Harbour Seals
(*Phoca vitulina*)

(Also known as Common Seals.)

Physical attributes:

Size & Weight:

- Up to six feet in length and 300lbs.
- Between 140-150cm and 80-100kg
- Males are generally longer than females!

Lifespan:

- Females can reach 30years, males only 20 years (because the males tend to fight over females and territories.)

Diet:

- Mostly fish and squid with all species being taken. May also consume other sources of food which become available such as crabs, lobsters and even marine birds.

Where they can be found:

The harbour seal lives in Europe, Asia and North America.

- *100 000 harbour seals in Europe, 30% of those are in UK waters, 80% of those in Scottish waters*

Habitat:

- They are non-migratory animals which spend their lives close to the shore, rarely venturing more than a few miles out to sea.
- Harbour seals live in large groups and can make their home on a variety of different shorelines ranging from sandy beaches and sandbanks to fairly rocky and rugged coasts. However, they spend the majority of their time in the water.
- They are capable of diving to depths of several hundred metres and can remain submerged for over half an hour.

This is what grey seals and harbour seals do differently with their pups:

- Harbour seals give birth to pups in between June and July – usually midsummer in waters around Ullapool. Their pups can swim straight away.
- Their pups are born with their adult coat because they shed their white coat inside their mum's tummy before being born!
- Pups are nursed for 24 days and sometimes can be seen riding on their mums back in the water while mum forages for food.
- Grey Seals give birth between September and December. Their pups have a white furry coat and they can't swim while they still have this coat.

Threats:
Pollution, climate change, fish farm Audio Deterrent Devices (or 'seal scarers,') chlorinated compounds such as PCBs, ocean acidification, fishing nets, disturbance by tourists, rising sea temperatures, boat strikes, getting shot by people who think they are a threat to fishing…
Also, they have natural predators, like: sharks, sea lions and orca.

Cool facts:

- When a baby harbour seal is born it can swim one minute after being born. But still needs to be nursed and looked after by their mum.

Photo: 1 A baby seal, just born minutes before photo taken – Carn nan Sgeir. ('Skerries' – Summer Isles, Loch Broom)

- Seals have large eyes to see in the dark water.
- Harbour seals are shy but curious animals

- When they dive their heartbeat slows from about 100 to ten beats per minute. A dive usually only lasts about three minutes, they are able to dive to depths of up to 300m, although most dives are less than 20m.
- Seal whiskers help them to navigate by sensing pressure waves from fish and underwater objects

    - They share a common ancestor with dogs and bears (you can see that when you look at their skulls.)

Photo: 2 Harbour seal skull

- Seals have long necks that they can shoot out quickly to catch fish when fishing
- Every year harbour seals moult their old pelage for a new one, and when this happens in August after pupping season, they lose a lot of heat so they don't go in the water much until their coat grows back.

If you make a Harbour seal feel threatened it may bite you. It can be as painful as a bear biting you – they have bacteria in their mouths that is very dangerous and can make you seriously ill.

What to do if you find a seal (or seal pup) that you think may be injured or otherwise at risk:

- Keep your distance! Remember: they look cute, but they can bite you quite badly.
- Call the experts at BDMLR **on 01825 765546** (or you can call Noel Hawkins direct if you live near Ullapool.)

If you can see a clear injury on the seal from your distance please say so when you are calling.

What to do if you find a dead seal:

Please report any to SMASS (https://strandings.org/) so that samples can be taken to investigate what has happened to that seal and learn from it.

Always remember:

- If you see a seal on your local beach please if you have a dog keep it on its lead and stay away from the seal and warn other people not to go too close!
- They are amazing creatures, but they are wild animals and they need their space!!

Thank you for reading!