

GRAY AND HARBOUR SEALS.....

THE TWO COMMON SEALS OF P.E.I.

by Terry Power, Newtown Cross

(Editor's Note: During this year's Christmas Bird and Mammal Counts, a number of people spotted seals and were curious about how to tell the two common species apart. Terry's article should make us all into first class seal spotters.)

Of the seven species of true seals known to frequent Canadian waters, only four, the Gray Seal (Halichoerus grypus), the Harbour Seal (Phoca vitulina), the Harp Seal (Phoca groenlandica) and the Hooded Seal (Cistophora cristata) may be seen off the shores of P.E.I. However, of these, the Gray and Harbour Seals are most likely to be observed, as they are inhabitants of coastal areas, in contrast to the pelagic habitat of the former two species.

The Harbour Seal is a short, heavily bodied animal reaching 5 feet in length and weighing up to 225 lbs., with females being slightly smaller than males. Background coloration of adults is highly variable, ranging from creamy white to dark brown. The usual color is buff-brown above with irregular dark brownish spots or patches. The underside is usually creamy white with dark brown spots.

The Gray Seal is much larger. Males may reach 10 feet and weigh up to 640 lbs., with females being somewhat smaller. Adult coloration is variable from silvery to smokey gray with black blotches on flanks and back. The head and underside are lighter than the back, and females are lighter in appearance than males.

An important distinguishing feature between the two species, other than color and size, is the shape of the head. The Gray Seal has a long broad straight snout, which has earned it the nickname 'horseface' or 'horsehead', while the Harbour Seal has a smooth round head and noticeably larger eyes.

Gray Seals are gregarious, foraging in groups and hauling out to breed and moult in dense colonies. Whelping occurs in January and February on Canadian shores although this varies with geographical location. Females give birth to one pup as a rule, either on ice or on rocky islets. Breeding follows parturition with a bull establishing his territory and collecting a small harem.

The bond between mother and offspring is surprisingly short. Three weeks after birth the mother deserts her pup and, left to subsist on accumulated fat, the pup undergoes the necessary moult to prepare it for an aquatic life. The white, protective coat of birth is gradually replaced by the characteristic spotted coat of the juvenile. Soon the pup begins to forage for itself.

Harbour Seals are gregarious on land but are usually solitary foragers. Mating occurs promiscuously in shallow water or on sand bars from late July to early September. Whelping occurs on reefs, sandbars, and occasionally in shallow

Gray Seal

