



The seal that came in from the cold

Wildlife enthusiasts on the Hebridean island of Mull have been surprised and delighted recently by a very unusual seal sighting.

Mull is well-known for its attractions for nature lovers, from corncrakes and sea eagles to whales, dolphins and otters. Locals are also used to regular sightings of grey and common seals, both of which thrive around Mull's coasts.

However, back in March, local wildlife tour operator David Woodhouse spotted an animal that looked quite different from his usual companions on Mull's west coast:

"I was making my way down Loch na Keal 15 minutes from the house and saw a seal laying on a flat area of shoreline which is unusual anyway here, and so its initial general demeanor was odd. I had a good look at it. What was immediately apparent was its extremely long and untidy-looking whiskers. Its coloration and facial markings also seemed odd compared to grey and common seals."



He was straight on the phone to the team at local research and education charity, the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust in Tobermory. From his description, Science Director Dr Peter Stevick identified the animal as a bearded seal, normally a denizen of the Arctic sea ice. According to Dr Stevick, bearded seals follow the retreating ice to the north in summer and are most often found on drifting floes near the ice edge. They spend the winter in pockets of open water within the ice pack, and can dig breathing holes in the ice with their strong clawed flippers.

Dr Stevick said:

"Bearded seals are only rarely seen at any distance from ice in any season, being an uncommon sighting even in Iceland. Therefore for an individual to be sighted on Mull was a special event indeed."

Dr Stevick continued:

"Bearded seals are one of the largest seals found in the Arctic at around 2.1-2.4m long. Their most striking feature is the thick set of very long whiskers on their upper lip and cheek that give them their name. When wet, these whiskers are straight, but when the seals are hauled out on shore and dry these whiskers tend to curl giving the seal a

slightly comical look. We think they use these distinctive whiskers as feelers to help find food on the sea floor like walrus do.”

The UK is not an ideal habitat for bearded seals, having no sea ice. Indeed in their normal environment, bearded seals would rarely haul out onto dry land. However, they have been seen as far south as France, Spain and Portugal, and this is not the first report of a bearded seal in the UK. A total of 15 records of bearded seal sightings have been reported in the UK since 1892, the majority of which have been in Shetland and Orkney. Mull’s bearded seal has now been hauling out in the area on-and-off since March.

Although ‘out of habitat’, this seal is not necessarily lost or sick; it may just be exploring new areas. It does have large patches of fur coming loose, but this is often seen in arctic seals, especially juveniles, when they travel farther south. It is thought to be the result of a fungal infection, and is not likely to be life-threatening.

David Woodhouse said:

“I have been running wildlife trips for 25 years and have never seen a bearded seal. It just goes to show what a special place the isles of Mull and Iona are for wildlife.”

END