

## Grey Seals at Blakeney Point

The continuing increase in the numbers of Grey Seals breeding at Blakeney Point over recent years, graphically shown in the National Trust article in the last Glaven Valley Newsletter, has puzzled me for a little while. Unfortunately there seems to be little published information about grey seals but what I did find was quite surprising, so I thought it was worth sharing. What follows comes mainly from a report, published in 2010 for Natural England, entitled 'Berwickshire and Northumberland Coast European Marine Site – Grey Seal Population Status'. It was prepared jointly by the Seal Mammal Research Unit, Scottish Oceans Institute and the University of St Andrews.

Some of the conclusions reached in the report suggest that the increase in grey seals along the east coast of Britain including the breeding group at Blakeney Point is probably due to man's activities, firstly as a consequence of culling an ancient breeding colony on the Farne Islands between 1962 and 1983 and secondly by commercial over-fishing in the North Sea. This needs unpicking a bit so I will try to be brief.

Female grey seals haul out annually in the winter at traditional breeding sites to have their pups, in doing so they are not only very faithful to the site but they are also very territorial about their own particular location within the site, which they will defend aggressively each year. Prior to the 1970's the only notable breeding group of grey seals along the east coast of Britain was on the Farne Islands and this group is known to have existed for centuries. Increasing numbers of pups reared here in the 1960's prompted a decision to cull, firstly the pups and later the adult females. Human interference in any stable natural wildlife population can produce totally un-predictable consequences and this is probably what happened here. It is suggested that female grey seals from the Farne Islands, displaced by the disturbance of the cull, triggered the expansion of the seal population along the east coast by establishing a new breeding group on the Isle of May in the late 1970's. This group grew exponentially because it was a new site with plenty of space for growth and therefore little competition for the females. It is likely that the same process, involving females from the Farne Islands, were responsible for establishing new breeding groups at Donna Nook in Lincolnshire in 1981 and at Fast Castle in Berwickshire in the late 1980's. Breeding started at Blakeney Point and at Horsey in 2001, probably involving females originating from Donna Nook.

Studies have shown that grey seals in the North Sea feed on sandeels, whitefish and flatfish in that order. Variations do occur over the years and seasons according to availability of prey, but sandeels and other bottom feeding fish and organisms such as dragonet and seascorpions form the major part of the diet. In the Orkneys it includes octopus and cuttlefish. Commercial over-fishing in the North Sea of the larger predatory fish (e.g. cod) which also feed on the sandeels etc is thought to be one of the causes for the widespread increase of grey seals because the reduction of competing predators resulted in a greater abundance of the seal's main prey items. When foraging away from their haul out sites the seals can range over the whole of the North Sea from the Faroe Islands to the coast of Norway down to Denmark and Holland although most foraging trips don't go that far and are of a shorter duration, usually lasting two or three days. Adults do not feed during the two months that they come ashore in the breeding season.

It is quite probable that the population at Blakeney Point will stabilise once it reaches an optimum level which judging from other breeding sites would be between 1,500 and 2,000 pups per annum. It should also be remembered that the mortality of pups in their first year is thought to be about 60%. The report states that in Britain there is clear evidence that growth in the population overall is levelling off.

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