

Text sample: Mammals

away, depending on the animals and the situation. Let them know you are there at an early stage; this is definitely better than them finding out about your presence when you are already close. The worst case scenario is a whole herd leaving a resting place in panic, all rushing into the water. For reasonable photos, you need a telephoto lens, but 300 mm should normally do. When swimming in water they can be very curious, so if you are lucky, then they will come close to you while you are standing on the beach. This is an amazing experience, but it certainly does not happen every day.

Next to the view, it is the sound that can be quite impressive; just imagine up to 70 kg of raw mussel meat being digested in every stomach! Considering this, it is not surprising that also the smell can leave you with unforgettable impressions.

On shore, Walrus are rather klutzy and slow, but in the water, they are very much in their element and accordingly agile and fast. Bear this in mind when you have them nearby small boats. Often, Walrus are rather peaceful animals, but their curiosity may reach unpleasant degrees and aggression including attacks on small boats and even yachts is not unheard of.

4.7.8 Harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*)

Seehund (D) – Spættet sæl (DK) – Phoque común (F) – Foca comune (I) – Kirjohylje (Fi) – Steinkobbe (N) – Gewone zeehond (NL) – Knubbsäl (S)

Description: Illustration page 196. With a length of about 1.5 metres and a weight of a good 100 kg, Harbour seals are slightly larger than Ringed seals. The colour of their fur varies from almost black to dark grey and brown, with patterns that are often similar to those of Ringed seals. Already at birth, their size approaches one metre and the fur also resembles that of adults. Main features to distinguish Harbour seals from Ringed seals are the location and situation of the observation: You will find Harbour seals only on the west coast of Spitsbergen and you will rarely see only one, as they tend to stay in groups. Also, if you see any seals lying on rocks, then they will be Harbour seals, as other seals in Spitsbergen rarely show this behaviour. In contrast to other seals, Harbour seals usually do not rest on ice floes unless the shore is not accessible.

Distribution/Migration: Generally, Harbour seals are amongst the seal species with the widest range, but they are more at home in temperate and sub-arctic areas. In central Europe, they are well known from the North Sea coast. The world's northernmost occurrence is on the west coast of Spitsbergen. There are several colonies of these, one on Prins Karls Forland close to Fuglehuken, and others are further north on the west coast, for example on Danskøya. They spend the whole year in the area, but can swim quite far. The Spitsbergen population is possibly a relict dating back to a period with milder climate several thousand years ago.

Biology: In Spitsbergen, Harbour seal pups are born in early to mid June. The offspring sees the light of day for the first time in shallow water and is immediately able to swim. The young seal will live for three to four weeks on its mother's milk until it has increased its body weight from ten or twelve to 25-30 kg and then starts to find



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its own food. As soon as the young become independent, the mating season begins, but pregnancy is delayed by a good two months, until September or October. Harbour seals moult in late August to early September and will then build up a thick fat layer for the winter, feeding on almost anything they find in the water that is small enough for them to eat, such as fish, jellyfish and crustaceans. Females and males tend to go their separate ways outside the mating and moulting seasons.

Their main enemies are Orcas, Greenland sharks, Polar bears and, exceptionally, those Walrus who have abnormal diet requirements.

The life expectancy of Harbour seals in Spitsbergen is significantly shorter compared to their relatives further south; the oldest one found was 22 years old (normally up to 35 years). Recent studies have confirmed Greenland sharks to be important predators in Spitsbergen, a fact that is likely to explain the reduced life expectancy. The relatively slow-swimming Greenland shark probably catches the seal while it is sleeping.

Miscellaneous: The size of the local population is estimated to be around 1,000 animals. Chances to see them lying on rocks are better during low water, since they tend to search for food during high tide.

Hunting, losses as bycatch in fishing nets and pollution including oil spills have put pressure on Harbour seal populations in many areas. While the Spitsbergen population is assumed to have a normal size, it is on the Norwegian red list and thus totally protected.

4.7.9-4.7.14 Whales

Auch Wale wurden mir versprochen, und ich fand es beeindruckend, daß das Reisebüro das Leben im Meer dermaßen gut unter Kontrolle hatte.

They promised me also whales, and I was impressed that the travel agency had life in the sea so well under control.

Anne B. Ragde, *Mord in Spitzbergen*

To begin with it needs to be noted that, after several centuries of intensive whaling, Spitsbergen is not prime whalewatching territory. But the numbers of different species – including Humpback, Fin and even Blue whales have increased significantly in recent years, and sightings are becoming more and more frequent. If you travel on a ship, then spend as much time looking out for whales as you possibly can.

Knowledge about the populations and distribution of whales is still incomplete. Biologists from the Norwegian Polar Institute ask everybody who is travelling in Svalbard waters to note their marine mammal observations (date and time, position, species, number of individuals, remarks) and to supply this information to the scientists. An observation form is available from <http://mms.data.npolar.no/accounts/login>, but the form is not strictly needed to supply the data as long as all necessary information is provided. Contact Kit Kovacs at Kit@npolar.no for further information.

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*4.7.1: A Polar bear approaches a small cruise ship.
Curiosity on both sides: a safe and interesting encounter.*



4.7.2: Arctic fox.

