

# Seal population on the rise in Thames estuary

Numbers returning to natural level after centuries of culling for meat and fur, survey finds

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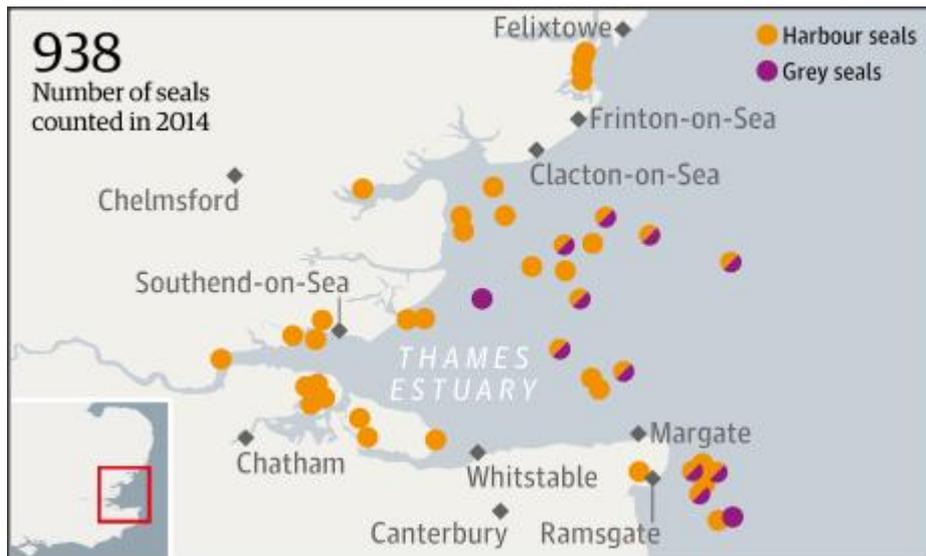
Harbour and grey seals bask in the sun on the Kent coastline. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

Seals are prospering in the greater Thames estuary as populations bounce back from centuries of culling, according to a [new scientific survey](#).

The research suggests hundreds of new seals visited the estuary in 2014, with some taking in the sights of central London by swimming all the way up to Teddington lock, the end of the tidal river.

The survey by Zoological Society of London researchers took advantage of the seals' moulting season in August, when they bask on sunny sand banks whilst growing a new winter coat. Compared to the first survey in 2013, the team found the population of [harbour seals](#) had increased slightly to 679 while [grey seal](#) sightings more than doubled to 449.

Seals were killed for meat and fur until the practice was outlawed in 1970 and, despite their proximity to the capital, the Thames seals are the least understood population in the UK.



“For the first time in UK history we have seals getting back towards their natural numbers,” said ZSL conservationist Joanna Barker. “Grey seals in Suffolk, Norfolk and the Wash have been rapidly increasing and we are seeing more pupping areas. So we think the same grey seals are travelling down to the Thames to feed or rest.”

No pupping areas have yet been spotted in the Thames estuary, suggesting the new grey seals are tourists for the present.

The stability of the harbour seal populations is also good news, said Barker, as other major UK populations are falling. “We have started to see large declines in Scottish populations of harbour seals in last five years,” she said, adding the falls appear not to be related to the distemper virus that devastated numbers in 1988 and 2002. “So we are very keen to keep an eye on the harbour seals in the Thames estuary as we have a big population here,” she said.



The Zoological Society of London combined land, sea and air surveys to get a clear idea of the Thames population of the seals and their range. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

The greater Thames estuary stretches from Deal in Kent to Felixstowe in Suffolk and includes huge sand banks up to 30 miles off the coast. Surveying the area required flights,

boat trips and even foot patrols, to reach the very shallow parts of the river Medway. The Thames estuary hosts a number of offshore windfarms and research published in July showed satellite-tracked harbour [seals taking advantage of turbines to forage](#) for fish sheltering amid the foundations.

Data from tagging harbour and grey seals on the British and Dutch coasts of the North Sea revealed that 11 harbour seals visited two active windfarms off the German and UK coasts.

At 300kg, grey seals are over three times bigger than the harbour seals and the effect of the influx of the former is not yet understood. “We will be keeping eye out for competition between the species for fish and favoured sand resting spots,” said Barker.

ZSL survey team count seals in Thames estuary

ZSL’s UK and Europe programme manager Rayner Piper said: “Although we carry out an intensive period of monitoring in August, we rely on the public to keep their eyes peeled and [submit their sightings](#) for the rest of the year. This year seals have been spotted near to a number of iconic locations, including beside the London Eye and underneath the Millennium Bridge.”