

**MEDIA RELEASE**

**For immediate release**

**St Abb's Head seal colony welcomes record number of pups**

A record number of seal pups have been recorded by National Trust for Scotland Rangers at St Abb's Head National Nature Reserve during the annual breeding season.

A final total of 1,806 pups have been counted at the east coast reserve and shows an extraordinary explosion in the seal population with zero seals recorded on the beaches as recently as 2007.

Grey seals breed on the Nature Reserve from October to December and the conservation charity is now keen to carry out further studies and determine the exact reason for the rapid rise.

Ciaran Hatsell, Head Ranger at St Abb's Head, said: "It really is an incredible story. I have worked in wildlife for some time and have been studying seal colonies for the past 10 years and I'm amazed by how this population has risen.

"Grey seals are one of the rarest seals in the world. There's a global population of roughly 300,000 and in the UK we have around 45% of that. To have this rise here is very special and I feel very privileged to be able to count and work with these animals.

"If you go back to 2007, there was no colony here at all and the population is still growing, which shows that the ecosystem is healthy and that they have plenty of food in the area.

"It's hard to draw conclusions about the sudden rise without the science or data behind it, but we can suggest it's down to lack of disturbance or that the seals have come from another North Sea colony that has reached capacity. There is so much that we still have to learn and, in many ways, that's quite refreshing."

Two counts are carried out in the peak of the pupping season in mid-late November, with most of the pups counted with binoculars. In the bigger colonies, high-resolution images are taken and the pups are counted from the photographs. The same process has been carried out each breeding season since 2015 and NTS staff have reported a steady year on year rise.

"Monitoring the populations of wild animals is more important now than it ever has been on this rapidly changing planet," continued Ciaran. "The work we do here is vital to our understanding of population dynamics and of the wider the natural world. If we know what is here, then we can make plans to protect it.

"These animals are biological indicators of the health of our wider marine ecosystem, they are the apex predator. If they are doing well, it is a positive sign. And don't we all need a bit of positivity at the moment!"

Ciaran continued: "The population counts that we do here is really just scratching the surface. Going forward, we would hope to work with other organisations, like the Sea Mammal Research Unit or

universities and collaborate with them and try and make our studies as efficient and all-encompassing as we can.

“The possibilities are endless, but we have to be realistic about what funding is out there at the moment and the challenges facing all organisations at the moment.”

Some of the beaches at St Abb’s Head are sheltered by surrounding cliffs and are largely inaccessible to the general public, providing a safe haven for the growing pups and their mothers.

Seals are rarely seen on the beaches out with the breeding season and the colony is expected to leave the site in the weeks leading up to Christmas when pupping has reached an end and the new arrivals have moulted their distinctive white fur.

However, the National Trust for Scotland is urging people who are keen to visit St Abb’s Head Nature Reserve to firstly check and follow the latest Scottish Government Covid-19 guidance on travel and general Covid-19 regulations.

Staff have also appealed for people to view the seals from a distance and on stretches of the coastline where the beaches are flanked by footpaths, electric fences have been erected to ensure a safe space for the colony and that they are not disturbed by the public or dog walkers.

“The fencing is essential and the area is a popular dog walking spot,” explained Ciaran. “In the past there have been incidents, horror stories of people picking up seals and bringing them back because they thought they were in trouble. We have had people putting their kids on the backs of seals for selfies, really bad stuff.

“I am on site every day and I hope that my presence can make an impact and a difference, in terms of educating people and protecting seals in the most vulnerable spots.

“We do ask that people don’t disturb the seals during breeding season, it really can be the difference between life and death. If females are inexperienced and are frightened by someone or something on the beach, this can cause them to flee and abandon their pups, who will then starve to death. Seals react strongly to the presence of dogs in particular, so when visiting, please keep dogs under close control at all times.

“If you find a seal pup alone on a beach and you are worried, then please call the British Divers Marine Life Rescue on 01825 765546 or the SSPCA on 03000999999. Please don’t approach the animal, give it space and encourage others to do so.”

For more information on St Abb’s Head National Nature Reserve visit <https://www.nts.org.uk/visit/places/st-abbs-head>.

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**Issued on behalf of National Trust for Scotland by Frame PR.**

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