

BEAUFORTIA

INSTITUTE FOR SYSTEMATICS AND POPULATION BIOLOGY
(ZOOLOGICAL MUSEUM) UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Vol. 47, no. 5

December 19, 1997

ON EXTRALIMITAL RECORDS OF ARCTIC SEALS (MAMMALIA, PINNIPEDIA) ON THE WESTEUROPEAN CONTINENTAL COAST IN THE PAST AND AT PRESENT - A SUMMARY

P.J.H. VAN BREE

*Institute for Systematics and Population Biology (Zoological Museum), University of Amsterdam,
P.O. Box 94766, 1090 GT Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

Keywords: North Atlantic arctic pinnipeds, extralimital records, Westeuropean continental coast, *Phoca groenlandica*, *Phoca hispida*, *Cystophora cristata*, *Erignathus barbatus*, *Odobenus rosmarus*

ABSTRACT

In the past extralimital finds of arctic seals on the Westeuropean continental coast (northern Denmark to southern Spain) were rarely recorded. At present much more cases are known. According to the author this is due to more naturalists visiting the coasts, more and better identification manuals, the creation of seal rehabilitation centres where ill and abandoned baby seals were brought to and yearly published lists of marine mammals found on the coasts. The last two developments gave rise to networks of interested collaborators and thus to increased awareness.

In a number of articles (van Bree 1977, van Bree & 't Hart 1990, van Bree *et al.* 1994, van Bree 1996, van Bree 1997, van Bree *et al.* 1997 and Derix & van Bree in press) attention was drawn to extralimital records of arctic seals on the continental coast of West Europe (northern Denmark to southern Spain). It would have been logical to note also the extralimital records of arctic pinnipeds on the coasts of the United Kingdom and Ireland. But, as the present author found out long ago, many of these records were and are published in local natural history journals, which are unavailable in libraries on the continent and which are not

indexed in the Zoological Record or similar journals. The listing of these non-continental records better can be done by an inhabitant of one of the two countries.

It was striking that on the continent the arctic seals, the Harp Seal, *Phoca groenlandica*, the Ringed Seal, *Phoca hispida*, the Hooded Seal, *Cystophora cristata*, the Bearded Seal, *Erignathus barbatus* and the Walrus, *Odobenus rosmarus*, were known in the past only from very few specimens (see Mohr 1952). But during the last 25 years more and more animals were found, in particular Ringed Seals, Hooded Seals and Harp Seals.

It must be said, however, that in the eyes of a

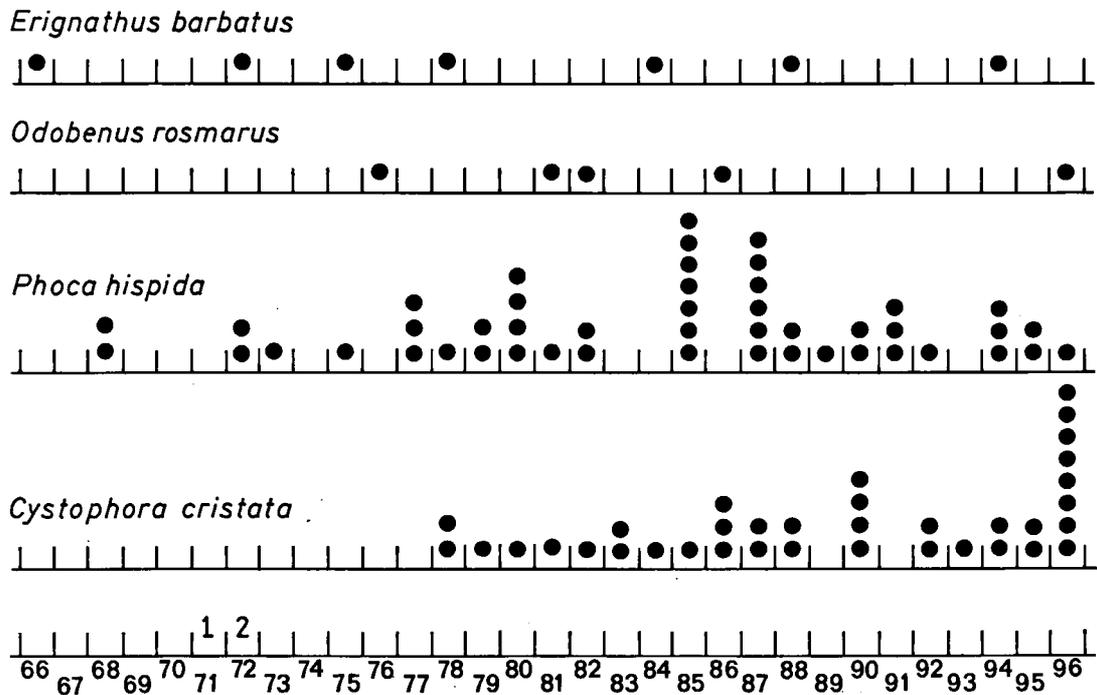


Fig. 1. Extralimital records of four arctic seal species on the Westeuropean continental coast (northern Denmark to southern Spain) during the past 30 years. Below the years in which the animals were found. Below also the years in which two important seal rehabilitation centres were founded (1) and the year in which the yearly reporting of marine mammals on the coast of France started (2); see text.

layman young Harp Seals and Hooded Seals are easily mistaken for aberrant Harbour Seals, *Phoca vitulina*. And adult Hooded Seals are mistaken for large Grey Seals, *Halichoerus grypus*. Even trained zoologists have sometimes difficulties correctly identifying Ringed Seals. About the rather rare Bearded Seal not much can be said, although its square-shaped flippers and its very long whiskers set it aside from Harbour Seals and Grey Seals. Only the Walrus, even when it is young, has such an odd and characteristic shape, that also laymen recognize the species at once.

But why the rarity of these arctic seals in the past and why are they found so much more at present? In the species accounts cited at the beginning of this article, the author has brought forward as explanation that three factors may have caused the difference between the past and the present situation. To wit, there are at present many more naturalists roaming along the coast, there are now more and better identification

manuals, and the influences of the creation of seal rehabilitation centres and the publication of yearly reports concerning marine mammals found dead and alive on the coasts and thus causing a greater awareness.

The first two factors are self-evident. The other one needs some explanation. In the Netherlands the late Mr G.J. de Haan started in 1951 to bring sick adult seals and orphaned ones to a facility behind his small natural history museum on the island of Texel. Once the animals were healthy again or could live independently, they were set free. In the beginning he only took animals found along the shores of the island. Later on came also seals found on other North Sea islands in the Netherlands and from beaches on the mainland. His possibilities, however, were limited, so the number of seals he took care of was also limited.

In 1971 Mrs Lenie 't Hart at Pieterburen, a small village near the north coast of the Nether-

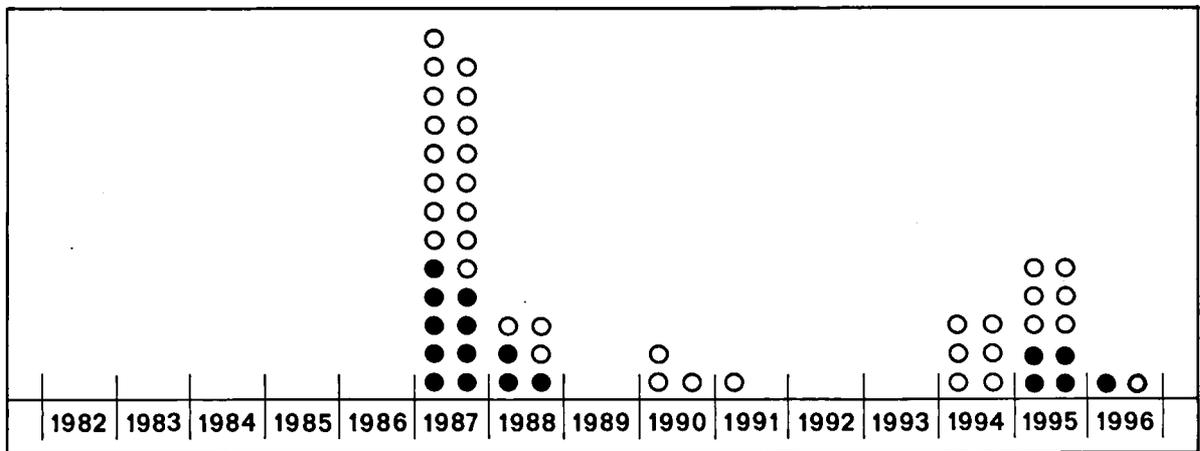


Fig. 2. Extralimital records of Harp Seals, *Phoca groenlandica*, on the West European continental coast during the past 15 years. Black dots represent adult specimens, circles young animals. After van Bree *et al.* 1997.

lands and Mr W. Schumann at Norden/Norddeich, also a small village near the German North Sea coast north of Embden, started to take care of ill adult and orphaned baby seals. At first in a rather primitive way but later very professionally. During the first years only animals found nearby the recovery centres were treated but later, thanks to a network of dedicated collaborators, seals also came from other European countries, sometimes as far as Spain and Portugal.

One year later, in 1972, Dr R. Duguay of the Natural History Museum at La Rochelle in France started to report yearly on the marine mammals found on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of France. In the beginning the lists were rather short but in the course of years a network arose of coast guards, members of the police force, naturalists and others, who all reported strandings and observations. The yearly reports were first published in the journal *Mammalia*, later in the *Annales de la Société des Sciences naturelles de la Charente-Maritime*. It is a pity that, after the retirement of Dr Duguay, nobody took over the publication of these important yearly reports. There are, however, plans to start publishing again these reports regularly.

Later on, two more seal recovery centres were founded on the German Atlantic coast at Friedrichskoog and Büsum. Seals were also

brought to the newly created Océanopolis at Brest in France and to the Fiskeri og Søfart Museum at Esbjerg in Denmark. At all the places mentioned seals could be studied at close quarters and staff members of the seal centres became well trained in recognizing the different species. Many illustrated newspaper articles concerning the centres and on the rare animals they treated were published, so that the general public became more "seal-minded". This in turn was the cause that more ill and young seals, which lost contact with their mothers, were reported.

In figure 1 the extralimital records of arctic seals during the past 30 years are summarized. In figure 2, concerning Harp Seals, the black dots represent adult specimens, the circles young animals. At the bottom of the graphs the years are indicated in which the seals were found. If the same animal was observed more than once and at different localities, it is enumerated only once. This explains the difference between the reviews published by Born (1988 & 1992) on Walruses and our figure.

The figures demonstrate clearly what has been stated before and the fact that arctic seals can be classed into three different groups. The first group consists of the ones which only rarely are seen on the West European continental coast, to wit the Bearded Seal and the Walrus. The second group consists of seals which are seen regu-

larly in small numbers, the Ringed Seals and juvenile Hooded Seals. The increase of records of Ringed and Hooded Seals over the last decades coincides with the establishment of seal rehabilitation centres and their alleged rarity in the past must almost certainly be ascribed to identification problems. The third group contains only one species, the Harp Seal, of which adult specimens are only observed in so-called "invasion years", when they come in large numbers to the south from arctic waters driven by lack of food (e.g. 1987/1988 and 1995/1996). Young specimens of this species are probably also occurring in small numbers in other years but likely escape correct specific identification. The find of a less than one year old female drowned in a net near Arcachon in France (44°40'N, 1°11'W) on 9-VII-1996 may be an indication for this assumption.

One of the conclusions of this study is that in future Ringed Seals, *Phoca hispida*, and young Hooded Seals, *Cystophora cristata*, must be given the status of regular visitor in West-European faunal works on mammals. And it would be sensible to list Harp Seals, *Phoca groenlandica*, Bearded Seals, *Erignathus barbatus*, and Walruses, *Odobenus rosmarus*, as stragglers from the far North. Hopefully the custom in observing seals more carefully and to take care of orphaned and ill seals will continue and that thus more will become known about these insufficiently studied mammals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the articles mentioned in the beginning of this study, the author and his colleagues have acknowledged gratefully the help they received in obtaining all the data. Without citing their names, the author wants to thank again all the persons who helped them. The only exception is

that he wants to thank here by name Dr E.W. Born in relation to recent extralimital records of Walruses.

REFERENCES

- BORN, E.W., 1988. Hvalrossstrefjere i Europa. Flora og Fauna, **94** (1): 9-14.
- BORN, E.W., 1992. *Odobenus rosmarus* Linnaeus, 1758 - Walroß: 271-299. In: J. Niethammer & F. Krapp - Handbuch der Säugetiere Europas, Vol. 6, part II: Robben-Pinnipedia (Eds R. Duguay & D. Robineau) (Aula Verlag - Wiesbaden).
- BREE, P.J.H. VAN, 1977. Over de recente zwerftocht van een Walrus, *Odobenus rosmarus* (Linnaeus, 1758), langs de Nederlandse en Belgische kust. Lev. Natuur, **80**: 58-63.
- BREE, P.J.H. VAN, 1996. Extralimital records of the Ringed Seal, *Phoca hispida* Schreber, 1775, on the West-European continental coast. Bonn. zool. Beitr., **46**: 377-383.
- BREE, P.J.H. VAN, 1997. On extralimital records of Hooded Seals, *Cystophora cristata* (Erxleben, 1777) on the western European continental coast. Z. Säugetierkunde, **62**: 182-186.
- BREE, P.J.H. VAN & L. 'T HART, 1990. Over de eerste Baardrob, *Erignathus barbatus* Erxleben, 1777, in Nederland gevonden. Huid & Haar, **8**: 162-165.
- BREE, P.J.H. VAN, E.J. VEDDER & L. 'T HART, 1994. Over zadelrobben *Phoca groenlandica* op de kust van continental West-Europa. Lutra, **37**: 97-105 (with summary in English).
- BREE, P.J.H. VAN, E.J. VEDDER & L. 'T HART, 1997. Nogmaals over Zadelrobben *Phoca groenlandica* op de kust van continental West-Europa. Lutra **40**: 23-26. (with summary in English).
- DERIX, R.R.W.M. & P.J.H. VAN BREE, 1998. On two recent life-strandings of adult hooded seals (*Cystophora cristata* Erxleben, 1777) on the West-European continental coast. Mammalia (in press).
- MOHR, E., 1952. Die Robben der europäischen Gewässer: 1-283, 40 tabl. (Verlag Paul Schöps-Frankfurt/Main).

Received: October 13, 1997.