

WATCHING MAMMALS with Oliver Smart

1: Grey seals

IN THE FIRST OF A NEW SERIES, WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER AND PTES SUPPORTER OLIVER SMART INTRODUCES YOU TO SOME TRICKS OF THE TRADE AND INVITES YOU TO GO OUT AND MEET THE CHARISMATIC GREY SEALS OF DONNA NOOK.



Grey seals or 'hook-nosed sea pigs' if you prefer the rather apt literal translation from the species' scientific name, are large mammals found on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Donna Nook is one of the most accessible breeding locations to be found within the British Isles and the population is growing annually with 3 500 breeding animals producing over 1 100 pups in 2007. Throughout the year grey seals spend most of their time at sea or hauled out on distant sand banks. It is only during the breeding season that they come to the shelter and safety of the coastal sand dunes to give birth to their fluffy, white pups. Grey seals feed largely on fish taken at depths of 70m or more and can live between 25 and 40 years in the wild.

Where to see grey seals

RAF Donna Nook is an active bombing range on the Lincolnshire coast where it is possible to get extremely close views of these endearing mammals. The site is bleak, windswept, and bitterly cold during the breeding season which takes place in the autumn. The area consists of extensive sand banks, salt marsh and dunes where grey seals breed from October to December. The site is managed by the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and covers over 10km of coastline. The main colony at Stonebridge has volunteer wardens present throughout the breeding season to offer advice and information to visitors. The Ordnance Survey grid reference for the site is TF422998.

Access to the beach is strictly

prohibited when red flags are flying but the sand dunes are accessible most of the time. Arrive early at dawn as the car park can get full very quickly. From either the north or south follow the A1031 to North Somercotes where signposts direct visitors to the Stonebridge car park. A mobile café is usually parked at this site which provides a range of refreshments but toilet facilities are few – portaloos were in place at the overflow car park during December 2008.

Further information:
www.lincstrust.org.uk



Oliver's top tip

The best way to photograph seals is to get down to their level. When the sandstorms subside I often use a kitchen tea-tray with either a bean bag or tripod head mounted on top. I can slide this along the beach. This

approach isn't particularly comfortable but it gives an intimate eye-level perspective of the animals in their natural habitat and, more importantly, allows me to get close without disturbing or threatening them.

