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On the pupping period of Grey Seals, *Halichoerus grypus* (Fabricius, 1791), reproducing on a shoal near the Island of Terschelling, the Netherlands

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Although the species must have been common in prehistoric times in view of the many remnants found during excavations, Grey Seals were unknown in the Netherlands until the winter of 1955–56, when a specimen was observed in the vicinity of the Island of Texel (KRISTENSEN 1957). From that winter on many Grey Seals were found on the coast of the Netherlands (HICKLING 1962; VAN HAAFTEN 1974), almost certainly all originating from the large colony in the Farne Islands in the North Sea, opposite the border between England and Scotland. Most of the specimens were very young animals and often in a poor condition. When found these young seals were mostly taken to the Harbour Seals Rehabilitation and Research Centre at Pieterburen, while some were taken to the Nature Education Centre on Texel. After recovery, they were set free again in the North Sea or the adjacent Wadden Sea.

Thus, over the years non-reproducing groups of Grey Seals were formed living in the coastal water of the Netherlands. At present one of these groups is living on and near 'Engelse Hoek', a high lying shoal (53° 20' N, 5° 10' E) off the Friesian Island of Terschelling. In the second week of January 1985 pilots of military aircraft reported that they had spotted two female Grey Seals with suckling young. Once this became known, special attention was given to the fact that seals might be born on the shoal. In the last week of January 1986 pilots again reported having seen two females with young. In the first week of February 1987 three newborn Grey Seals were seen lying on the shoal, while 10 days later two more were spotted.

This shoal is a part of the Wadden Sea that remains dry most of the time, being flooded only in case of high northwesterly winds (force 7 de Beaufort and stronger). That is probably the reason why a number of Grey Seals chose this shoal for their habitat. From 1980 to 1986 a total of 55 stranded Grey Seals were taken into the Pieterburen centre, recovered and set free again on this shoal. From observations we know that at present the shoal accommodates a colony of some 45 Grey Seals.

The two Grey Seals born in January 1985 disappeared after heavy weather. One was probably found on the Friesian coast and could be rehabilitated in the Pieterburen centre. The two Grey Seal pups born in the last week of January 1986 also suffered bad luck. They disappeared in stormy weather, one being later found dead on the shore of Terschelling.

The Grey Seal pups born in February 1987 numbered five. Three were found on the shore of Terschelling and survived thanks to treatment in the Pieterburen centre. The other two grew up on the shoal.

That Grey Seals should settle and breed in the coastal waters of the Netherlands was to be expected, but that the pupping period would be in the second and third week of February came as a surprise. After all, the breeding season of the colony of Grey Seals in the Farne Islands, where most of the Dutch specimen come from, starts around the middle of October and lasts until around the middle of December, with a peak by 7 November

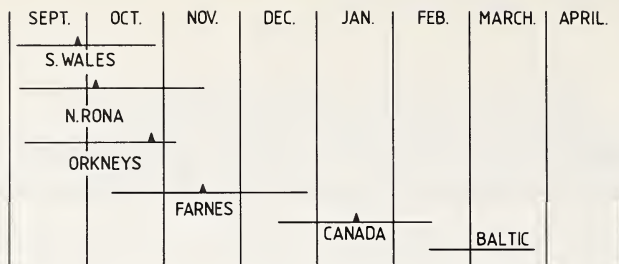


Fig. 1. Pupping seasons and peak times of some Grey Seal colonies. After KING (1983)

(HEWER 1974; KING 1983). That in the first year Grey Seals had pups on the shoal near the Island of Terschelling in January could be explained by the fact that this involved young females. Young Grey Seals have been known to give birth in the spring (BACKHOUSE and HEWER 1957). That the young near Terschelling should be born in a later period in 1986 and 1987, however, was completely unexpected.

The pupping season of the Grey Seals in the Netherlands looks more like that of *Halichoerus grypus* in the Baltic (Fig. 1). In this short article we will not try and furnish an explanation of the phenomenon, but we only want to draw attention to it in order that it may be studied in the coming years.

To conclude this note, we would like to express our gratefulness for the information we received from pilots of Leeuwarden AFB, and from Mr. HESSEL WIEGMAN.

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