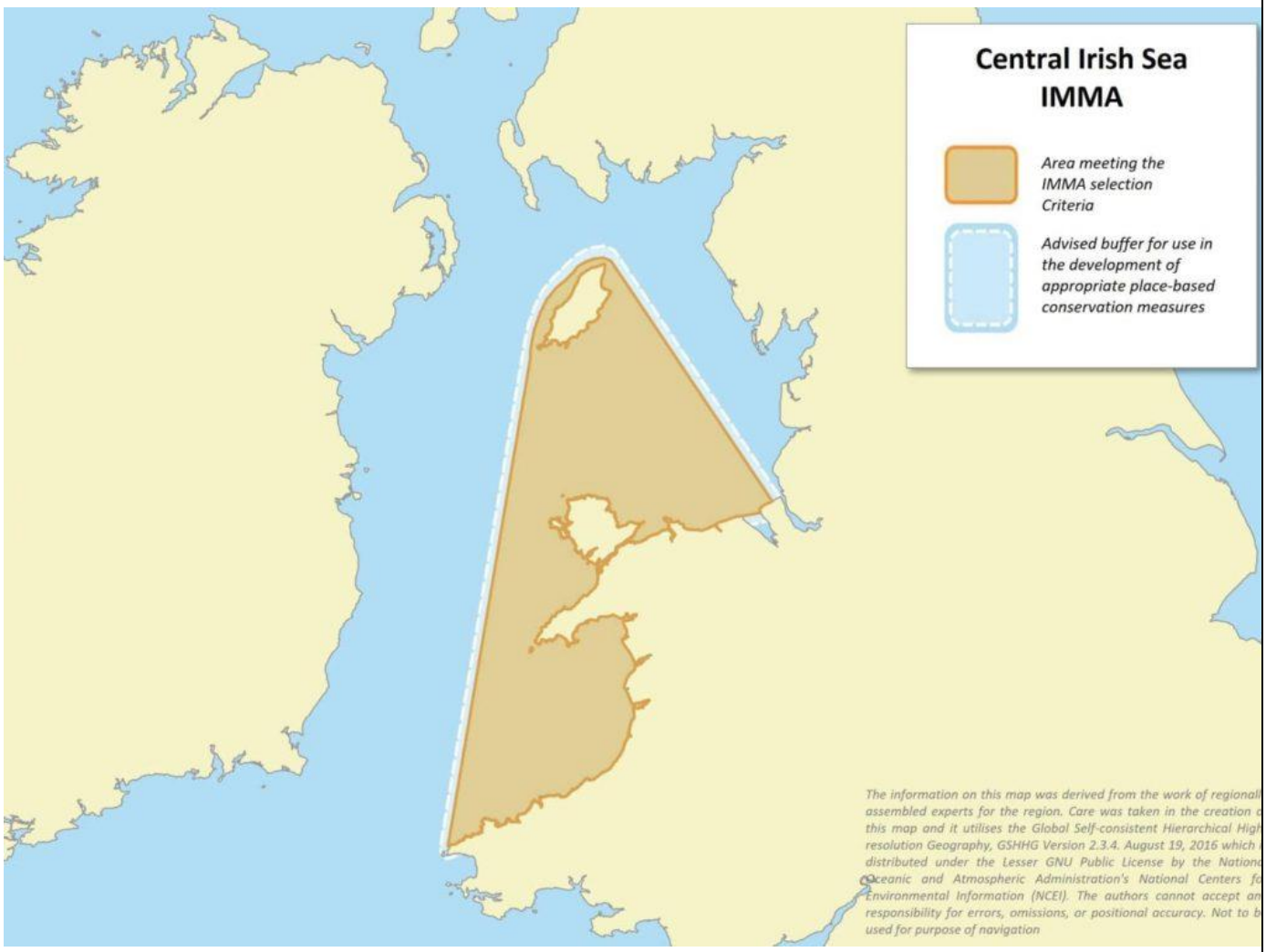

Fig. 5. Map showing the extent of the Central Irish Sea Important Marine Mammal Area and its advised buffer area first - recognised by the IUCN in 2024.

Threats

- Increased and regular disturbance of seals, especially pups and juveniles at breeding and haul-out sites, due to increased accessibility to the coastline through sightseeing and pleasure craft, including kayaks, canoes, stand-up paddleboards along with wild swimming, coasteering, people, vehicles and dogs. Of note, on rocky shores, panicked seals can be severely injured by rushing over ledges when returning to the sea. Seals are highly susceptible to disturbance whilst moulting during the winter.
- Increasing amounts of marine litter can lead to entanglement and ingestion, resulting in loss of condition, injury, starvation and death. Entanglement in commercial and recreational fishing gear is becoming a common issue, with several cases of seals being reported in Manx waters since 2016. As the Isle of Man recommences a fin fishery bycatch will become an increasing likelihood at sea.

- Disease and illness, such as mouth rot, lung worm, gastroenteritis (from untreated sewage), distemper, and tuberculosis. There is also a significant potential for avian influenza to infect seals, as seen in the major South American outbreak within seals since 2022.
- There is a risk of ship- and boat-strike, especially with very fast-moving vessels such as commercial fast-craft ferries, RIBs and jet skis.
- Climate change is causing increased storminess during the autumn pupping season and winter moulting season leading to increased mortality (especially in pups). Emerging research shows increased water temperatures result in pups being born earlier by mature females. Changes in prey availability due to climatic changes/other anthropogenic factors may also impact pup survivability.
- The exploitation of fish stocks and the loss of seal feeding grounds due to bottom dredging, marine developments (such as wind farms and gas extraction) can force seals to feed elsewhere, including further offshore, expending more energy which could lead to a loss of condition.
- Acoustic disturbance from marine developments can result in temporary displacement and general noise from increased shipping can mask biologically important inter- and intra-specific sounds.

Reason for BAP

Seals are apex predators that help maintain balanced, healthy and naturally functioning marine and coastal ecosystems. Their local increase in recent decades likely presents one of the Island's greatest conservation successes which must be sustained towards their full recovery. There is still much to be understood about both species, such as prey preferences, breeding behaviours, disease, responses to marine developments, feeding areas, the potential impacts of climate change, and changes to their habitual sites. Most notably, as an enigmatic coastal megafauna, they are highly susceptible to disturbance when on land (hauled out, moulting and breeding) and in shallow coastal waters.

Aims

The aim of this BAP is to ensure the ongoing recovery of seals in Manx waters through the structured monitoring of seals in Manx waters to better understand their population trends, distribution, abundance, needs and ecology to facilitate and sustain their recovery to likely historic levels.

Linked BAPS

Beach Nesting Birds: specifically at the Point of Ayre where signage around the tern colony from April to July warns against seal disturbance and provides information on best practice for seal watching and the penalties that can be incurred for offences.

Delivery Options	Active	Challenges
Maintain long-term dataset of annual seal pupping activity and survivability on the Calf of Man (including adult photo identification work).	Yes	Staff/Volunteer resourcing. Weather. Isolated site. Limited facilities.
Continue long-term monitoring of the Point of Ayre haul out.	Yes	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Isolated site.
Commence an annual whole-IOM seal population assessments via thermal imaging drone.	Partial	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Weather. Scale of task. Isolated sites.
Undertake Island-wide ID catalogue creation and compare with other jurisdictions.	No	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Organisational priorities.
Undertake necropsies of dead seals to understand causes of mortality and monitoring for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza.	Partial	Staff/Volunteer resourcing. Weather. Funding required for sample testing. Expertise. Isolated sites.
Improve coastal water quality via all-Island treatment of sewage.	Partial	Planning constraints.

Improve site protections in relations to seals via more and enhanced designations (ASSI, NNR, MNR and Ramsar) both on land and at sea. Most notably the Ayres from Cronk y Bing to the Point of Ayre, Calf of Man, the Sound, Thousla, Kitterland, the Cletts.	No	Govt resourcing and funding. Political will. Lack of understanding of the scale of the disturbance issue.
Enhanced year-round wardening resources at the Point of Ayre haul out to reduce human, vehicle and dog-based disturbance.	Partial	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Isolated site. Lack of understanding of the scale of the disturbance issue.
Recognising the requirements of Schedule 5 of the Wildlife Act and the Byelaws of the Manx Museum & National Trust, restrict any landings on Kitterland (one of our most significant seal haul out sites) to 'prior permission required' from the MMNT.	No	Govt resourcing and funding. Political will. Lack of understanding of the scale of the disturbance issue. Requested by MWT in 2023.
Educate all sea users about the potential for disturbance to pupping and haul out sites from high-speed craft and unnecessary proximity.	Yes	Staff/volunteer resourcing. N.B. MWT have applied for a DOI Notice to Mariners for the 2024 season.
Provide interpretation and wildlife-safe receptacles for the disposal of recreational fishing gear etc at all Manx harbour piers.	Partial	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Initial set up cost and permissions. Delivering routine emptying of sharp & biological waste.
Permanent signage at seal haul out sites publicising the legislation and therefore assisting in the delivery of enforcement.	No	Govt/MWT resourcing and funding. Land-owner permissions required.
Encourage/incentivise sea users, boat owners and other sea users to attend WISE training courses to better understand and reduce disturbance.	No	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Significant course costs. Political will. Lack of stakeholder buy-in. Lack of understanding of the scale of the issue.
Engage and educate children, public, visitors and sea users about seal disturbance and their legally protected status. Raise awareness about the importance of seals to the marine ecosystem and the need for their conservation.	Yes	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Large number of schools.
Establish a Manx seal rehab centre for abandoned/ sick/injured pups and juveniles.	Partial	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Large capital outlay. Planning restrictions. Private site.
Establish a satellite tagging programme to monitor seal movements within and beyond Manx waters to identify feeding and transitory movement areas.	No	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Significant funding challenge. Lack of a local marine biological research/academic institution.
Monitor the new (2023) Manx fin fishery for marine mammal bycatch. Ensure DEFA, MWT and the fishing industry are working together in an open and mutually beneficial manner to reduce bycatch risk to the lowest practicable level. Develop bycatch response/ training.	No	Staff/volunteer resourcing. Lack of effective integration between eNGO, industry and Govt.
Annual review and update of this document.	By Dec 2025	

Annual Updates

Year	

[1] Tomlinson, P. & Pooley, E. in: Chiverrell, R. & Thomas, G. (Eds.) (2006) *A New History of the Isle of Man* Vol. 1: *Evolution of the Natura*l *Landscape*, p. 299.
[2] Bruce, J.R., Colman, J.S. & Jones, N.S. (1963), *Marine Fauna of the Isle of Man and its surrounding seas* 2nd Ed., pp. 272-273.
[3] Wright, M. (1972), *The Calf of Man Bird Observatory Annual Report for 1971*, p. 79
[4] Lockington Marshall, W. (1978), *The Calf of* Man, p. 50.
[5] Garrad, L. In: Robinson, V. & McCarroll, D. (Eds.) (1990), *The Isle of Man: Celebrating a Sense of Place*, pp. 89-90.
[6] NBN Atlas IOM as of 25th August 2024.
[7] Bruce, J.R., Colman, J.S. & Jones, N.S. (1963), *Marine Fauna of the Isle of Man and its surrounding seas* 2nd Ed., pp. 272-273.
[8] Wright, M. (1972), *The Calf of Man Bird Observatory Annual Report for 1971*, p. 79

[9] Tomlinson, P. & Pooley, E. in: Chiverrell, R. & Thomas, G. (Eds.) (2006) *A New History of the Isle of Man* Vol. 1: *Evolution of the Natura*l *Landscape*, p. 299.
[10] NBN Atlas IOM as of 25th August 2024.
[11] Bruce, J.R., Colman, J.S. & Jones, N.S. (1963), *Marine Fauna of the Isle of Man and its surrounding seas* 2nd Ed., pp. 272-273.