

Grey Seals

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Great conditions for photography, less so for the seal and camera. These open eastern beaches get the full benefit of weather conditions on nearby continental Europe.

I'm not a great fan of wildlife circuses and the locations and individual animals I enjoy working most are the ones that receive the least attention from other photographers. Nevertheless, the prospect of some good grey seal photography that didn't involve a boat trip or five mile trek to some remote beach proved too much of a lure last December and I headed to the east coast of England, along with everyone else.

These English rookeries differ from those in Scotland and Wales insofar as they occur on sandbanks and beaches; in the north and west, the species favours rocky shores, preferably on uninhabited islands, and sea caves. Unlike its smaller relative, the common or harbour seal, the grey seal normally stays well clear of people. Grey seal pups spend at least the first three weeks of their lives on-shore, before their mothers leave them to fend for themselves. Seal's milk, with its 55% fat content, ensures rapid growth. This period ashore, as well as their conspicuous white coat, makes them more vulnerable to predation than common seal pups which can take to the water within a few hours of birth and accounts for their

shyness.

Around half the world population of grey seals lives around British shores, and ninety percent of those are in Scottish waters. Legal protection (and on some islands, such as the Monachs, the end of permanent human settlement) have allowed the population to rise from a low-point earlier this century of about 500 animals to more than 100,000 today. Their tolerance of people on the beaches of eastern England can be seen as a response to a lack of living space as overspill occurs from population centres.

From a photographic point of view, an open sandy beach has a lot of advantages. For one thing, it is exposed to the full-bodied light of dawn and dusk; my best Scottish site is entirely in the shade by the time the pupping season comes round in mid-October. The sand itself is reflective, introducing warm hues and improving light levels. The animals, even white-coated pups, stand out well against sand which is not always the case when they are lying on seaweed covered rocks.

The day we arrived at the site, a storm was raging across the water in Denmark which felled more than 70% of that country's forest cover. The tail end of the storm created challenging working conditions for us as sand filled the air, threatening to penetrate every corner of camera and lens. After twenty minutes, my 500mm was crunching on sand if I focused manually. Anticipating that blowing sand might be a problem, I had brought with me a bivvy bag in which I intended to change films but the fierce gusts made it impossible to set up and instead, I sought shelter in a small lean-to on the beach. Fortunately, none of the 30 rolls of film I exposed over the next two days suffered scratching.



Of the few large mammals we have in the UK, grey seals are one of the most conspicuous. Rarely, however, do they permit such an open approach, allowing us the opportunity of getting a whole range of behavioural pictures.

Looking beyond the dozens of animals nearby, my attention was caught by a bull a little further out on the beach who was completely caked and making sure that he kept his head above the worst of the blowing sand. The brooding sky above was just the right complement to his heroic pose. In the violent wind, I abandoned the tripod in favour of a beanbag resting it on a beer crate I had borrowed from the place we were staying. With the huge lens hood removed too, I was assured sharp exposures. There was a big range in contrast between the dark sky and the pale, sunlit sand, so I based my exposure on a spot reading taken from the



This one was fun to take; not only was my F5's auto focus on the blink, but the rapidly advancing tide made me wonder about the wisdom of the water-level perspective.

animal's chest, just where the pale merges into the dark. A quick check of the exposure for the paler head, my most important highlight, showed that it still fell within the two-stop-brighter-than-mid-tone range, meaning that highlight detail would be complete. I had time to make only four exposures before the animal decided that he'd had enough and he turned and shuddered towards the other seals in search of shelter.

There is perhaps something incongruous about a seal in a "desert storm" - we naturally associate them with the sea. But this is what I witnessed and for me, a view which challenges the received wisdom about seals is enough justification to join the circus.

I was specifically asked by the warden not to name this location in print. Visitor pressure on the site may eventually lead to restriction which from a photographer's point of view would be a great loss. Although many of the seals are approachable they are nevertheless wild animals and you should remain at a respectful distance; I did all my photography with a 500mm or 700mm (500mm + x1.4) lens. The better the conduct of photographers, the more chance that we will continue to enjoy privileged access.

Planning

- What am I looking for? Adult grey seals are best distinguished from common seals by their profile; the common seal's face is quite dog-like whereas the generally bigger grey seal has a long, "Roman nose". At close range you can see that the common seal's nostrils form a "v" shape; those of the grey seal are quite parallel.
- Where- Grey seals are scattered around the British coast, reaching their highest densities in the western and northern isles of Scotland. Sometimes individuals associate with common seals but during the breeding season they seek out secluded rocky bays and islands and are much less likely to be seen in estuaries.
- When - There is most on-shore activity at the end of the year. The northern populations drop their pups first, in early October. The southern English animals are later; pupping reaches its peak there in early November. At this time, there is plenty of bloody sparring between older bulls as they defend their harems of up to 10 breeding females.
- Time of day - The seals are active throughout the day and night. If you are shooting on sand, be aware that it may lend an unexpectedly warm cast to your pictures, especially at the edges of the day. In this habitat, avoid films such as Ektachrome Elite / VS which already has a yellow bias. What to shoot. In a big rookery at this time of year there are plenty of possibilities, from suckling pups to fighting bulls, mating couples to cute portraits.
- What to take - If you are working on a beach, make sure that you can keep the sand out of your camera and bag. A crate to keep the bag off the sand is a good idea, as well as, another to rest the beanbag and lens on. I have a dry cloth to wipe my hands with before opening the camera or handling film. A long lens (400mm +) gives the animals a comfortable distance from you, particularly important where mothers and pups are concerned.

Watch out for sunset beach shots with seals as an element in the composition and traces of the seals in wet sand. Much of the sparring between males takes place at the edge of the sea - which is a bit more interesting than on the beach.

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