



A review of out of habitat Arctic pinniped records in south west England

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Background.

Records of non-native pinniped species from the Arctic visiting Europe have been increasing in recent years (see poster HC-58), linked to climate change impacts through loss of sea ice habitat. Within the UK, the large majority of vagrant species occur in the north of Scotland and along the North Sea coast, however it has been noted that a cluster of records occur specifically in south west England, which is incongruous in comparison to the rest of the west UK and Irish coasts where there are generally very few (Figure 1). This review aims to identify and provide context to this south west hotspot for vagrant pinnipeds, and call for conservation measures to help mitigate and manage these occurrences.

Methods.

Reports of non-native pinnipeds in the UK were drawn from the databases of the presenting organisations, and from a physical and digital literature search back to 1900. Where possible the date, location, species and outcome were recorded.



Results.

A total of 104 reports were found for the UK (Figure 1). These are broken down by species in Table 1. 82 (80%) occurred on the north and east coasts of the UK. The remaining western coast of the UK had 22 (21%) records, of which 13 (13%) occurred in south west England. Looking only at the west coast records, south west England accounted for 60% of the total.

Non-native pinniped records for south west England.

Date	Location	Species	Outcome
1902	Teignmouth, Devon	Harp seal	Sighting.
14.10.95	Treyarnon Bay, Cornwall	Hooded seal	Taken for rehabilitation at the Cornish Seal Sanctuary. Released off Shetland 14.05.96.
21.01.97	Poole harbour, Dorset	Harp seal	Taken for rehabilitation at the Cornish Seal Sanctuary. Released off Aberdeen 28.05.97.
27.09.03	Portland, Dorset	Harp seal	Public sighting.
01.03.04	Kynance Cove, Cornwall	Hooded seal	Seal Research Trust survey record.
26.03.04	St Ives, Cornwall	Harp seal	Hauled on public beach, monitored by BDMLR until it left of its own accord.
15.08.14	St Ives, Cornwall	Hooded seal	Washed into a crevice and died. Recovered for necropsy (blubber abscesses, septicaemia).
03.09.16	Plymouth, Devon	Ringed seal	Taken for rehabilitation at Cornish Seal Sanctuary. Died. Taken for necropsy (gastric dilation, possible torsion).
19.05.21	Trevose Head, Cornwall	Walrus (Wally)	Public sighting. Swimming along the coast.
17.06.21 – 30.07.21	Isles of Scilly, Cornwall	Walrus (Wally)	Resided in area for six weeks, required a lot of management by BDMLR, SRT, CSS and others.
11.12.22	Calshot, Hampshire	Walrus (Thor)	Hauled on public beach, monitored by BDMLR until it left of its own accord.
24.07.24 – 28.07.24	Hayle, Cornwall	Ringed seal	Monitored by BDMLR. Had seizure and died. Recovered for necropsy (acute neuronal necrosis of unknown origin).
06.09.24	Falmouth, Cornwall	Hooded seal	Public sighting. Hauled out in a dinghy, left of its own accord.

Discussion.

The large majority of reports come from the far north of the country and along the North Sea coast, which is more likely given they are geographically closer to the areas these animals are thought to originate from. Even Scotland shows significant disparity between its east and west coasts, so that south west England in particular stands out as a hotspot location. One eighth of all, and over half of west, UK records of non-native pinnipeds occur in the relatively small region of south west England. It is also noteworthy that over 50% of records in this region of the UK have occurred in the last decade, evidencing the recent increase that links with climate change impact concerns (Nunny et al, 2025).

This hotspot effect is unlikely to be due to higher observer effort, as the vast majority of records are opportunistic public sightings or animals potentially in distress reported to welfare response organisations. Although the Seal Research Trust and other organisations carry out regular surveys of haul out sites across south west England and Wales, only one record has been obtained from dedicated survey work. This would suggest that south west England receives more visitations than would be expected, as coverage across the other regions is relatively consistent for sightings and strandings networks. Therefore, other unknown factors appear to be involved in their occurrence here.

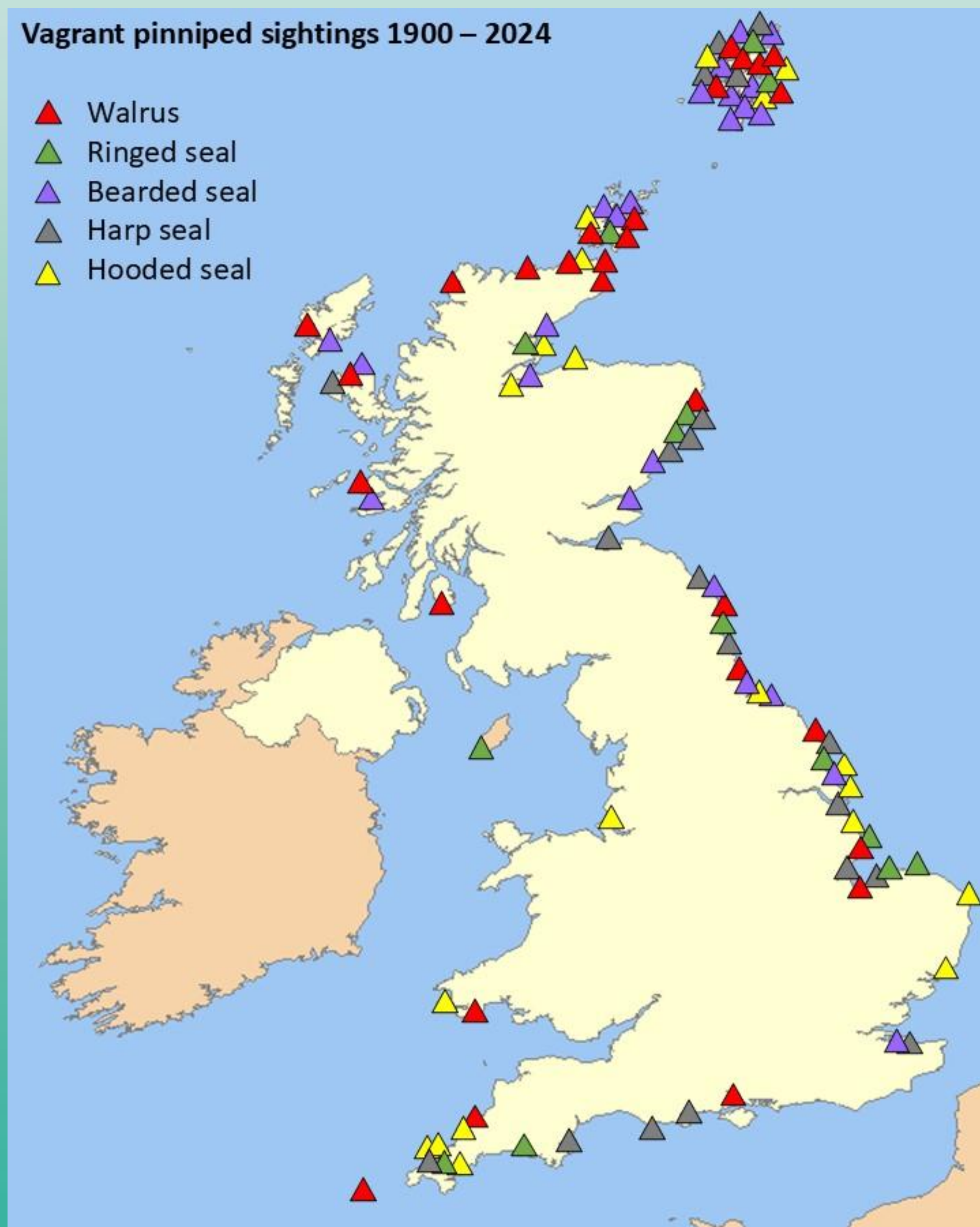
Conclusions.

As reports increase due to climate change, there needs to be more emphasis on providing resources and strategies to manage these animals amongst conservation organisations to better serve their welfare, including public education on the causes of and consequences for wildlife climate refugees. Prepared information, management plans and protocols for rescue, rehabilitation and release should be considered to help streamline processes and understanding with statutory bodies who may be involved with these situations too.

Collaborative global mitigation strategies for climate change and its effects are called for. As sea ice continues to be lost, more displaced refugees may seek out new habitats further south in Europe and elsewhere, bringing them into more contact, and perhaps conflict, with humans. Solutions such as providing artificial habitat opportunities should be carefully considered and implemented where viable to help conserve these species in their home range, to assist pioneer populations to re-establish themselves for the future.

References.

G. B. Corbett, S. Harris (1991) *The Handbook of British Mammals* (3rd edition). Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford.
 Nunny, L., Bossley, M., Boys, R., Brakes, P., Genov, T., Parsons, E.C.M., Peters, K., Rose, N., Simeone, C., Stockin, K., Vail, C., van der Linde, K., Visser, I., Simmonds, M. (2025) *Out of habitat marine mammals – identification, causes and management recommendations*. *Marine Policy* 177: 106652.



Species	UK	SW Eng
Harp seal	20	4
Hooded seal	20	4
Ringed seal	13	2
Bearded seal	24	0
Walrus	27	3

Table 1: non-native species records for the UK and south west England.

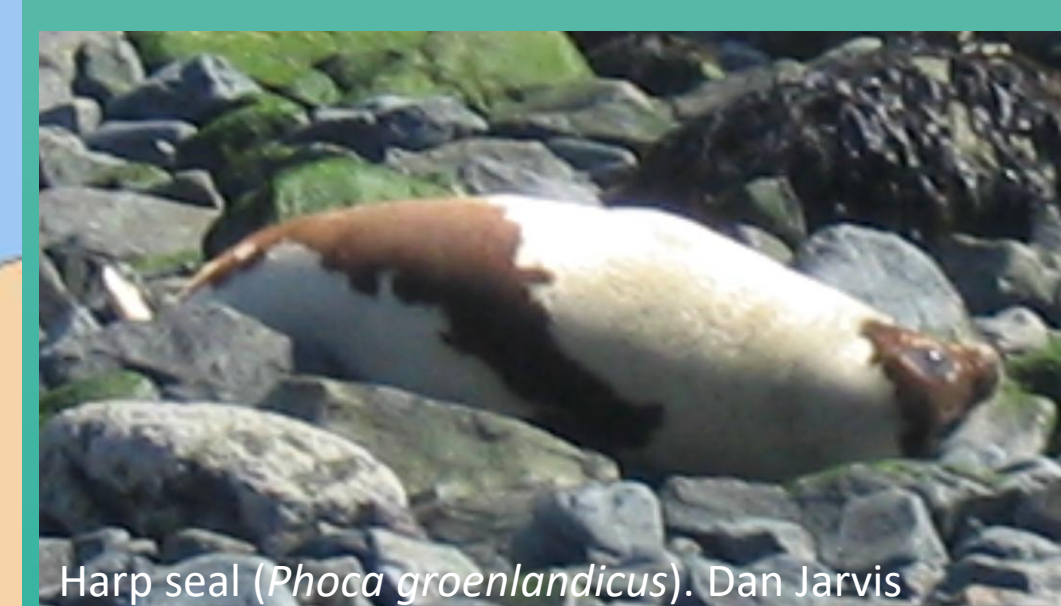


Figure 1: map of non-native UK pinniped records 1900 – 2024. Other UK records sources from social media, RSPCA, SSPCA, Skegness Seal Sanctuary, Hillswick Seal Sanctuary and Orkney Seal Rescue.

