The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation
Saimaa Ringed Seal team
2025

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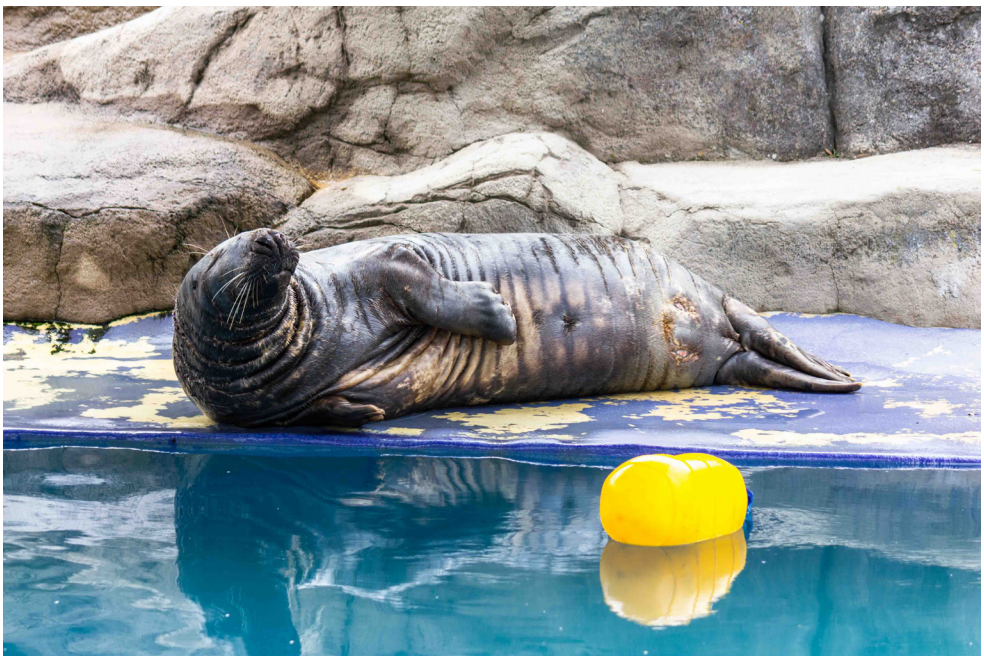
Excursion to seal sanctuaries in Ireland and Cornwall, UK



Grey seals often develop eye problems, making it difficult for the animals to survive in nature. Marlin, though blind, is safe and comfy at the Cornish Seal Sanctuary.

In the beginning of June 2025, the Saimaa Ringed Seal team at the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation (FANC), **Hanne Kosonen**, **Marjaana Kovanen** and **Kaarina Tiainen**, visited three different seal sanctuaries on the British Isles. The Finnish visitors familiarised themselves with local seal protection and environmental education work, reciprocally telling their hosts about the Saimaa Ringed Seal and its conservation.

Seal Rescue Ireland
https://www.sealrescueireland.org/

The only seal sanctuary in the Republic of Ireland, Seal Rescue Ireland (SRI) in Courtown on the south-east coast of Ireland was our first destination. Their aim is to "Rescue, Rehabilitate, Release" seal pups that are poorly, injured or orphaned. SRI also has a motto "Healthy Seas, Healthy Seals", highlighting their actions towards saving individual seals as well as improving the state of marine environment, communicating about the subject and educating the general public on environmental matters.

The operations of SRI were showcased by General Manager **Kim Townsend-Smyth**. The facilities make up a seal hospital, situated almost entirely in outdoor spaces in the backyard.

There are intensive care units, kennels, two nursing pools for preparing the seals for release, and finally a pre-release pool where the seals are moved towards the end of their stay, as isolated from people as possible. In connection with the hospital, there is storage for supplies (e.g. pillow-like "wet suit mamas" made of recycled wet suits, for comforting the pups) and a fish kitchen where "fish smoothie" is made, to be fed to the weaker pups by gavage.

Exhausted and starving, the young grey seal Kallymenia was found on a busy beach in the beginning of May. After a month, she had rehabilitated nicely and was now in the nursing pool at Seal Rescue Ireland, waiting to be released.

This sanctuary only receives young seals: common seal (*Phoca vitulina*) and grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) pups. In the beginning of summer, there are usually no pups yet, as common seal pups are born in the summer and grey seals in the autumn, spending the summer and winter at the sanctuary and being released back into the wild in the spring at the latest. There was, however, one grey seal pup in the outdoor pool now, found in May.

Approximately 130 pups are nursed annually at SRI. During the record year 2024, as many as 170 pups were cared for. Around 60% of the seals are successfully rehabilitated and released into the wild, each with a tag on one flipper. People are encouraged to report any sightings later on, providing information on the seal's movements and wellbeing. There are no other means of monitoring in use.

SRI also welcomes visitors at the sanctuary. Before exploring the facilities, there is a presentation on seals, factors threatening them and SRI's actions for the animals. The environmental education carried out by SRI also involves school visits and virtual tours. On their website, there is a series of videos, as well as seal-themed workbooks for school children. Environmental education is more than just spreading information about seals: the subject is covered widely and linked to themes as climate change, marine pollution and litter, problems caused by fishing and human disturbance.

Volunteers are a key resource in the operations of SRI. More than 700 volunteers around Ireland are at the ready to rescue any seal pups in need and bring them into the care of SRI. There are also several volunteers and interns working at the sanctuary itself. There is an all-day, all-year phone telephone service. Funding is received mainly from sponsors, donators and pup "adoptions" or a pup fostering system. There is also a little shop at the SRI facilities.

Cornish Seal Sanctuary
https://sealsanctuary.sealifetrust.org/

Our next visit was to the Cornish Seal Sanctuary (CSS) in Gweek, Cornwall. Conservation coordinator **Grace Jones** gave us a tour around the sanctuary. Compared to the facility in Ireland, the CSS is considerably larger and more diverse, but the basic functions – rescuing,

rehabilitating and releasing seals – are very similar. Here, however, nearly all the patients are grey seals. Approximately 70 pups go through the care procedures every year. During our visit, there were two recently found pups in intensive care.

Seal pups are taken on as patients for reasons similar to those at SRI: they may be injured, sick or separated from their mums and starving. A wide network of volunteers enables pups to be rescued all around Cornwall. CSS also co-operates with the Cornwall Seal Hospital (see below).

In addition to rehabilitating seal pups, the sanctuary accommodates nine resident grey seals, unable to be released back into the wild due to injuries. These seals live in the sanctuary pools, diving, playing, enjoying fish and being admired by visitors.

Open all year round, the CSS enables visitors to see not only local seals but also a small burrow of Icelandic puffins. The grounds cover a beautiful hillside with the river Helford flowing underneath. There is a café and a shop, as well as several information boards about the seals, puffins and history of the CSS. The actual seal hospital facilities are, naturally, out of bounds for the public. However, the pups can be observed from behind a glass.

The environmental education at the CSS is concentrating on things that can be presented on the premises. There are visits and workshops available for different school groups. Visits to schools are made occasionally. Due to being subjects to a charge, the visits and workshops have declined in demand lately. Environmental education materials as such, online or in print, are not available at the CSS.

One of the resident seals at Cornish Seal Sanctuary relaxing during a busy work day.

The Cornwall Seal Hospital
https://bdmlr.org.uk/

Run by the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR), the Cornwall Seal Hospital (CSH) is located inland in Mid Cornwall. We visited CSH on our third day and were guided by **Dan Jarvis**, Director of Welfare and Conservation. Built in 2021, the seal hospital is a rather new one. Seals are treated in pens. Outdoor pools are yet to be constructed but there are temporary pools in the yard.

The new facilities are well-planned and functional. We saw a variety of care equipment, a fish kitchen, a small laboratory and the hospital itself, the pens equipped with heat mats. On a trailer in the yard, an inflatable boat was waiting, prepared to be used on the next seal rescuing mission. BDMLR takes in injured and poorly seals, to be cared for, rehabilitated and released back into the wild. Volunteers are an essential part of the operations. There is a round-the-clock telephone

hotline, with volunteers and employees on standby for rescuing ailing seals, as well as other marine mammals. The organisation works in close collaboration with other seal sanctuaries and veterinarians.

The amount of phone calls concerning seals in distress is constantly rising. With climate change, fierce storms battering the Cornish coastline are getting more and more frequent, causing a growing number of seals to be injured, reported and taken in by BDMLR. Marine litter and human disturbance are posing severe threats to seals and other marine mammals, and BDMLR is striving to raise public awareness of these issues.

Various kinds of fishing gear are posing a threat to seals in the Cornish waters. In winter 2023, the seal in the photograph was cut loose from a longline, rehabilitated and released back in the sea.

In stead of carrying out general environmental education as such, BDMLR is concentrating on saving seals, campaigning for conservation and training new volunteers, in the facilities we visited. Among other training tools, there is a model of blubber and vertebral column to assess a seal's body condition, as well as Pinnifred, an artificial seal pup for practising different care procedures, including inserting a stomach tube.

BDMLR is regularly participating in campaigns and actively following environmental research. In 2025, there is an ongoing Flying Ring campaign, with appeals to consumers and retailers to refrain from selling and using flying ring toys on the seashore. Stuck around a seal's neck, a ring like this can be fatal. BDMLR also informs and educates the general public on issues like marine litter, problems caused by fisheries, as well as human disturbance. During our visit, BDMLR and the Cornish Seal Sanctuary were preparing for an international three-day seal conference, with visits to both CSH and CSS functions and facilities on agenda.

Seal rescue and environmental education

Each of the three facilities we visited aims to rescue injured, poorly, starving and/or orphaned seal individuals. Efforts of volunteers are essential for the function of these sanctuaries, and funds are raised in many different ways. The general public is being reminded of the many threats faced by seals. Conservation of seals and marine ecosystems is promoted. Information is distributed to the public through several channels. The Cornwall Seal Hospital, unlike the two other facilities we visited, is purely a seal hospital and therefore not open for public.
What is remarkable with both Seal Rescue Ireland and Cornish Seal Sanctuary is that the seals

in their care are given names and presented as individuals, both for audiences visiting on the sanctuaries and on the organisations' websites. Their injuries and problems, as well as their rehabilitation process, are described. This approach aims to stir emotions and encourage people to protect seals, but also serves to boost fundraising. At both these sanctuaries, individual people or, say, school groups, can "adopt" a seal and observe its life, recovery and release.

At each facility we visited, we were warmly welcomed and thoroughly informed about the goals and functions of the sanctuaries. During our visits, we also discussed the Saimaa ringed seal and its conservation, the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, as well as our environmental education work and the Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project. At each sanctuary, we gifted brochures in English and other environmental education materials on the Saimaa ringed seal.

A charming seaside village, Courtown is home to the Seal Rescue Ireland sanctuary.

The black-and-white Cornish flag, here flown in a garden in Penryn, is a common sight all over the Duchy.