

Observations on Seals on Surtsey in the Period 1980–1989

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ABSTRACT

In this paper are presented records of sightings of seals in Surtsey from 1980 to 1989. Seals in Surtsey have been counted regularly, as part of a bigger project of aerial censusing of seals around the coast of Iceland (Erlingur Hauksson 1985 and 1986).

Earlier accounts of seals in Surtsey are rather sporadic and only based on occasional observations. Some of them are mentioned, but many may have been omitted which the author has not been aware of, since observers of seals in Surtsey have not published their records.

INTRODUCTION

The author's first seal observation on Surtsey was in the late summer of 1972, while diving to collect subtidal algae and benthic invertebrates for scientists investigating the colonization of these on the hard substrata bottom. The sighting was of a common seal (*Phoca vitulina* L.) which were quite common at that time.

The author's first sighting of a grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus* Fabricius) on Surtsey, was in 1982 when he was counting grey seal pups in breeding places, from an aircraft, on the coast of Iceland (Hauksson 1985). This is, however hardly the first time grey seals have been observed in Surtsey although there are no written records of other sightings.

Seals, in general, started visiting the island frequently soon after its formation (Fridriksson 1975). It is therefore likely that some grey seals have been around at that time.

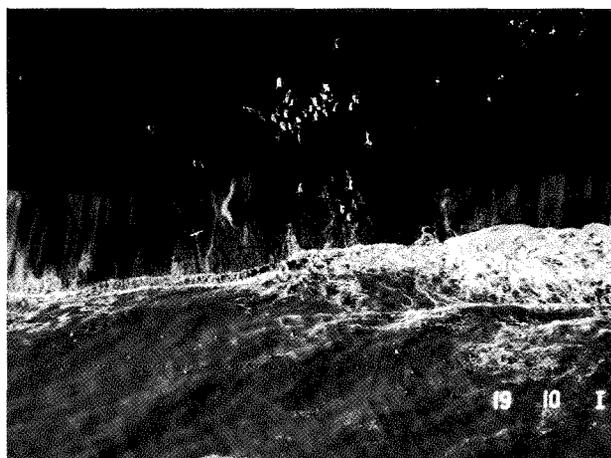


Fig. 1. Grey seal pups on the northern sandy spit of the island of Surtsey. The picture is taken by the author from an aircraft on October 19th 1986.

OBSERVATIONS ON SEALS IN 1980 TO 1989

Common seals on the south coast of Iceland have been counted from aircraft in the years 1980, 1985, 1988 and 1989. On most occasions common seals have been observed in the sea

TABLE I
Number of common seals (*Phoca vitulina* L.) observed on Surtsey in aerial census, and from a research vessel, 1980 to 1989

Date	Time	Number	Further information
11/08/1980	13.41	20	
22/07/1985	14.45	0	
11/07/1987	–	4	Seen from a research-vessel
11/07/1988	–	0	
21/11/1988	11.30	≈30	All adults
09/05/1989	17.45	0	
22/06/1989	15.30	0	
21/09/1989	17.00	1	

TABLE 2
Number of grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus* Fabricius)
observed in aerial census, on Surtsey

Date	Time	Number	Further information
08/10/1982	15.45	0	
19/10/1986	13.14	50	34 pups in lair and 16 adults in the sea (Fig. 1).
16/07/1987	17.11	6	Two adult males and 4 females in the sea.
11/07/1988	12.25	0	
09/10/1988	10.25	2	1 pup in lair 1 adult in the sea.
21/11/1988	11.30	26	15 pups in lair and 11 adults in the sea.
09/05/1989	17.45	0	
22/06/1989	15.30	0	
21/09/1989	17.00	0	
25/10/1989	11.05	4	3 pups in lair and 1 adult female basking on land.
21/11/1989	10.55	35	All pups basking on land, but not all totally white.
13/12/1989	12.00	73	3 white pups and about 70 grown ups basking on land.

around Surtsey or basking on the island's northern spit (Table 1).

Grey seal pups at breeding places on the south coast of Iceland, have been counted from aircraft in the years 1982, 1985, 1986, 1988 and 1989. Grey seal pups have mostly been seen on the northern spit of the island (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

From these observations on seals at Surtsey, it can be deduced that common seals and grey seals have already several years ago started breeding on the island, as well as using it as basking site. They have probably used the sandy northern spit, as a basking site much earlier than they started to breed on it. Fishermen from the isles of Vestmannaeyjar, have noticed seals there regularly, often in great numbers, during the winter-time for many years.

Surtsey is in many respects a good breeding place for seals. The animals there are hardly ever disturbed. Visitors to the island are very few and come to the island mostly in the summertime. The sandy northern spit is low and

beaching is easy for the animals, even in windy weather. Close to the island are good fishing grounds for seals. In the summer there is an abundance of saithe, cod and herring just off the cliffs. All year around flatfishes and sea scorpions can be found there to eat.

If the seals in Surtsey continue to get the same protection in years to come, as they have had to date, then a strong breeding stock of grey seals will probably evolve as well as also a sizable herd of common seals. Grey seals are however known to disturb the settlement of common seals. This could happen in Surtsey, so that the island could become a sanctuary for grey seals, as many inhabitable offshore islands and skerries around the coast of Iceland already are.

Common seals are breeding on the nearby shore of the southern part of the mainland of Iceland, in great numbers. However the closest large breeding place for grey seals is on the sandy shores of Óræfi, several hundred km to the northeast, with a small breeding place on Skógarsandur, which is much closer to Surtsey. The grey seal herd in Surtsey has probably been recruited from these herds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank the pilots of the taxi-flight Company Sudurflug hf., especially Einar Gudmundsson, which have skilfully and safely taken the author on several trips over Iceland's most southerly island, Surtsey.

The aerial-census programme for counting seals on the coast of Iceland, on which the results of this paper are based, is sponsored by the Research Committee for Biological Seafood Quality.

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