

Persistence pays off: seal successfully rescued after six years of suffering.

Seal Research Trust (SRT) volunteers have been tracking an adult male grey seal caught in a blue plastic ring since September 2017. He was named 'Commuter' after his routine trips up and down the north coast. In all this time he had chosen inaccessible locations or positions on accessible beaches that made a rescue attempt by British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) impossible on safety grounds.

On Sunday 14 January, SRT surveyor Andy Rogers routinely surveyed his local haul out site and spotted Commuter high up the beach with a relatively small number of other seals, and an outgoing tide. He reported this to BDMLR, and after assessing the circumstances and logistics involved, urgent preparation for a rescue attempt began. Safe capture and disentanglement of adult seals carries extra risk to the rescuers, as they are large animals weighing over 200kg and can be defensive when they feel threatened. A team of experienced handlers and specialist equipment were needed to be able to catch and control Commuter safely on land. If at any point he had gone into the sea, a rescue would have been impossible.

Sue Sayer MBE, Director of SRT said: "waiting for a rescue to be organised is hugely stressful. Despite Andy's best efforts to speak to visitors and explain the situation's need for caution, people on the clifftop still managed to disturb the seals below on three occasions. Over the next couple of hours, a third of the seals stampeded into the sea to get away from the perceived threat and Andy's optimism for a possible rescue was dwindling. Luckily, Commuter remained sleeping, so the first opportunity to rescue him in six years was not lost."

BDMLR Area Coordinator Dan Jarvis stated: "when our team of Medics arrived, circumstances were perfect. It was low tide, meaning access was at its easiest for us with all the equipment we needed, including a cargo net, herd boards and a stretcher. We had Medics assist Andy on the clifftop raising awareness of what was happening to prevent further disturbance incidents, while a team of six Medics stealthily accessed the cove."

"As there were still a few other seals on the beach, we had to focus on Commuter as the group became aware of us approaching and began heading for the sea. Using the cargo net we blocked his escape, while a herd board was used to safely keep two other adult males away from him and the rescue team. After a standoff, we were able to wrap Commuter in the net to slow him down, then placed the stretcher on top to safely restrain him so his entanglement and injury could be assessed."

The team found that the plastic ring around his neck (a carelessly discarded anti foul paint tin seal) had not cut in as deeply as feared. After the ring was snipped off with bolt cutters, the encircling wound with minor infection was assessed, cleaned out and he was deemed fit to be released. Commuter was freed and took off into the water at a rate of knots! He didn't go far, as he was soon spotted bottling (resting) in the water just offshore, apparently no worse for wear from his ordeal and hopefully feeling substantially better without his constant neck compression.

Andy Rogers added: "I am so happy. I would like to thank everyone involved in this major operation. Not only was it a huge success for Commuter after more than six years entangled, but also for the BDMLR rescue team who were able to catch their first 'healthy'

adult male seal using a new technique. Members of SRT and BDMLR can now look forward to seeing Commuter in the future without an entanglement and track the progressive healing of his injury in the saltwater environment. Well done for a great team effort and a miraculous rescue!”

Let’s all do our bit. Please make sure no looped or circular plastic items get lost at sea in the first place. We can all pick up lost items on coastal walks to prevent suffering and save a marine animal’s life!

-ENDS-

For further information please contact Dan Jarvis (BDMLR) on 07810 460603 or dan@bdmlr.org.uk, or Sue Sayer (SRT) on sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk.

British Divers Marine Life Rescue is an international marine animal rescue organisation based in the UK and is a registered charity. The aims of the organisation are to provide a rescue service for marine wildlife, to support existing rehabilitation centres and to develop new methods of rescue, treatment, transport and care. Website www.bdmlr.org.uk. Email info@bdmlr.org.uk.

The Seal Research Trust (Charity 1162936) is a multi-award winning, evidence-based pioneering citizen science marine conservation charity. SRT conduct research aimed at putting grey seals on everyone’s agenda by giving seals a voice and inspiring people to learn more about this UK globally rare species. Website www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk. Email seals@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk.