



Seals of Spitsbergen

On our polar voyages we have the good fortune to meet with several species of seals; peering their inquisitive heads out of the water to inspect us, lazing in groups on the ice floes and always keeping a wary eye open for a passing hungry polar bear. On occasion one may witness the startling act of a polar bear capturing and eating a seal - a necessity of nature, though an emotional burden to witness. Although we all may recognize seals, these beautiful creatures are often shy and secretive and we know relatively little about them. Whilst they may appear slow and cumbersome when either on the shore or on ice floes, it is in the water that they really come alive and often when diving we can hear their haunting calls and communication in the surrounding waters. Some species are able to dive to depths of over 200 m in search of jellyfish, whilst others are capable of gaining over 2 kg in weight per day: the seals of the Arctic are an enigmatic but mysterious group of Arctic wildlife.

Bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*)

Measurements: length 2.0 – 2.5 m
weight up to 300 kg

The bearded seal is a large species of Arctic seal and has a relatively small head for its body size. The large fan of whiskers, which are an obvious feature in this species, are highly sensitive and are used to feel for food whilst the seal dives to depths of over 200 m. The bearded seal is very rarely seen ashore, preferring to rest on ice floes and enjoying its own company rather than be part of a larger group. If bearded seals do happen to meet on the same piece of ice, they move far apart and face different directions. Male bearded seals produce a distinct song underwater, which is likely to be territorial behaviour, used beneath the pack-ice.



Ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*)

Measurements: length 1.2 – 1.5 m
weight 60 – 100 kg

The coat is marked with dark spots which are ringed with pale edges. The underside of the animal is often lighter in colour and can be distinguished from the harbour seal readily by having little or no markings on its underside. Unlike other species of seals in the Arctic, the ringed seal excavates a 'lair' under the surface of ice floes, where it gives birth to and hides its pup from predators. Although polar bears are the main predator of ringed seals, both walruses and Greenland sharks have both been known to predate upon them. The smallest of the Arctic seals, the ringed seal may live for over 40 years (maturing at about 5-7 years) and has a diet consisting mainly of fish and planktonic crustaceans.



Harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*)

Measurements: length 1.5 – 1.9 m
weight 90 – 100 kg

The harbour (or common) seal is variable in its appearance, ranging from brown to grey and to with very pale silver and dark, blotched markings across its body. These seals are usually found in large groups, using sandy or stony haul-outs over the ice. Harbour seals are often seen in a 'banana' pose, with their head and tail lifted in the air and tend to stay close to shore, rarely venturing more than 20 km from the shore. Harbour seals feed on a range of fish, planktonic invertebrates and even jellyfish. On close encounters, its distinctive V-shaped nostrils are easily seen. Pups are born in June and are able to swim immediately.



Harp seal (*Phoca groenlandica*)

Measurements: length 1.2 – 1.5 m
weight 60 – 100 kg

The adult harp seal is readily recognized by its black face and muzzle and silvery coat with a distinctive 'harp'-shaped pattern on its back, which does not become fully visible until around five years of age. With a diet consisting mainly of fish and planktonic crustaceans, harp seals are most commonly seen in large groups either at the edge of pack ice or on drift ice, where they can dive up to 275 m to feed. Young spend just two weeks with their mothers, feeding on their rich milk, gaining an incredible 2 kg per day, before being left to fend for themselves. Harp seals migrate south in the autumn and north in the summer; often exceeding a distance of 6,000 - 8,000 km.

Photographs by Chris Dobbs, Ben Garrod