Best Practice Guidelines

National Seal Release Protocol

2025

National Seal Release Protocol

This Seal Release Protocol Framework (SRPF) has been developed as a tool for all rehabilitation centres, animal care centres, wildlife hospitals and their respective public relation departments to guide and manage the safe and successful release of seals back to the wild.

Overall aim

The aim of this framework is to standardise release procedure for seals that have undergone rehabilitation, ensuring that the time, effort and resources are focused on best outcomes, best practice and the long-term survival of wild seals post rehabilitation.

A quick reference checklist has been created to compliment the SRPF; please see Appendix 1.

Relevant Legislation

The SRPF must comply with the requirements of the following:

- The Conservation of Seals Act 1970
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
- Animal Welfare Act 2006
- Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997
- Zoo Licensing Act 1981
- Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974

Guidance/Codes of Practice

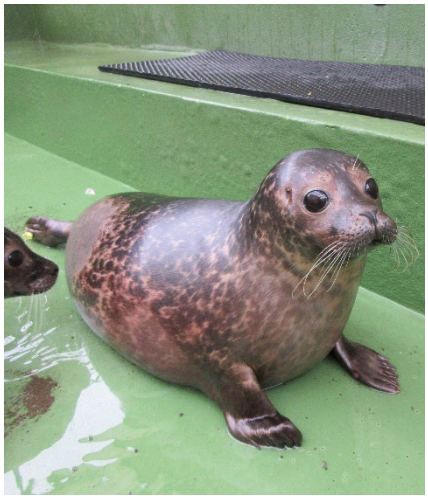
The SRPF should comply with the following:

- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Marine and Coastal Wildlife Code (England only)
- Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) The Drone and Model Aircraft Code
- The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code SMWWC
- Natural Resources Wales Sea Wise Code

Pre-release planning and considerations

Seal Health and welfare

Release of any animal back to the wild should be sanctioned by veterinary guidance taking into account the animal's health, optimum weight/nutritional condition and behaviour as well as recorded ethical discussions. Rehabilitation should involve minimal human interaction and if rehabilitated animals are to be housed on display to the public, the facility must clearly demonstrate that this does not cause stress or compromise eventual release. Rehabilitation centres should only release seals that are likely to thrive and survive in anticipated harsh coastal environments. Seals should have reached the target release weight for species, be healthy, tagged, free of transmissible disease and abnormal parasite burden, active and successfully competing for fish without support.



RSPCA West Hatch

The numbers of seals being released must take into account local conditions, public acceptance/ support, topography of the release location and dispersal opportunities away from the area. Seals should not be fed in the morning of the release. This will reduce the risk of vomiting whilst in transit. A seal for example vomiting in a stretcher could be fatal. It will also allow released seals to naturally seek food and disperse into open water sooner.

Identification

Tagging

All seals should be tagged on their rear flippers with a uniquely coded identification tag. An example tagging protocol is included in Appendix 2. Rehabilitation centre tag protocols (sex/side; colour and numbering system) can be submitted here to contribute to a central European database via this link.

A programme of post-monitoring release should be implemented to ascertain the success of the programme. This should as a minimum include all seals being tagged on their rear flippers with a uniquely coded identification tag. Tag numbers, along with release data, should be shared with local seal monitoring groups to ensure the best chance of post-release feedback.

Pelage (Fur) Pattern

The seal fur pattern (pelage) should, if possible, be photographed on both sides of the head, body neck and whiskers with all scars or abnormalities (e.g. missing digits/claws) documented. These can be forwarded to you your local seal photographic ID conservation groups. Please contact the UK Seal Alliance should you wish details of such groups. Please see the attached guide of how to photograph and document the animal's pelage (Figure 1). L1, L2, R1, R2 should be considered the priority. For further details see Appendix 3.

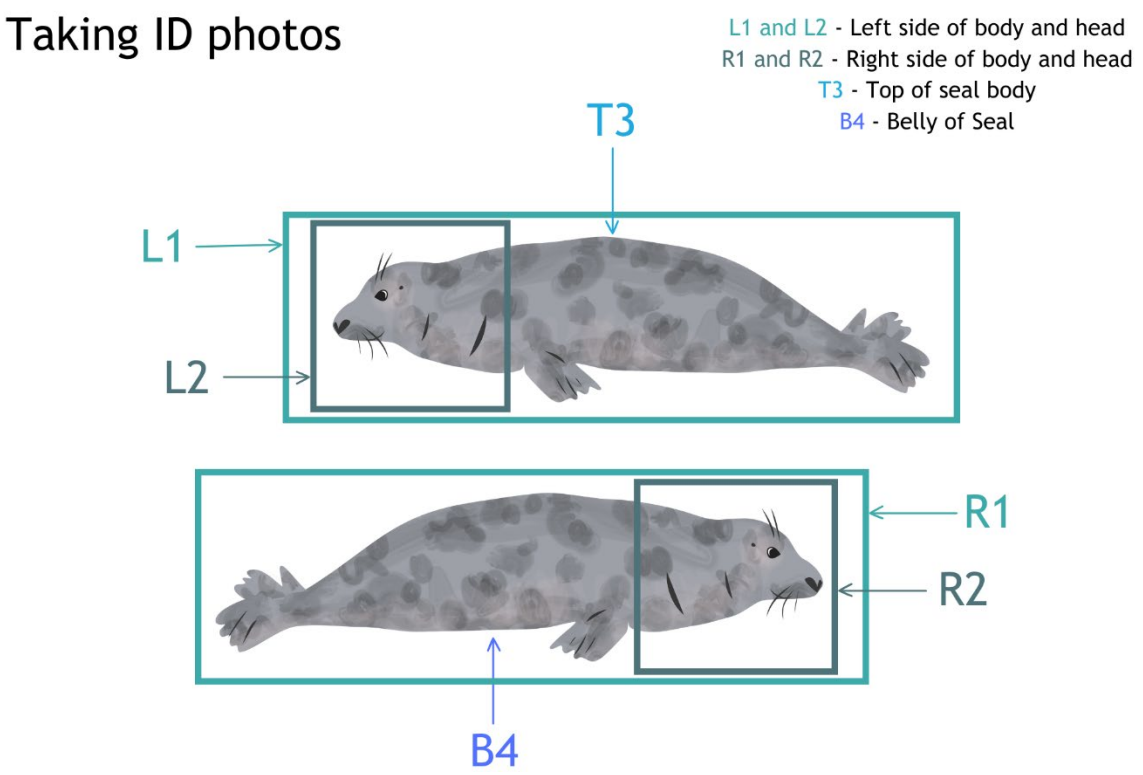


Figure 1 - Taking pelage identification photos (credit: UK Seal Alliance)

Vibrissae (whisker) Patterns
The seal's whisker patterns and arrangements also provide a valuable method for identifying individuals. Since seals often only surface briefly to breathe, flipper tags and pelage colouration may be difficult to observe. Whisker images should, if possible, be taken from multiple angles:

- **L1, R1** - Side-on view (90°) capturing all whiskers from each cheek separately and their arrangement.
- **L2, R2** - Diagonal (45°) angle from the front, capturing whisker position, including the nose and one side of the face.
- **F1** – Direct frontal view showing both sides of the face and the full whisker arrangement.

To ensure clear whisker images post-release:

- **W1** - Focus on the top three rows of whiskers on both sides of the mystacial pad for the most distinctive arrangements (preferably at 45°).
- Ensure good lighting and adjust exposure to reduce glare, enhancing visibility.
- Both wet and dry whiskers can be used (relaxed whiskers are preferred where possible, but this will be species- and distance-dependent).

Maintain a record of these images at your centre and submit them to Alyx Elder (supersealsense@yahoo.com) for long-term identification efforts (see Appendix 3 for further details).

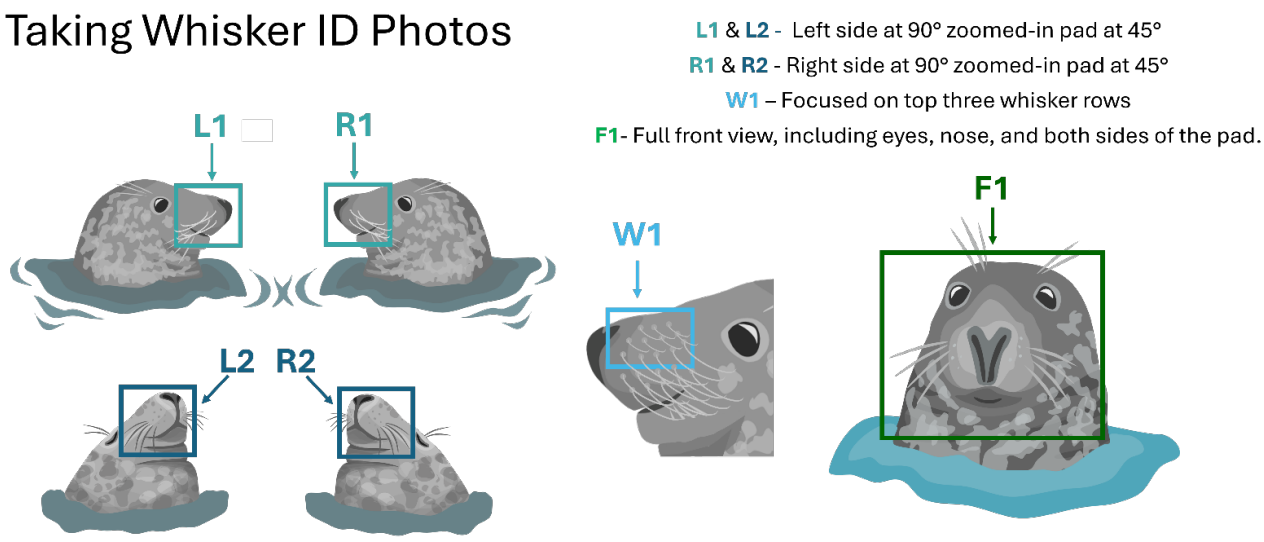


Figure 2- Taking whisker identification photos (credit: Alyx Elder)

Release planning

Release Coordinator
Nominate a Release Coordinator (RC) who will be responsible for the implementation of the Seal Release Protocol Framework (SRPF) and all requirements, including legislative.

This role should be undertaken by an experienced person who has familiarised themselves fully with the steps to be taken to ensure a timely, safe and successful release.

The RC will be responsible for briefing all personnel on all aspects of the generic and dynamic risk assessments required for that particular release and for ensuring effective public management and communication.

Release Site

Release site selection is crucial to maximise a natural return to the wild whilst minimising risks to the animal, staff and public.

Points for consideration include proximity to a known seal colony, accessibility for release, distance from rehabilitation centre, no effluent outflows close by, public use of beach or water (e.g. recreational, surfing), or attitude of local fishermen towards seals in general. As a general rule, where possible, each seal should be released as close as reasonably possible to where they were rescued/thought to originate from, although it is recognised that this is not always feasible or desirable. Consider beach and boat releases; e.g. boat releases may be more successful for releasing common seals directly to private inaccessible breeding/feeding grounds on the East coast.

Seals should be released back to open sea conditions avoiding rivers, estuaries and locations where current human activity (at that time), may have a detrimental effect on the animal being released or locations where there are relatively low levels of human activity.

Some release sites may be designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and therefore may require appropriate licensing as well as landowners' permission. These checks can be made by contacting the relevant agencies:

- **England:** Sites of Special Scientific Interest (England) | Natural England Open Data Geoportal
- **Wales:** Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) | DataMapWales
- **Scotland:** Protected areas | NatureScot
- **Northern Ireland**: Areas of Special Scientific Interest | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Any release site must have the landowner's permission once the SRPF has been explained and fully understood by them.

Weather conditions

Weather and tide conditions must be closely monitored beforehand to select an optimum release time. Seals can cope with a varying degree of conditions however be mindful that many pups will be about to experience, for the first time, open sea conditions. Conditions can be site dependent and must be suitable to encourage the fastest seal dispersal.

Consider delaying a release if severe weather is imminently forecast within the next 48-72 hours. Checking the Met Office forecast is crucial and interpretation of marine weather forecast terminology can be found at Marine forecasts glossary - Met Office . Seals should be released when sea states are smooth, mild or moderate in line with Met Office definitions.

Time of day

Choose a time of day to limit the number of members of the public likely to be present. This will minimise the amount of stress and potential interference the animals will face during any release. Morning releases are always advised allowing seals time to familiarise themselves with their new environment and find locations to rest. Evening releases should not be considered. Conditions (tides etc.) can be site dependent and must be suitable to encourage the fastest seal dispersal.

Transportation

The RC must ensure that seals are transported to the release site in compliance with the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997. Individual cages/Varikennels are preferable however, stretchers (but only if a short transit) should be used. Suitable trailers may also be used but must comply with legislation. All means of transport will be of a suitable size (large enough for the animals to be able to turn around), securely affixed, well-ventilated and not cause the animal any unnecessary suffering.

Hyperthermic shock can occur if an animal overheats whilst in transit. Temperature regulation is paramount to avoid overheating and potential death. An animal will have gained additional insulation (blubber) during rehab therefore, its ability to keep warm would have significantly improved from initial admission.

If deemed hot, please ensure the head and flippers are sprayed with cool water and a constant check is maintained throughout the journey. Good ventilation is important to maintain a constant flow of air

Journey times and distance will be kept to a minimum with sufficient rest periods taken if an extended journey is necessary (a 30-minute stop per 2-hour journey is recommended).

Release Staff/Volunteers

Each person involved in the release will be allocated specific tasks, fully briefed by the RC and be in possession of suitable clothing and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as gloves, washable clothing including boots, pig boards and any other items as required by Government advice at that time.

Consider using volunteers from local seal conservation groups or British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) to assist in the smooth management of the RPF.

Public Relations/Social Media

It is advantageous to discourage the use of social media or other media to publish intended release dates/sites in advance as they have the ability to draw large crowds, creating difficulties in managing the safe and successful release and the resultant role modelling of bad practice.

Any invited media organisations must comply with the SRPF and be briefed beforehand what is expected of them to ensure the safety of all present and avoid unnecessary stress or distraction to the seals.

The RC will ensure that filming is within the best practice guidelines on photographing seals (see Appendix C)

The use of drones should be discouraged at all times in order to avoid role modelling their use around wild seals at sensitive seal sites. Drones cause increasing disturbance to wild seals across the UK. Drone footage instigated by seal rehabilitation centres, has the potential to justify and condone their use at sensitive seal haul out sites contravening the CAA (The Drone and Model Aircraft Code). Release staff should role model good practice thus avoiding the use of drones to film animal releases.The aim will always be to put the animal first and foremost by minimising the potential of causing unnecessary anxiety to a vulnerable animal in our care.

Release

On the Beach

Where the public are present, create a clear demarcated sterile zone where people are excluded and seals can be released with minimum human contact/awareness.

This area can be cordoned off with tape or suitable ground fixtures visibly marking off the danger area.

The clearly marked **sterile zone** should be at a distance of no less than 15 metres either side and to the rear of the animals being released (*see figure 3*). This will ensure a clear safety area for the RC to observe before the release is carried out. (It should be remembered that under ordinary circumstances, it is recommended to maintain significantly larger distances when viewing wild seals, e.g. 100m as recommended within Defra's Marine and Coastal Wildlife Code).

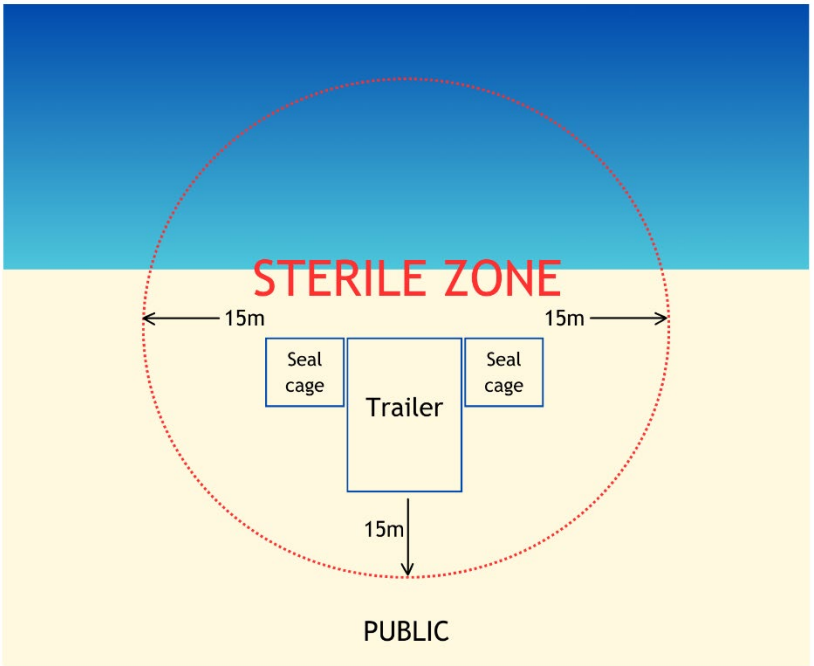


Figure 3 - Seal release best practice: sterile zone (credit: Seal Alliance)

The sterile zone will only contain key release personnel and will be cordoned off by tape and/or signage clearly indicating a high-risk area. Seals being released by boat can follow a similar procedure, with other water users and vessels being managed to remain at a distance with engines off or in neutral gear.

There will be times when there are water users already in the sea (e.g. surfers). Every effort should be made to release the seals away from the area being used as much as is reasonably possible, to reduce the likelihood of an unintentional interaction.

Dogs should be on leads and discouraged from being within close proximity of the sterile zone and all personnel present should be quiet and out of sight.

Once satisfied that conditions are suitable, the RC will give the signal that the release should go ahead.

Seals should be released with a clear and unobstructed access route to the open sea and no person should approach or interfere with the animal once released, except where an animal has made its way towards people or under a release vehicle and requires redirection/discouragement which can be achieved through gentle 'herding' with seal boards.

Seals usually disperse within around 30 minutes of release but should be monitored by staff to ensure successful dispersal into open sea conditions, ideally until no longer visible.

Seal Release (Relocation)
There will be times, when seals do not require rehabilitation at a centre or at a veterinary practice but have been captured in order to relocate to a more suitable location from where they were initially found. An example would be where a seal is otherwise healthy, but situated within an area of human or animal activity and there is a potential for disturbance or an injury being sustained.

The relocation site should take into account the guidance outlined within the SRPF to ensure the animal is safely relocated with minimal human contact.

The animal should be marked with a suitable animal marking spray or stick (e.g. Raidex stick) with a prominent unique identification letter/number along its body line. This will identify the animal if subsequently seen or reported by a concerned member of the public. On no account should this marker be red in colour which could, from a distance, be misidentified as an injury.

Local marine rescue organisations such as the RSPCA, BDMLR etc., should be notified of any relocated seal to avoid further unnecessary deployment of resources.

Monitoring of the animal within its new location, should be maintained for a period that ensures the animal is safe and unlikely to suffer in any way.

Public Engagement
Seal releases can be an opportunity to promote best practice by positive engagement with the public.

The creation of a QR code has endless positive opportunities and can be bespoke to that particular region and centre.

A bespoke QR code can highlight:
- Specific information about the release and work undertaken by the rehabilitation centre.
- Signposting to relevant good practice guides and leaflets. The need for NO human contact or hand feeding. It is also vital to share what to do if any seal approaches you.
- General information about how the public can assist e.g. donations/volunteering etc.
- Important seal facts.

A briefing/information sheet can be created for those members of the public that do not have access or use QR codes.

Leaflets such as Defra endorsed *'Watching Seals Well'* and *'Enjoy Respect Protect Our Seals'* are available via The UK Seal Alliance and champion best practice around encountering wildlife. It is always worth alerting the public that 100m is the minimum approach distance wherever logistically possible for seals once released.

Post Release Monitoring

Before leaving the area, ensure the released seals have dispersed. It is important to have a plan in place for who will be responsible for post release monitoring of the seal to ensure dispersal from the area before leaving the release sit, and also who will coordinate collation of post-release monitoring data. Consider using volunteer partner organisations to assist with undertaking this potentially time-consuming post release role.

Post release media opportunities can highlight the needs that recently released seals now require in the wild and how the public can assist (see **Public Engagement** above), in particular educating local enthusiasts or volunteers around the coast to report any sightings of flipper tags or dead seals.

Tag identification records should be updated and maintained in line with the rehabilitation centre processes and practices.

Additional Note

Seals are an important species in the wider marine ecosystem. Whilst in rehabilitation, they are still wild animals experiencing temporary captivity for a specific reason.

Every effort must be made to place the animal's wellbeing and natural needs at the very forefront of what we do, including minimising human interaction throughout the rehabilitation process (where reasonably possible) to prevent habituation.

They live in a natural world shaped by the decisions we make today.

For More information see the Seal Alliance website: https://www.sealalliance.org/

APPENDIX 1: Release Quick Reference Checklist

This checklist should be used after the SRPF document has been read and understood.

It is not compiled as a quick reference to circumnavigate the important points within the SRPF.

- ✓ Release Coordinator (RC) appointed;
- ✓ No social media messages of the release have been posted prior to release;
- ✓ All relevant staff fully briefed on the release plan and wearing appropriate PPE;
- ✓ Animal(s) authorised for release by appropriate Veterinary staff representative;
- ✓ Release site landowner permissions obtained and approved;
- ✓ Seals have been photographed to aid future survey identification;
- ✓ Transport is appropriate for the safe transportation of live animals;
- ✓ Appropriate and well-ventilated cages/kennels/stretchers are being used;
- ✓ Seals have been photographed to aid future survey identification;
- ✓ Release staff are allocated roles and have briefed everyone present to ensure members of the public are quiet and dogs are kept on a leash at all times;
- ✓ Release site has been appropriately cordoned off (safe zone) ensuring the public are kept safe;
- ✓ Release staff are allocated roles to ensure members of the public are quiet and dogs are kept on a leash at all times;
- ✓ Drone flying/filming is discouraged at the release site;
- ✓ Information QR codes and leaflets are available to the public explaining the release event including facts on seal disturbance and their future wellbeing;
- ✓ Staff remain post release to ensure seals have safely dispersed;
- ✓ Thank the public for their cooperation.

This is not an exhaustive list but one that will assist as a quick reference guide to achieve a successful seal release.

APPENDIX 2: Example Tagging Protocol (kindly shared by the Cornish Seal Sanctuary, Gweek)

A major advantage of flipper tags is that they are very low impact on the seal; not interrupting dives or feeding effort. They are also long lasting (over 10 years) and are easy and quick to attach.

The disadvantages of flipper tags include that they are difficult to spot on live healthy animals and often are only seen with if the animal comes ashore for a period of time or washes up dead. They can also be pulled out by other seals, and the writing can come off within 3 years (however the imprint can still be visible).

A new colour flipper tag is used each year so that when seals are spotted in the wild (even if the number can not be seen) the centre knows which year the seal was rescued and released allowing the animal to be aged.

Jumbo & Rototags

The flipper tags used are cattle and sheep tags and are ordered from Dalton by Gweek each year and sent out to all the UK sites.

The smaller sheep rototags are used for common seals and the larger cattle jumbo tags for grey seals. The tags have an ID number on the two outside faces and Gweek's contact details on the inside face in case the body washes up the details can be read and feedback received.

Attaching flipper tags:

Males are tagged on the rear left flipper, females on the rear right. The following procedure should be used to attach the tag:

1. Place the tag in the tagging puncher ensuring each side of the tag is placed in the correct side.
2. Pour some surgical spirit over the male end of the tag that will be going through the webbing.
3. Examine the webbing and select a suitable place to attach the tag between either the 2nd and 3rd digit or the 3rd and 4th digit, avoid the raised areas where the veins run, choose a spot where the end of the tag will be in line with the end of the webbing.
4. Clean the webbing both sides with surgical spirit.
5. Position the tagging puncher over the selected spot and press down firmly, then gently remove the punchers.
   (Note: If you have caught a vein and the flipper bleeds run cold water on the flipper until it stops).
6. Round off the male end of the tag with a file to reduce the chance of irritation.
7. Pour surgical spirit over the hole and spray with tetcin.

APPENDIX 3: Advice to rehabilitation centres for the taking of photos to support photographic ID surveys post release.

Pelage (Fur) Pattern

Any photos taken in rehabilitation before release can be used to identify the individual seal when the flipper tag number cannot, for numerous reasons, be read in the wild. Sadly, flipper tags often remain hidden or are only glimpsed briefly in the wild. Therefore, reliance on fur patterns (pelage) is crucial to positively identify specific seals.

Fur patterns are clearest when wet, so wet seals offer the best definition for photographing however, dry fur can also be used. Wet seals in bright sunlight can produce glare that masks the natural fur patterns. Aim for good lighting and adjust the exposure a little to show the patterns as clearly as possible. Ideal photos are taken from a 90° angle from the side of the seal and from low down.

The most important photos to prioritise are the zoomed-out flank photos of both sides of the seal from low down. Firstly, take a zoomed-out photo to show the nose to rear flippers from the side of the seal. Then take a closer photo to include the seal's neck pattern from its nose to the back of its shoulders. If the seal is moving around take photos of its side fur patterns from different angles. Where possible take photos of the seal's back and belly pattern.

Please maintain a record of these photos at your centre and also submit to your nearest Seal Surveying Photo ID Group. Consider sharing the poster below with members of public.

Vibrissae (whisker) Patterns

Photographs taken during rehabilitation before release can serve as a valuable tool for identifying individual seals when flipper tags or pelage colouration are not visible in the wild. Flipper tags are often obscured or only briefly visible, and pelage colouration can be difficult to assess unless the seal is hauled out. Therefore, whisker arrangements provide a reliable method for identification.

Both wet and dry whiskers can be used for identification, though relaxed whiskers—lying flat against the muzzle—are preferred where possible. However, this will depend on several factors, including species, behaviour, location and distance from seal. Bright sunlight can create glare, making whiskers harder to distinguish. To improve visibility, aim for good lighting and adjust exposure as needed to enhance contrast.

For optimal identification post-release, images should be captured from a diagonal (45°) front angle, which provides a clear view of the whisker arrangement on one side, including nose. Focusing on the top three rows allows for more precise identification. When photographing seals on-site, images should be taken from multiple angles to allow for thorough identification:

- **L1, R1 (side-on, 90° angle)** – captures arrangements of whiskers from each cheek separately.
- **L2, R2 (diagonal, 45° angle)** – captures whisker position on one side of the face, including the nose and one side of the face.
- **F1 (Frontal view)** – a direct front-facing image showing both sides of the face including nose.
- **Unstaged enclosure image** – a natural image of the seal within an enclosure, focusing on the whisker pad (preferably top three rows) to allow for preliminary identification.

Maintain a record of these images at your centre and submit them to Alyx Elder (supersealsense@yahoo.com) for long-term identification efforts.

Photography Best Practice for Seals

While it is always exciting to see a seal, we must remember that it is a wild animal with survival needs and instincts
We must learn to live alongside seals, who need us to avoid inadvertently disturbing them and causing unseen harm
The impacts of disturbance are often invisible and delayed

As a charity, we no longer publish or share photos of seals looking at the camera and are phasing out photographs on public display where the seal is looking into the lens; this is to discourage people from deliberately disturbing seals to get a "good photo"

A good photo is a relaxed seal, <u>not</u> looking at you and behaving naturally

If a seal looks at you, you are too close!

Defra recommend we all stay at least 100m away

Let's change the culture of wildlife photography, one photo at a time

Use zoom cameras or binoculars

On land, stay on clifftops, dunes or paths. Avoid walking on seal beaches and discourage others from doing so

at least 100 metres

Eyes, nose and ears
Make sure seals cannot:

- smell you *(stay downwind)*
- see you *(stay out of sight)*
- hear you *(stay quiet/ whisper)*

Enjoy, Respect, Protect Leaflet

Aim to be a role model for photography best practice

In public: use vague site names, avoid landmarks, and encourage others not to name sensitive seal sites online, except in a direct message

On/in the water: If you spot seals on land, give them an extra-wide berth - especially if the seals are high above the water line. A high-up seal is a high injury risk

Don't share photographs of mums and pups in real time, or reveal their location

Visit sites where human access is managed

#RespectTheNap #DoNotDisturb

#RudeToIntrude #GiveSealsSpace

Selfie Research

Defra Marine Code

SRT Website

SEAL Research Trust