



# Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) outstanding scilly

nature access beauty heritage

## The Secret World of Scilly's Seals...

By Nikki Banfield, Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust Communications Officer

**Our charismatic Atlantic grey seals might be easy to see when you visit Scilly but they are quite secretive and there is so much we don't know about them. The Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust has decided it's about time this changed and our small Team are stepping up to the challenge (working in partnership with Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust (CSGRT)). So, what are we doing, and why?**

There appears to be an abundance of Atlantic grey seals here in Scilly; everywhere you turn there seems to be one, or more, bobbing around or hauled out sleeping or basking in the sun.

If you head out on a boat trip either to the Eastern Isles of the Western Rocks they are the star attraction. But what many people do not realise is that the Atlantic grey seal is a globally rare species. The United Kingdom population represents approximately 40% of the world population and Scilly is one of four key areas for Seals in the West Country.

**“There are more Red squirrels in the United Kingdom than there are Atlantic grey seals” ~ CSGRT**



*Female Atlantic grey seal resting on Renny Rock, Scilly*

New for 2019!  
The Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust team are scheduled to dedicate more than

# 500

hours to survey work on our nationally important Atlantic grey seal population

[www.ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk)  
Charity Number 1097807

Regular Scilly Now & Then readers may remember articles by Sue Sayer (CSGRT) in Issues 97 & 98 regarding the Seal Survey & ID Training she and her colleagues carried with our Team towards the end of 2018.

As a result of this training our Team will be dedicating more than 500 hours to survey work across the Islands throughout 2019; with the view to continue into 2020, and beyond, should we successfully secure the required funding.

### The first set of surveys took place in April and produced some really exciting information!

On a blustery, damp day in April we welcomed Sue & Marion from CSGRT back to our Islands to support our first foray into Seal surveying and carry out some additional “on-the-water” training; building on our office based training, carried out in October 2018.

Armed with cameras, binoculars, pencils and recording sheets we went West on the first day with St Agnes Boating to wobble around Annet and the Western Rocks and carry out our first ever Atlantic grey seal survey.

It was an interesting day, we all learnt a lot, and also began to realise the enormity of the task at hand.

Our second day saw us heading East with St Agnes Boating out around the Eastern Isles; with lessons learnt from the previous day the training all started to fall into place, but it made the task no less daunting.

During these first two surveys we covered the entire West & East areas to get a full data set and work out a plan moving forwards. Subsequent trips are likely to focus on key areas/ Islands which we know we will be able to access by boat all year around.

### **What did we find?**

The short answer to this is Seals; which is good because that's what we were looking for!

Following analysis of photos and data of the Seals that we counted and took pictures of Sue has managed to successfully identify two that are "known" to CSGRT (both from the Western Rocks survey on day one) and both have interesting stories.

### **DP564b aka Frog mouth**

This lovely chap is well know to CSGRT having been identified and recorded by their team of volunteers, mostly in areas of West Cornwall, on a regular basis since October 2013.

He's been recorded on average around eight times a year but only between the months of September and late April/early May; for June, July and August he's mostly not been seen.

Frog mouth was last recorded in West Cornwall by volunteer surveyors Sue and Kate on the 25th April 2019 before he was recorded here in Scilly on the 7th May 2019.

Could it be he's not been seen in West Cornwall during the summer months because he's here in Scilly? Maybe we'll find out over the course of future surveys!



*Male Atlantic grey seal,  
DP564b aka Frog mouth*



*Male Atlantic grey seal, Wolf*

### **Wolf ~ tag 338**

Also spotted by the eagle eyed Sue whilst processing the Western Rocks photographs was this dozing Seal with a white flipper tag, which when zoomed in on clearly has the numbers 338 on.

The tag identifies this male Seal as an ex-rescue Seal and again thanks to Sue we have a little bit of information about him.

Wolf was rescued on the 31st January 2017, as a pup, from Chapel Porth, near St Agnes, Cornwall as a result of net entanglement. Following removal of the net and rehabilitation, at the Cornish Seal Sanctuary, Wolf was released back in to the wild on the 18th May 2017 at Gwithian, Cornwall; complete with his white flipper tag.

Since his release Wolf has not been seen or recorded by CSGRT until the first day of our survey work here in Scilly, where he was seen as a fit and juvenile male contentedly hauled out with a number of other adult males on Jacky's Rock.

## Why are we doing it?

Scilly is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) primarily as a result of its nationally important breeding population of Atlantic grey seals.

SAC's are strictly protected sites designated to safeguard listed habitats and species which are most in need of conservation at a European level; SAC is one of the highest/strongest designations available.



Atlantic grey Seal  
Pic ~ Tim Allsop

We often talk of our "resident" Seal population but recent information, as a consequence of CSGRT Photo ID work, shows that some are "nomadic" moving between sites from Wales, to Devon & Cornwall and Brittany (with the assumption that they use Scilly as a "gateway"). By increasing and improving the Scilly ID Catalogue database we will be able to say with some certainty whether this is the case for some/all of our Seal population.

This could lead to better protection at other sites used by Atlantic grey seals which currently aren't afforded the same amount of environmental protection as Scilly, therefore meaning our work could have positive outcomes beyond Scilly!

*"Seals are invaluable to the island's ecosystem and their economy and the potential for expanding the revenue from Seals is great, however, development needs to be both responsible and sustainable."* (MASRISS, 2011).

Seals, although an apex predator, may come under threat or into conflict from increased human activity; i.e. tourism, fishing, increased boating opportunities, but because of the lack of research surrounding these mammals (particularly in Scilly, where any impacts are likely to be amplified as a result of the close proximity and lack of space) it is difficult to say what the impact and likelihood of this threat may be.

We know, following extensive research from CSGRT across Cornwall, that disturbance of seals has a detrimental impact on them. We, at the Trust & CSGRT, actively encourage and promote responsible, positive wildlife interactions within the Islands to residents and visitors; however we know that some who interact with the Seals are getting too close, flushing Seals from rocks and beaches. Please report the number of seals being flushed from rocks with a date, location and cause and send seal sightings photos to [sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk](mailto:sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk)

As Scilly's champions of nature, the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust is keen to ensure that any current, or developing, operations have the health and success of our Atlantic grey seal populations at the forefront of their minds. It is imperative that all who love our Islands, and in turn this iconic species, understand the impact their actions could have and how they can minimise any negative repercussions.

By learning more about our Seals we will be better able to understand our impacts on them and as a result be in a better position to know what we can do and what we can encourage others to do in order to ensure that this vital population remains healthy and happy in its natural environment.

To find out more about Scilly's Seals and to support our ongoing survey & monitoring work head on over to our website:

[ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk](http://ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk)



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