

**European Community Directive
on the Conservation of Natural Habitats
and of Wild Fauna and Flora
(92/43/EEC)**

**Second Report by the United Kingdom under
Article 17
on the implementation of the Directive
from January 2001 to December 2006**

**Conservation status assessment for
Rare and occasional seals**

Please note that this is a section of the report. For the complete report visit <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/article17>

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Rare and Occasional Seals

Five species of seal are considered vagrants in UK waters (Hall, unpublished data). The Sea Mammal Research Unit keeps a record of sightings in UK waters, although not all sightings are reported. Additional records are kept at a local level by the Shetland Marine Mammal Group and the Orkney Biological Records Centre. As there are few sightings it is not possible to ascertain the conservation status of any of these species.

S2640 *Phoca hispida* Ringed Seal

This is the most common seal in the Arctic, found in circumpolar Arctic coasts, wherever there is open water from near the ice edge to the Pole. It is normally solitary, and rarely found in the open sea or in floating pack ice, but common in fjords and bays where the ice is firm (King 1983). Found in Iceland in the winter and along Pacific Japanese coasts as far south as 35°N and also found in the Baltic Sea and sub-species in some freshwater lakes (e.g. Lake Saimaa in Finland and Lake Ladoga in Russia). Although largely non-migratory (Kingsley 1990) *Phoca hispida* shows long distance seasonal movements with pack ice, moving north in summer and south in autumn with expanding pack ice (Smith 1973). However, occasional (especially young) individuals move south and have been recorded from the Atlantic coasts of several European countries.

UK records suggest this species may be a regular visitor around Shetland, although probably under-recorded due to its resemblance to *Phoca vitulina*. Records in UK include: 1846 Norfolk coast; 1889 Lincolnshire coast; 1897 Collieston, Aberdeenshire; 1901 Aberdeen; 1940 Isle of Man; 1968 one shot at Whalsay, Shetland; 1990 Northumberland; 1994 Scarborough; 1991 and 1995 Norfolk; 1999 Mablethorpe, Lincolnshire; 2001 one seen at Loch of Gutcher and then at Cullivoe, Shetland; 2006 one seen hauled out close to Bonar Bridge, Kyle of Sutherland, Scotland.

S5018 *Phoca groenlandica* Harp Seal

A highly migratory and gregarious species found in the open sea of the Arctic Atlantic; nowhere is it resident throughout the year. Range extends north to the open waters of the Arctic in summer and early autumn, animals coming south in late autumn and winter in time for the spring breeding. There are three breeding regions: (i) off the NE coast of Newfoundland (the Front) and in the Gulf of St Lawrence (the Gulf); (ii) in the Greenland Sea around Jan Mayen Island; (iii) in the White Sea. In the summer, after breeding, seals from the first region move to the west Greenland coast and the Canadian eastern Arctic; those from Jan Mayen move to the east Greenland coast and west of Svalbard, and those in the White Sea move to the Barents Sea following the pack-ice belt.

Phoca groenlandica can extend its range further south into the Northern North Sea, occurring in large numbers along the Norwegian coasts. Many animals were caught in fishing nets in 1987 and 1988 in Northern Norway (Nilssen *et al.*, 1992) and were thought to be responsible for the introduction of the phocine distemper virus (PDV) into the European *Phoca vitulina* and *Halichoerus grypus* populations in Denmark, producing the epidemic in 1988 (Goodhart 1988). However, no such invasion occurred in 2001 prior to a second outbreak of PDV in 2002 (Härkönen *et al.*, 2006). Extralimital movements have also been reported in the North-

west Atlantic (McAlpine *et al.*, 1999). Reasons for these movements are not clear but population increases, food shortages and climate change have all been suggested. Moderate invasions into European waters continue to occur, with higher numbers reported around western Europe in 1994 and 1995 (Van Bree 1997).

Records kept on this species since about 1800 from the UK include: 1830 one shot at Burrafirth, Shetland; 1864 several seen at Baltasound; 1868 one killed Lancashire; 1873 one in fishing net, Argyll; 1899 two in nets, Ayrshire; 1901 near Hillswick, Shetland; 1902 Teignmouth, Devon; 1903 one in Firth of Forth; 1968 adult in Ronas Voe, Shetland; 1987 one live (Catfirth) and one dead (Hamnavoe) in Shetland; 1987 Adult male River Humber; 1988 one very sick Medway, Kent; 1988 one seen off Flamborough Head, Yorkshire; 1994 adult, Holkham, Norfolk, taken into rescue centre; 1994 Eastern Scotland, taken into rescue centre; 2003 27 September Portland Island, Dorset..

S2638 *Erignathus barbatus* Bearded Seal

This seal has a circumpolar distribution and is found in shallow waters all along the American, European and Asiatic Arctic and on all the associated islands, occasionally as far south as Hokkaido. Not considered migratory but few reach the Gulf of St Lawrence and as far south as Cape Cod. Occasional animals found on northern Norwegian coasts.

Records of sightings in British waters are largely from the Northern and Western Isles and include: 1892 Norfolk young male; 1956 individual filmed at Mainland, Shetland; 1977 two from Shetland (Cullivoe and Burra); 1981 Mid Yell Shetland; 1986 Ronas Voe, Shetland; 1987 two records from Shetland (Weisdale and Burra), one from Orkney (could be the same animal as seen in Shetland two days earlier); 1988 one in Orkney, one in Bressay, Shetland; 1993 Mid Yell, Shetland; 1998 Lincolnshire taken into rescue centre and released in Shetland; 1993 Mid Yell, Shetland; 1999 January, Hartlepool Fish Quay, Teesside; 1999 April, one in Loch Scavaig, Isle of Skye, seven days later two hauled out in bay Camas Mo'r, seen intermittently separately, then two seen on Eilean Mo'r hauled out with grey seals; 2000 one seen at Mid Yell, Shetland intermittently between 9 April and the third week of June; 1 April 2005 for 2-3 weeks, immature female seen at Ouse, Fintoen, Orkney; 2005, 30 April – 3 May Easter Quarff, Shetland.

S2637 *Cystophora cristata* Hooded Seal

A solitary seal found in deep waters of the Arctic regions of the Atlantic on drifting ice. Occur mainly from Bear Island and Svalbard, to Jan Mayen Island, Iceland, Denmark Strait, Greenland, the east coast of Baffin Island and Labrador. The breeding areas are similar to those of *Phoca groenlandica* (the Gulf and the Front on the Canadian Arctic, West Ice near Jan Mayen and in the Davis Strait). Telemetry studies of animals from the Jan Mayen (West Ice) stock indicated they spent some time in the waters around the Faeroe Islands and north and west of Shetland (Folkow *et al.*, 1996).

Records in British waters: 1892 one killed River Orwell, Suffolk; 1872 one killed St Andrews, Fife; 1873 one caught in Frodsham, Cheshire; 1890 one shot and one seen on Sanday, Orkney; 1891 uncertain record from Benbecula, Hebrides; two 19th century records also exist for animals killed in Quendale and Spiggie in Shetland but there is no date; 1903 Elgin, mouth of River Lossie; 1980 pup seen Haaf Gruney, Shetland; 1989 pup taken to

rescue centre found in Felixstowe; 1991 Mid Yell, Shetland; 1993 juvenile male seen at Norwick, Shetland; 1996 juvenile, taken to rescue centre from River Mersey; 1999, six month old female in Orkney Islands, taken to Orkney Seal Rescue but later dies; 2000 one juvenile rehabilitated from Lincolnshire coast; 2001 one juvenile and one immature taken into rescue centre from Norfolk coast and one at Haven beach, Pembrokeshire taken to Milford Haven Seal Hospital; 2004 26 March St Ives Beach, Cornwall and June Dunnet Beach, Caithness; 2005 one seen at the mouth of River Conon, Ross-shire, Scotland; 2006 a young female was taken into West Hatch Wildlife Centre from Saunton Beach, Cornwall.

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