

Advice for encounters with seals at sea (Useful for divers, snorkelers, surfers & swimmers)



Follow these guidelines for an unforgettable wildlife experience. (They should be discussed by boat operators as part of thorough safety and behaviour briefings, before anyone enters the water.)

If approaching in a boat, please do so slowly and quietly 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. Ensure you anchor at a distance for hauled seals to remain relaxed and resting on rocks and limit the amount of time you spend there. Juveniles are more likely to be skittish and most easily scared in the spring.

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. 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 an aggressive response. Be confident that seals are generally gentle creatures unless they feel threatened. Seals default is to choose flight over fight, but they are most 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.

Seals will explore you with their fore flippers, whiskers and mouths. Wearing a wetsuit is essential, as seals have strong claws and sharp interlocking teeth.

Always watch the seals' reactions closely - if they show signs of being agitated, please back away gently. If they get too intimidating, slowly and gently but assertively move away.

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

**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.

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.

The aim is to regularly review and update this advice in the light of experience. Comments are welcome to sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk