

The Harbour and Grey Seals on North Bull Island



Ciaran Dunne & Tom Cooney

Perhaps the most memorable sight that greets walkers on a balmy, summer's day is the presence of a group of sun bathing seals on sandbanks at low tide off the north end of the island commonly known as 'the Point'. This group of up to 20 or more seals occasionally comprise Harbour (Common) *Phoca vitulina* and Grey Seals *Halichoerus grypus*. Both species are native to Irish coastal waters. Although seals have been seen occasionally on the exposed inter-tidal sands between the South Wall and Bull Wall, the presence of seals hauled-out on the North Bull Island is a relatively new phenomenon as neither species was recorded during National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) surveys up to 2003 (Cronin *et al.* 2004; Lyons, 2004). In 2003 a total of 34 harbour seals were counted at three haul-out locations in County Dublin (Cronin *et al.* 2004) which was only 1.2% of the total population in the Republic of Ireland (2,905 animals). This article documents for the first time the presence of a resident population of harbour and grey seals within the North Bull Island Nature Reserve, County Dublin (Lat. 53.369043; Long. -6.147881).

When encountered the seals are usually found basking on the sheltered side of the low-water sandbanks and are always in close proximity to the deep water in Sutton Creek should a quick exit be required. To get into these 'haul-out' locations in the first place they allow the outgoing tide to strand them on the highest point of the sand spit or occasionally they 'bounce' their way up from the tide line. If left undisturbed they will remain for several hours. However if danger does approach the grey seals are usually the first to vacate the haul-out followed shortly afterwards by the harbour seals.

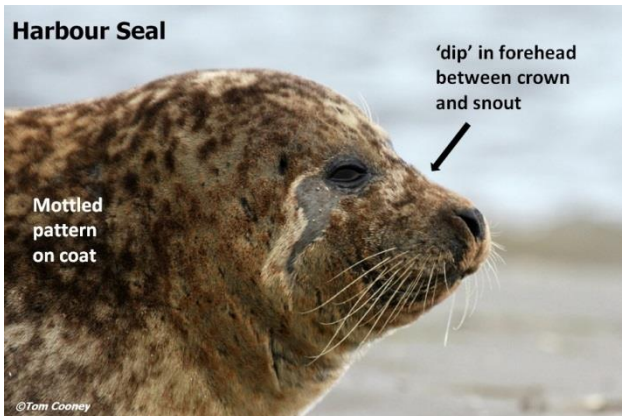
Harbour seals have a proportionately smaller and more rounded head with a distinctive forehead, a shorter muzzle, V shaped nostrils and a more placid/gentler appearance than grey seals. Harbour seals (adult male 1.7m) are also smaller than greys seals (adult male 2.1m).

Harbour Seal

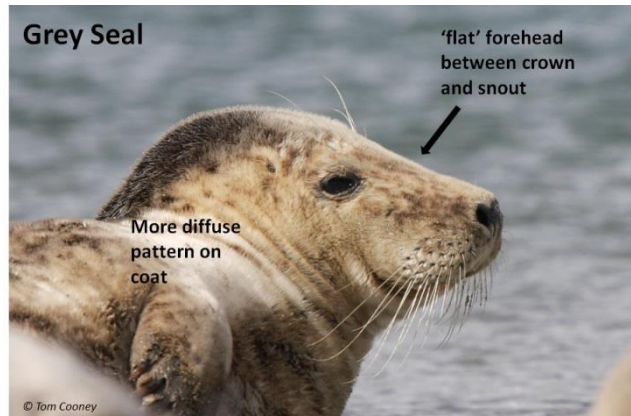


Observed from a distance one of the most characteristic features of basking harbour seals is the way they hold their body in an arched/banana shaped pose with head and tail (hind flippers) upright. Often they rest, as the incoming water rises around them, until only the head and tail are visible.

Harbour Seal



Grey Seal



Harbour Seal



Grey Seal



On the island the harbour seals are generally more gregarious than their grey cousins. They can be observed in the waters around the northern end of the island throughout the year but especially from mid-summer onwards. Harbour seals tend to be more local on their movements and there is generally less movement between haul-out sites than there is for grey seals (SMRU Ltd, 2011). In addition, young grey seals are known to disperse over very large areas (Seal Conservation Society, 2013) whereas post-weaning harbour seal pups do not venture very far from their natal sites (Wilson *et al.*, 2007).

Although the colour of harbour seal fur varies considerably they usually emit a beautiful olive brown glow in sunlight which appears paler and sometimes creamier in colour (when dry) than grey seals. The mottled pattern on their coat is also smaller, browner and less pronounced.

Grey seals on the other hand are larger (adults), generally darker in colour (dark blue/grey or grey/brown - can appear almost black when wet), have a distinctive long, facial muzzle (dog like) with nostrils which are almost parallel, a body which is very portly with thick rolls of flesh folding around the neck and they have larger and darker mottling/blotching.



The side view of the head is usually described as having a roman profile as opposed to the turned - up nose appearance of the harbour seal. Compared to the harbour seal they are more cumbersome on land and haul-out less frequently. Most animals can be seen feeding in the adjacent waters. From a viewing perspective these seals are often observed feeding either individually or in small groups around the shoreline at the North Bull Wall or off the Sutton coastline. The grey seal is typically a creature of rocky exposed coasts, a habitat best seen at these locations. When feeding grey seals often display a characteristic "bottling" impression with their head and neck protruding clear of the water. Identification of the two species can be difficult especially when adults and immature animals of both species congregate at the Point. A nearby population of grey seals can be observed in Howth harbour, at Balscadden, along Howth cliff face and at Red Rock, Sutton. Besides local seals from

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the Howth peninsula it is likely that the island is also visited by seals from nearby Skerries, Lambay Island, Ireland's Eye, Dalkey islands and possibly further afield.

Although both species are strictly protected under the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 1976-2005 (NPWS 2013) and they reside within the North Bull Island Nature Reserve (*see* Map 1 McCorry & Ryle, 2009), they are extremely vulnerable to disturbances from malicious individuals and (their) aggressive dogs. The continued vigilance of the public and staff of the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Dublin City Council (DCC) is imperative to protect the harbour and grey seal populations on the island. To minimise disturbance to these seals it is strongly recommended that observations should be made with the use of binoculars/telescopes from the promenade at Sutton directly opposite to "the Point". Dogs continue to be a major problem for all forms of wildlife on the North Bull Island and they pose a significant threat to the seals. Dogs should never be brought near seals hauled-out on sand banks.

A study of the seals is currently being carried out by the 'North Bull Seal Group'. It is hoped that this work will provide new insights into the status and distribution of the island's seals. This project is being carried out with the assistance and co-operation of seal groups in Ireland and the UK.

May those who continue to walk the strand, on a warm, summer's day, be rewarded at the Point, with the wonderful sight of contented seals basking in the sun.

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