



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

Gray Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)

Description

Gray seals are 'true seals' which are characterized by lack of an external ear flap and short forelimbs (unlike sea lions). Coloration varies by geographic region and sex – males have a dark gray coat with silver spots and females have a silver-gray coat with scattered dark spots. Males can also be distinguished from females by the long-arched "roman" nose and their larger body size. Pups are born with creamy white fur that is shed after the first three weeks.

Habitat and Distribution

Gray seals are generally found in coastal waters, and they are divided into three somewhat isolated stocks: Western North Atlantic, Eastern North Atlantic, and the Baltic Sea. At sea, they are usually alone or in small groups. On land during mating, pupping, and molting, they gather into large groups.

Sounds

Gray seal pups make a shrill yapping sound. Adults make a variety of vocalizations including threatening hoots, barks, and hisses. Adult males use vocal threats to defend their territory on the breeding grounds.

Feeding

Gray seals are opportunistic and eat fish, crustaceans, squid, octopus, and even the occasional seabird.

Threats

Gray seals are accidentally caught in fishing gear such as gillnets, trawls, purse seines, and weirs. They are also threatened by ship strikes, oil spills, contaminants, ingestion of marine debris, power plant entrapment, and illegal shooting. Natural predators include sharks and killer whales.

Fun Fact

The male nose is the basis for its Latin name, *Halichoerus grypus*, which means "hooked-nose sea pig."



Stephanie Wood / NEFSC



Gordon Waring / NEFSC

Family: Phocidae
Population: 200,000–300,000
Status: Least Concern
Length: 7.5 – 10 feet
Weight: 550 – 880 lbs