



2024 annual report

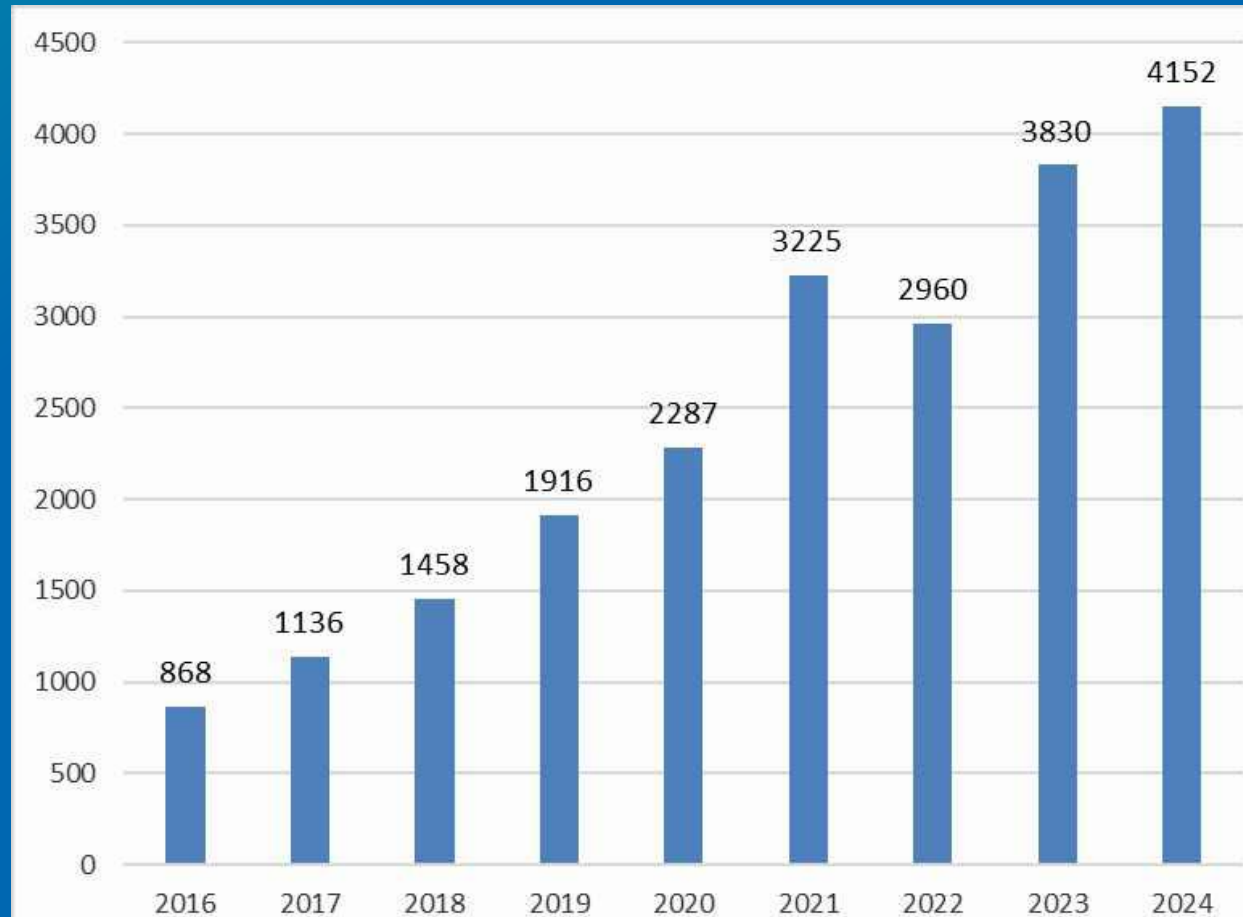


Calls: annual

Note: these data represent the raw number of calls received to the hotline.

2024 showed more of a gradual increase in comparison to 2023, with annual calls still reaching record breaking highs, surpassing 4000 call-outs. As per previous years, extreme weather conditions contributed towards an increase in grey seal and cetacean callouts, whilst mouth rot continued to be a strain on the common seal population. Human disturbance too remains to be a significant factor year on year.

- 2016 = 868 calls
- 2017 = 31% higher
- 2018 = 28% higher
- 2019 = 31% higher
- 2020 = 19% higher
- 2021 = 41% higher
- 2022 = 8% lower
- 2023 = 29% higher
- 2024 = 8% higher

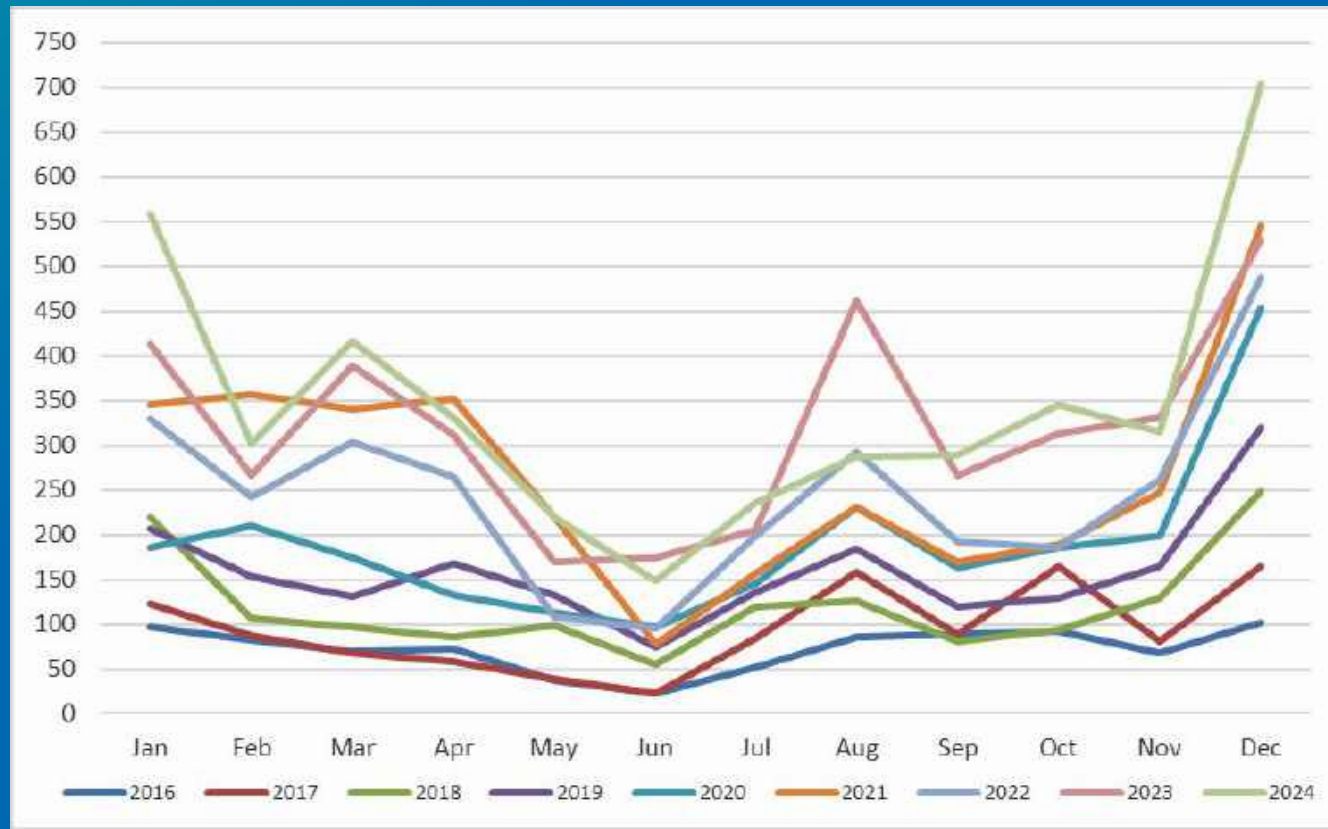




Calls: monthly

This chart is largely influenced by the seal pup rescue seasons (common seals primarily July to September, grey seals primarily September to May). January, March, June, July, August, September, October and November all set new total call records for their respective months.

We saw similar numbers in common seals as seen in 2023, with numbers stabilising in August 2024 after a significant peak the year before. For the first time calls also surpassed 700 in December, mostly consisting of grey seals.





Calls: ongoing trends

Generally, the rise in calls can largely be attributed to:

- **Increasing awareness of BDMLR**

- Greater online visibility and access
- Increasing media interest, especially with climate change and pollution
- Local awareness-raising efforts of BDMLR volunteers and colleagues

- **Changing human population and activity**

- Increasing human population
- Increasing year-round tourism
- Greater uptake of outdoor activities e.g.: SUPs, kayaks, coasteering, walking
- All of the above resulting in more wildlife disturbance incidents and causing casualties, and more potential casualties being found and reported

- **Climate change**

- More frequent severe storms/extreme weather events in Autumn and Winter
- Growing evidence for increased grey seal pup mortality, lower reproductive success and shift in timing of the pupping season
- Redistribution/expansion of wildlife populations

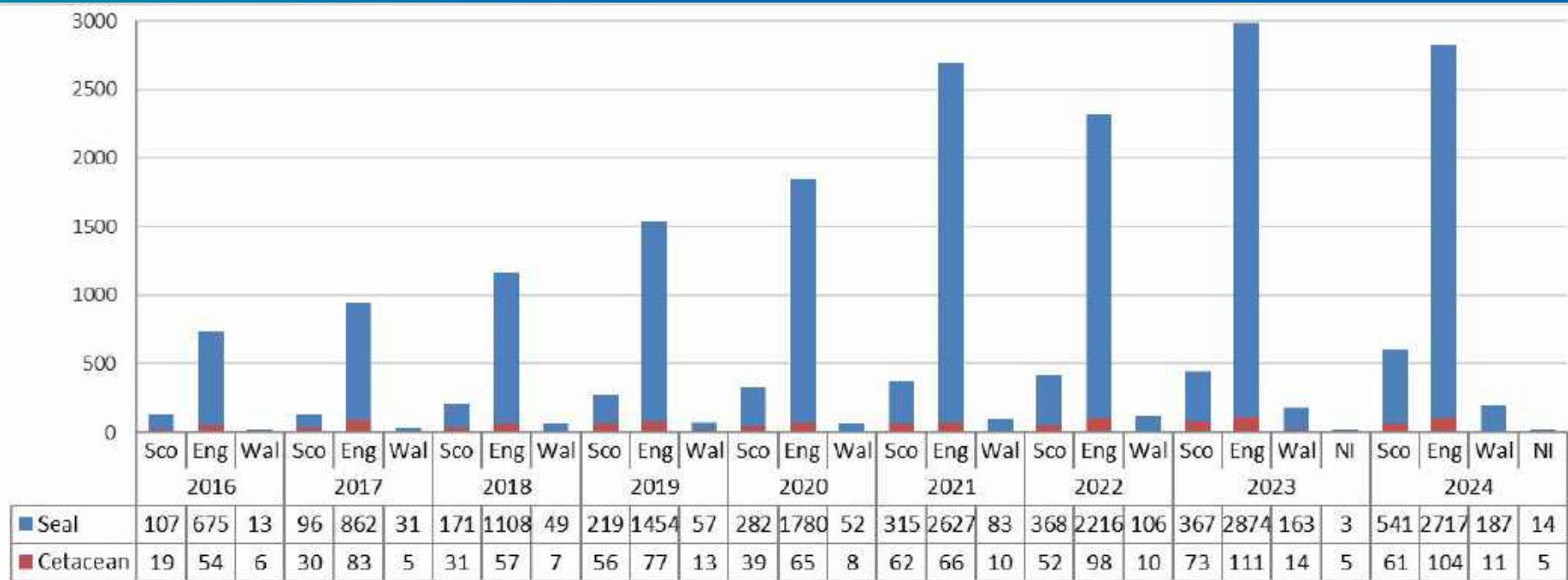
- **Health in the East coast common seal population**

- Severe 'mouth rot' infection in weaned pups over the last several years causing higher mortality



Calls: countries

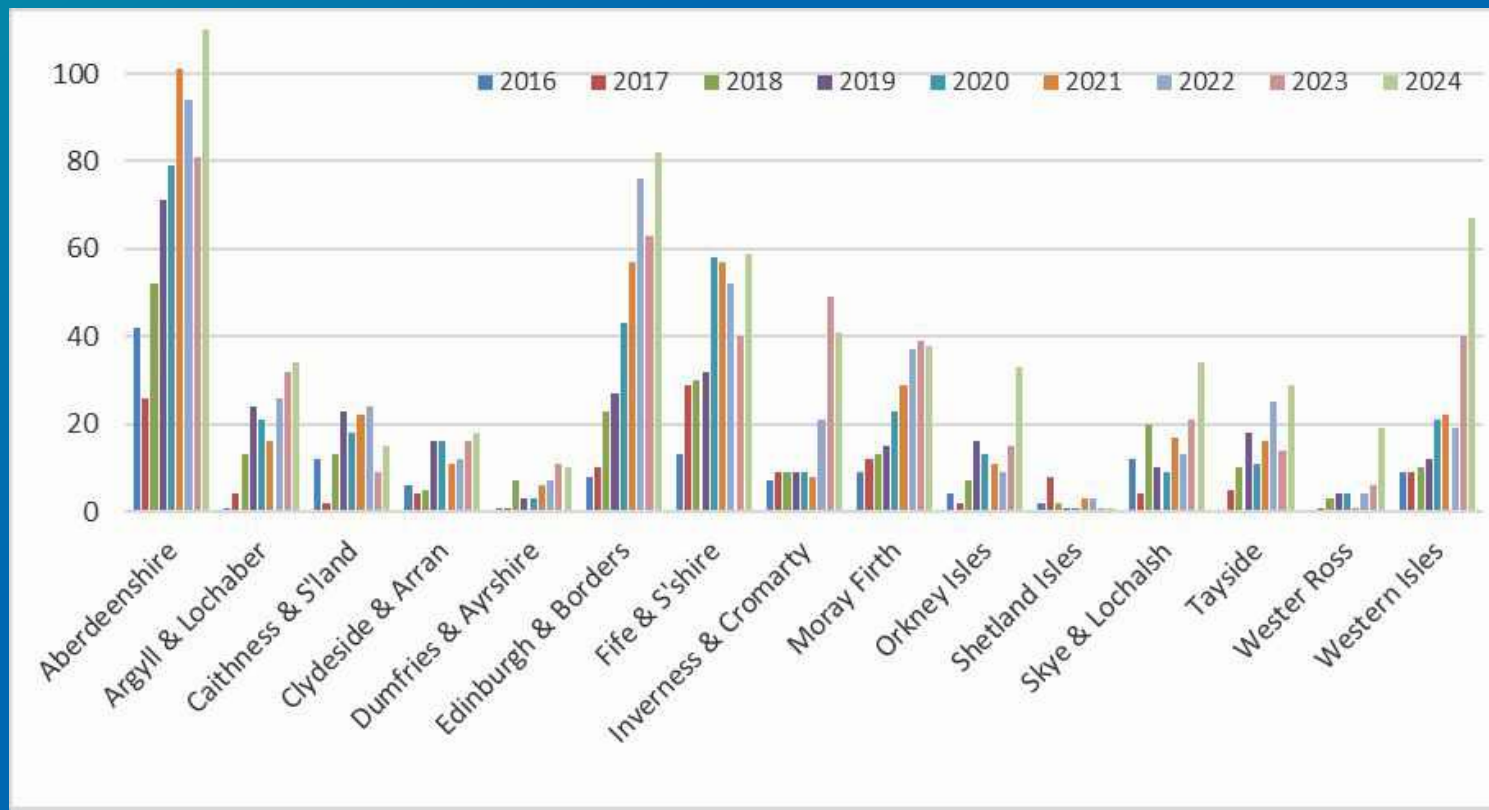
Broken down by country and species groups, England continues to have a very high proportion of the seal calls. Scotland saw a significant increase in seal calls with a slight reduction in cetacean reports, though Scotland still remains to have the highest proportion of cetacean call-outs in comparison to seals. The proportions between the species groups in Wales remains to maintain a similar statistic, and Northern Ireland, though calls are relatively low has seen more than double in seal calls.





Calls: Scotland

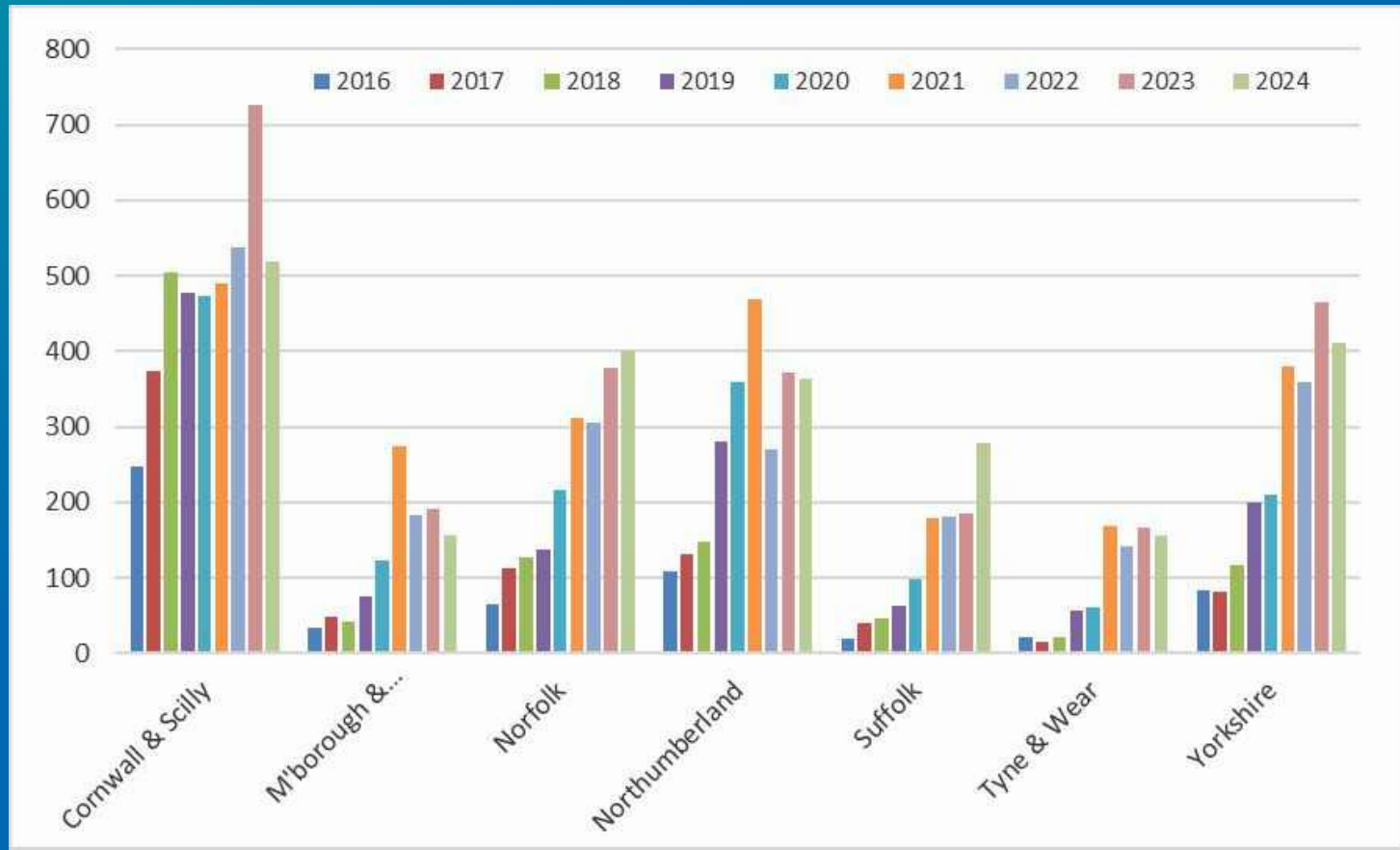
In 2024, a number of regions saw their highest volume of calls yet. Aberdeenshire remains the busiest region in Scotland with calls exceeding that which was seen in previous years, whilst Inverness & Cromarty saw a decline after the areas highest peak in 2023. The Orkney Isles saw a significant increase which may be due to greater public awareness following the mass pilot whale stranding in July. Additionally, the Western Isles saw a large increase for the second year running, though causes unknown, it could be the result of climatic changes and an increase in storm occurrences.





Calls: England

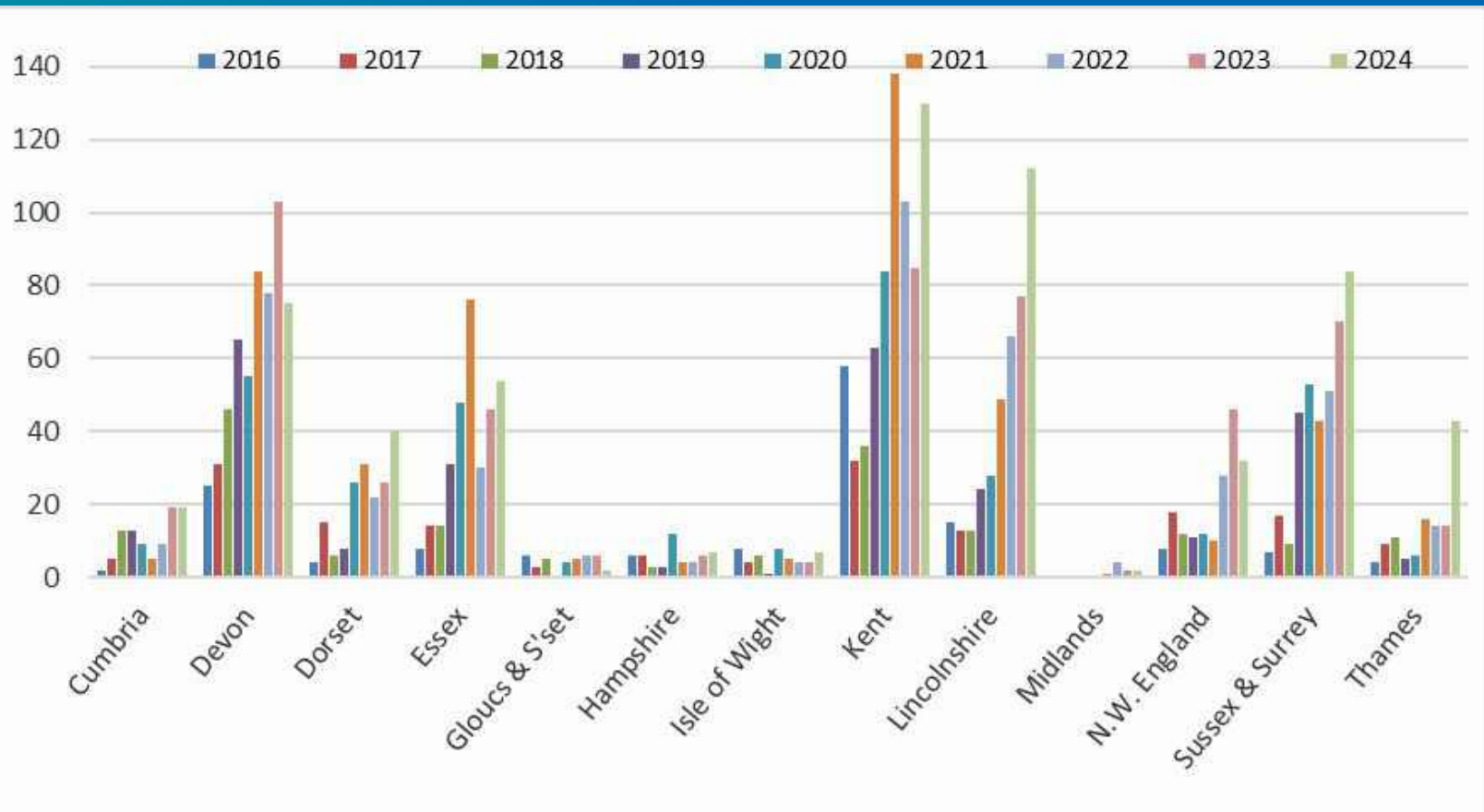
Cornwall and Scilly saw its first decline in recent years after reaching record highs in 2023, in addition to some of the other busiest regions in England such as Yorkshire. There was however an exception for Norfolk and Suffolk which both continued to see an increase in the number of reports, again possibly influenced by increases in both human and seal population numbers, as well as greater public awareness and a growth in the tourism industry.





Calls: England

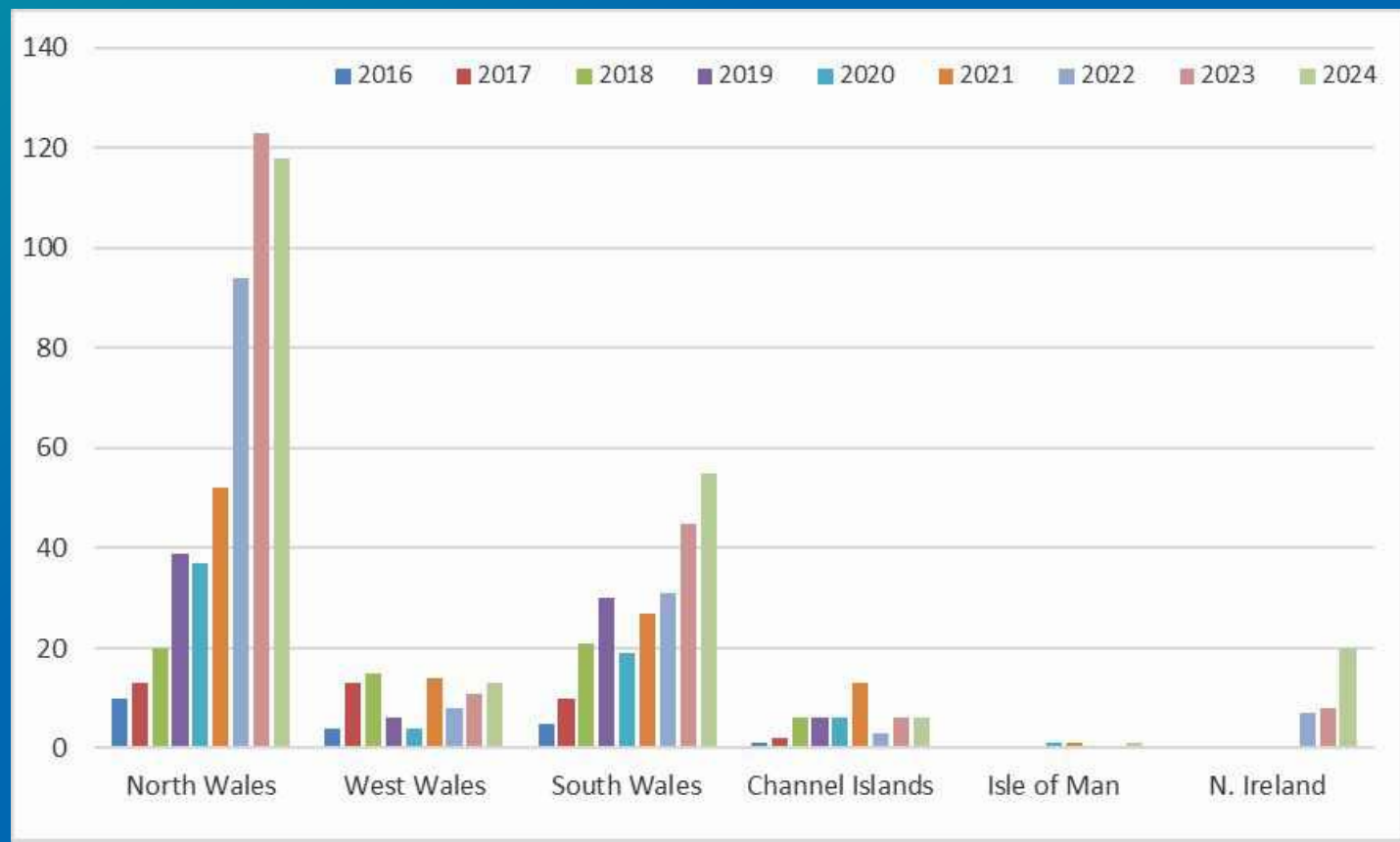
Though remaining to receive the most call-outs in the UK, many regions in England saw a decline after peaking in 2023, particularly those down the west coast. Whilst other regions such as Lincolnshire and the Thames saw a significant increase. Possible reasons including a change in species distribution due to human disturbance, changes in fish migration, as well as seal colony activity.





Calls: Wales, N. Ireland and Islands

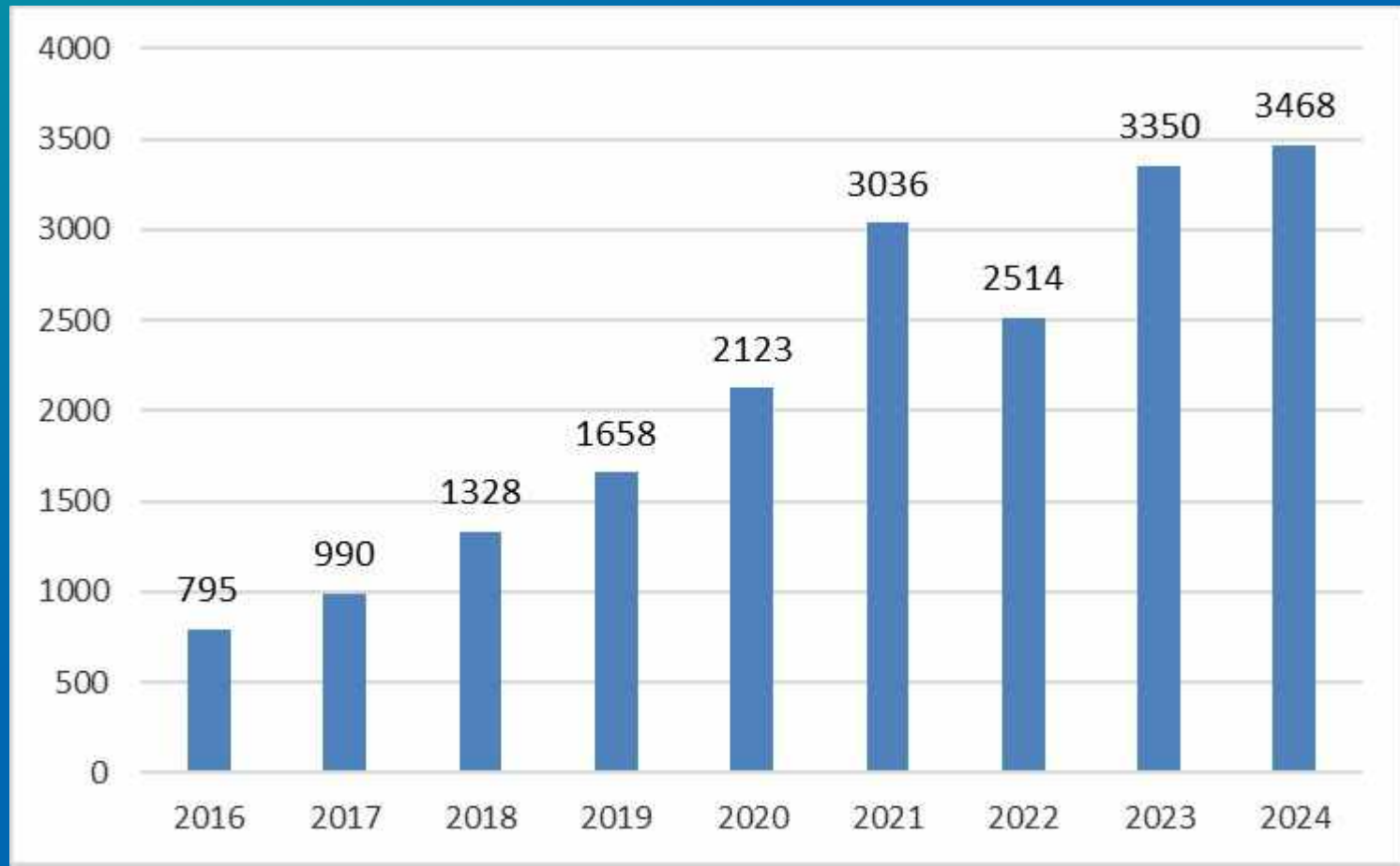
North Wales also saw its first decline in recent years which was minor, with West and South Wales continuing to show gradual increases. Northern Ireland has seen it's largest incline in the number of reports made to date. This is likely due to greater public awareness as a result of an increase in BDMLR presence including more Medics and further public engagement. Efforts are also still in the works to appoint our first Area Coordinator for the region which will also support BDMLR's growth throughout Northern Ireland.





Calls: pinnipeds by year

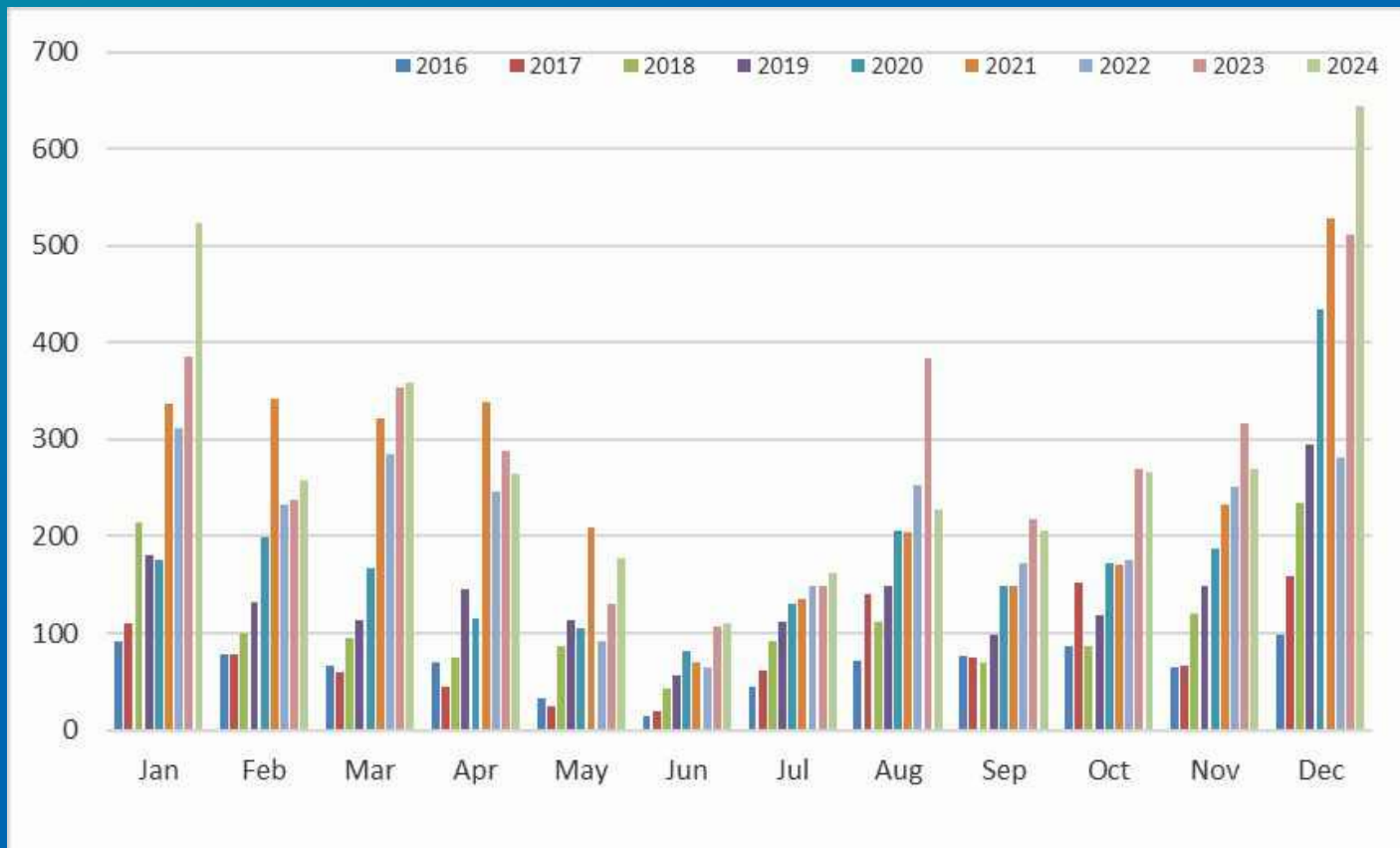
Overall the number of seal calls continued to grow to new highs, with changes in species abundance and distribution across the UK. As previously mentioned, there are a variety of contributing factors, including storms, particularly during December. Additionally there was a huge peak in grey seals in December across the country this year too.





Calls: pinnipeds by month

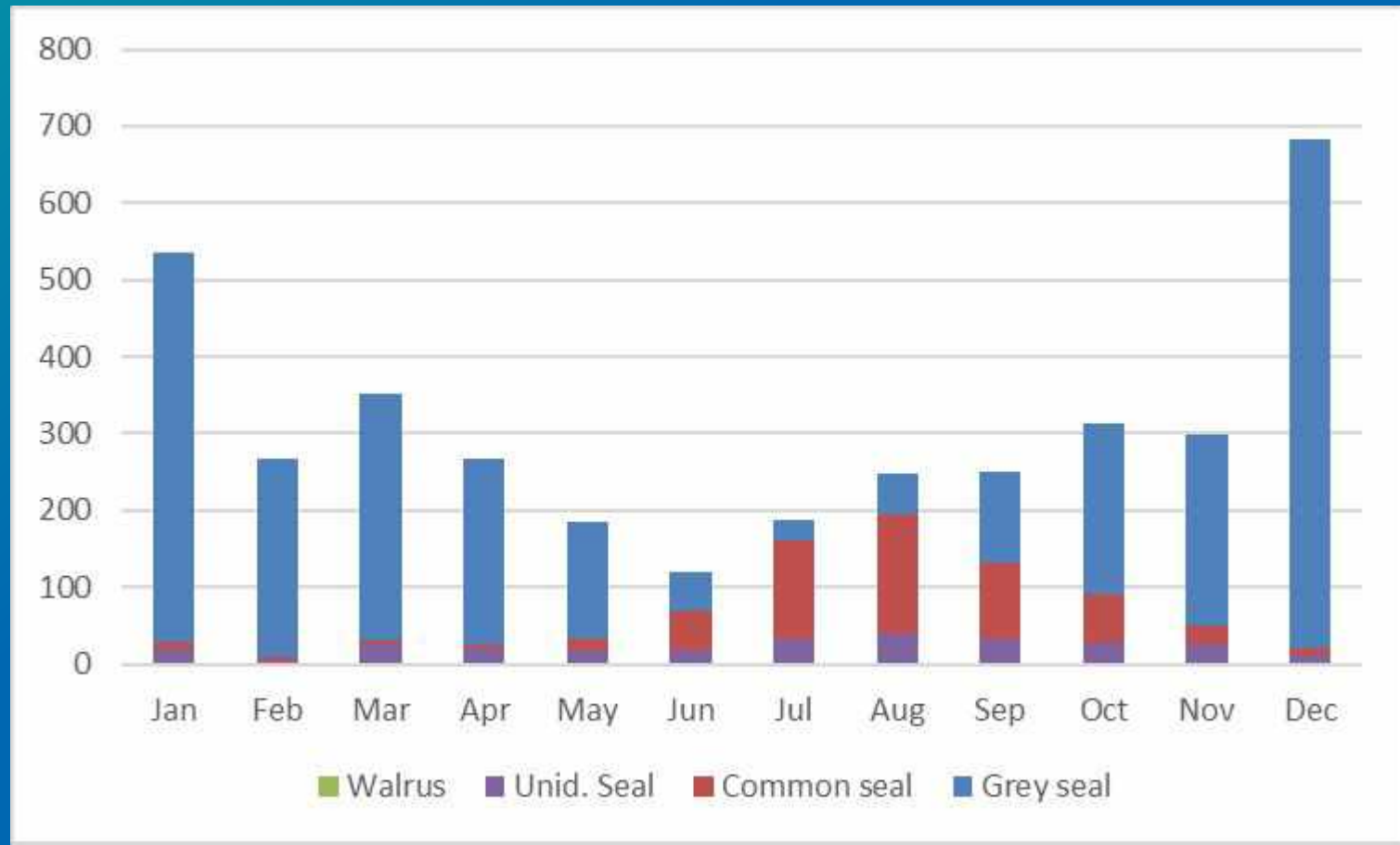
Like previous years, the large majority of calls were made up by seals, reaching 3468 over the course of 2024. Almost a quarter (20%) of these calls were made in December, during the peak of the grey pupping season. We also saw the number of calls surpassing 500 during January, which also consisted of mostly seals. Though we saw a significant decline in common seals during the month of August, which could have been the result of an increase in mouth rot call-outs the year prior (2023), common seal numbers continue to remain steady for the other months.





Calls: pinnipeds by species

As is typical for this chart, the switch between the long grey seal season and short common seal season is clear. Aside from the high total volume of calls and reasons why that have already been discussed, there is nothing that particularly stands out for 2024 as being unusual.

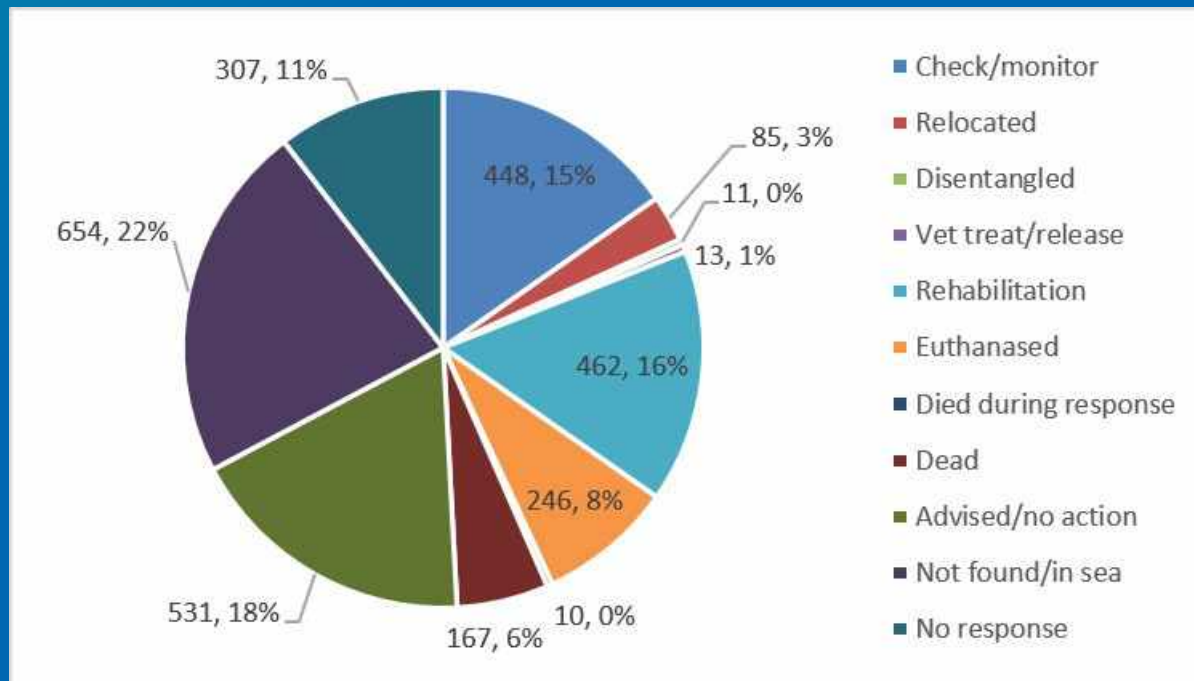




Calls: overall pinnipeds by outcome

Overall, a total of 83% of seals reported to our hotline were attended to; 15% were checked and monitored, this is 8% lower than that of 2023, unfortunately this is likely due to there being greater numbers of seals needing euthanasia (8%) for reasons including injuries associated with storm trauma and even more heavily mouth rot as well as more seals needing rehabilitation (16%). A further 18% was for incidents which required no action apart from advice being given to the caller.

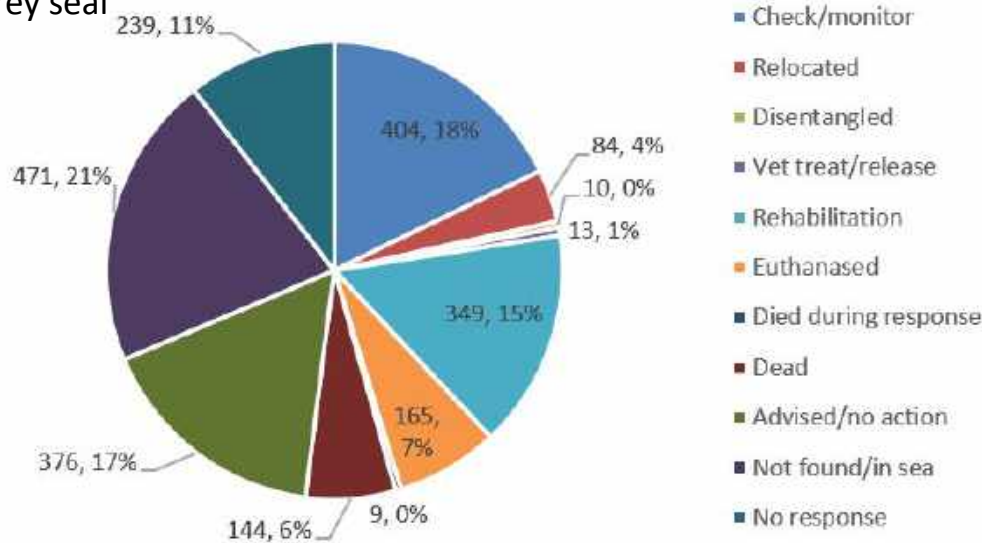
There were similar numbers amongst relocated and disentanglement outcomes as recorded in 2023. Like previous years, the number of seals picked up and released post assessment/treatment has continued, likely due to further improvement and development in beach triage.





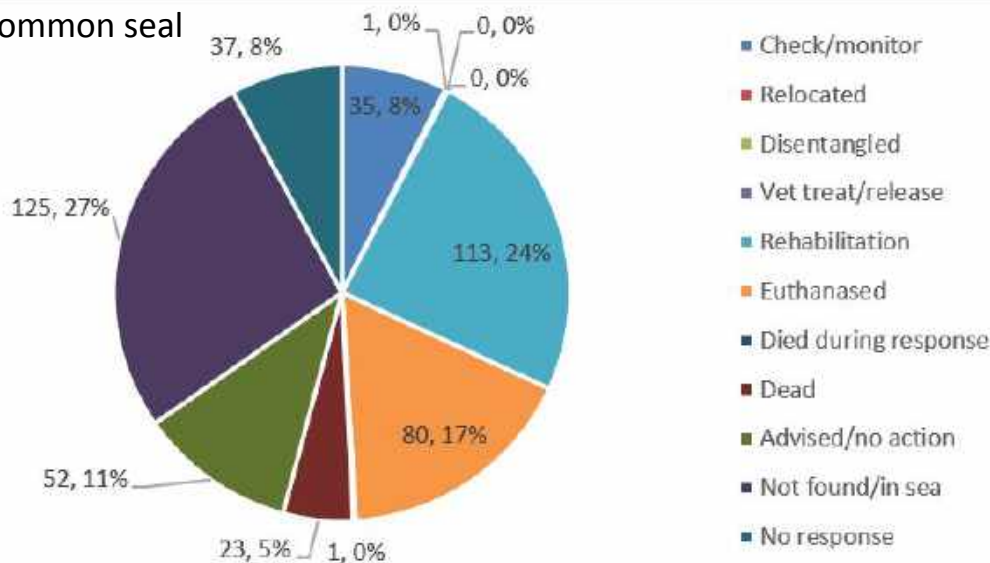
Calls: pinniped species by outcome

Grey seal



For grey seals, the number of animals checked and monitored was down by 8%, this is suspected to be the result of an increase in those picked up for rehab and those euthanised. Incidents where advice was given showed a slight increase and those which returned to the water were similar to 2023 and made up the remaining larger portion of calls. Disentanglement cases were also down slightly.

Common seal



Commons too showed various similarities to 2023 including almost identical numbers to those which were picked up for rehab and incidents where advice was given. A decline in those which were checked and monitored was observed, likely as the result of a 6% increase in pups which required euthanising due to the mouth rot infection.



Calls: pinnipeds summary

Capacity in rehabilitation centres for seals nationally continues to be a major issue as demand is outstripping supply. Four centres have closed in the last ten years and only two have opened. This has forced us to place more onus on in situ monitoring and short-term holding as a result, but this isn't the final or best solution. More full rehabilitation facilities are, especially as increasing callouts are largely due to human factors.

Work continues to address this situation in the background, with the opening of a new temporary holding facility in the Northumberland region where demand is at its greatest. The North-East Seal Triage unit is to act as a supporting resource to full rehabilitation centres where seal pups can be held for a few days and receive treatment and care to begin their rehabilitation journey. Depending on the success of the new unit could lead to further temporary units being constructed around the UK in regions where they are most needed.

Concerns grow as development plans have been announced for Hesselhead Wildlife Rescue Centre, meaning that they will no longer be able to accept seals whilst the work is underway. This means that the closest rehabilitation centres would be SSPCA Fishcross which only accept seals from Scotland and RSPCA Stapeley Grange which is still a few hours away from Northumberland and Tyne and Wear.



Cornwall Seal Hospital

In the calendar year of 2024 the Cornwall Seal Hospital admitted 75 grey seal pups for care. As mentioned elsewhere, the rescue season in South West England was particularly severe from September to December due to frequent or prolonged periods of rough conditions and storms, which contributed to the high number of admissions.

Zoe Satsias, who had joined for the 2023/24 season, returned for the 2024/25 season in the relief veterinarian role to support Natalie and Dan. There are over 65 volunteers from around Cornwall and Devon who form the core team operating in the hospital with a further 30 placements organised for other Medics and veterinary professionals from around the UK to come in and learn more skills and gain confidence in their abilities.

One more pair of veterinary student externships were hosted in 2024. The opportunity is open for fourth or fifth year students who will be given a lot of hands on time with the animals, learning veterinary procedures and assessments, but also rounding out the experience with opportunities to assist with a post mortem examination with Cornwall Marine Pathology Team, attend a seal survey with the Seal Research Trust and a cetacean survey with Cornwall Wildlife Trust to help them gain an understanding of wild population dynamics, behaviours, habitats, threats and conservation measures.



Mobile Seal Rescue Unit

44 seal pups (17 common, 27 grey) were admitted to the MSRU in the calendar year of 2024, which is a record by some margin and demonstrates again the need for such a facility in this region. The unit is generously funded by Andy Ottaway from the Seal Protection Action Group. Seals can be held here temporarily for a few nights until they can be moved on to rehabilitation or released again if deemed fit enough.

The unit continues to work very well as a support resource for full rehabilitation centres thanks to our dedicated volunteers, where pups will receive initial care and treatment. Plans for potential expansion in the future could a priority once the Northumberland unit is up and running and has proven to work effectively.





Temporary holding units

Yorkshire: Em Mayman and Chris Cook admitted 54 seals (5 common, 49 grey).

Northumberland: Jane Hardy; Robson and Prescott Vets; Morris and Plumley Vets units combined admitted 30 seals (5 common, 25 grey).

Moray: Boonie admitted 7 seals (3 common, 4 grey)

Inverness: Dave McDonald admitted 14 seals (9 common, 5 grey)

Kent: Jez and Sheila Stone admitted 33 seals (7 common, 26 grey).

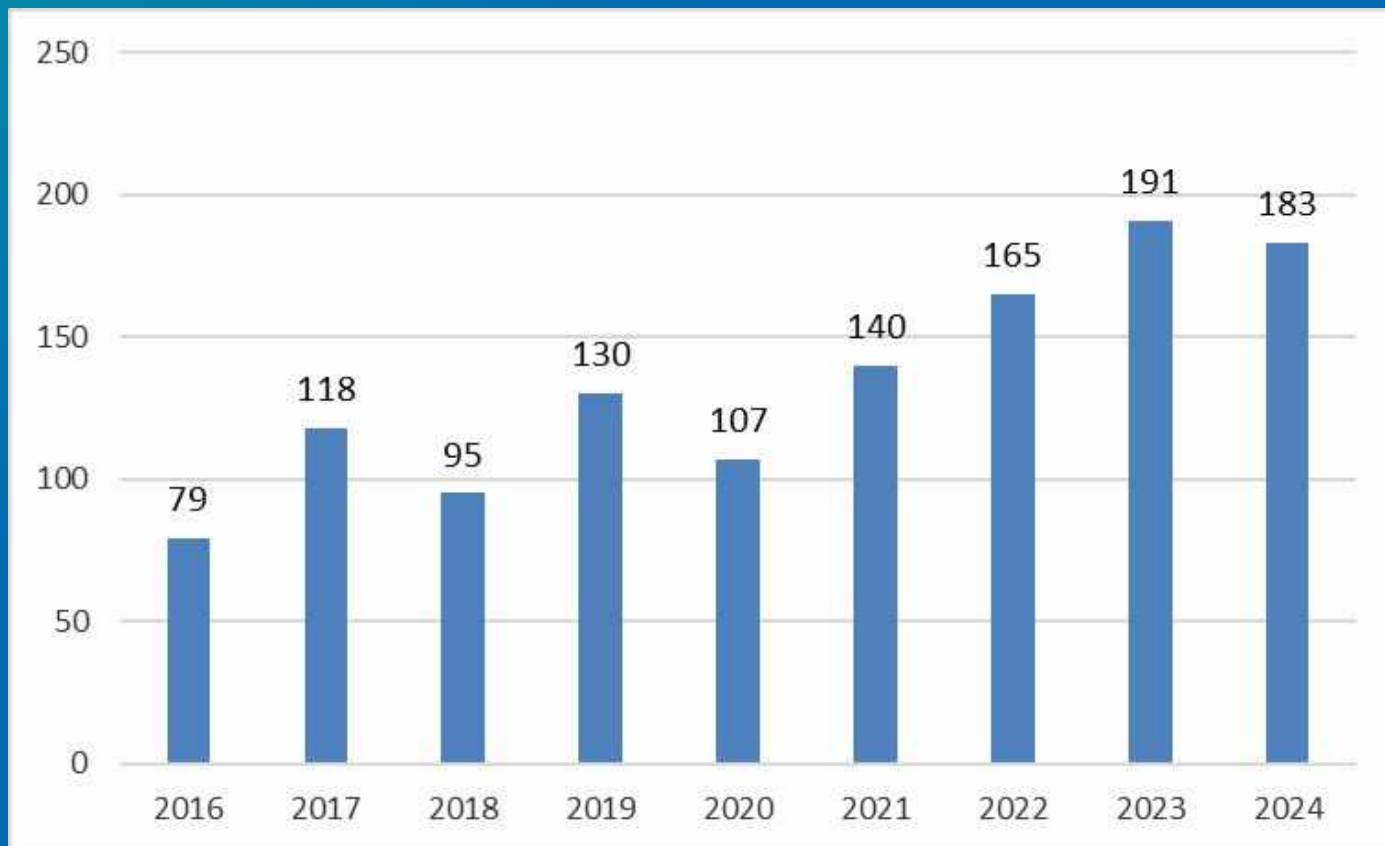
These are the only temporary holding units operated by BDMLR volunteers with specialist training and facilities to do so, who are all evidently doing an incredible job. Otherwise we generally make use of key experienced veterinary surgeries and a handful of other external centres (e.g.: Kendal College) to hold pups until we can move them to full rehabilitation centres, so the overall numbers of seals held temporarily is higher than illustrated here.

The number of animals passing through our temporary holding units alone is strong evidence for the need for more full rehabilitation facilities in parts of the country due to volume of casualties and/or distance from the nearest available centre.



Calls: cetaceans by year

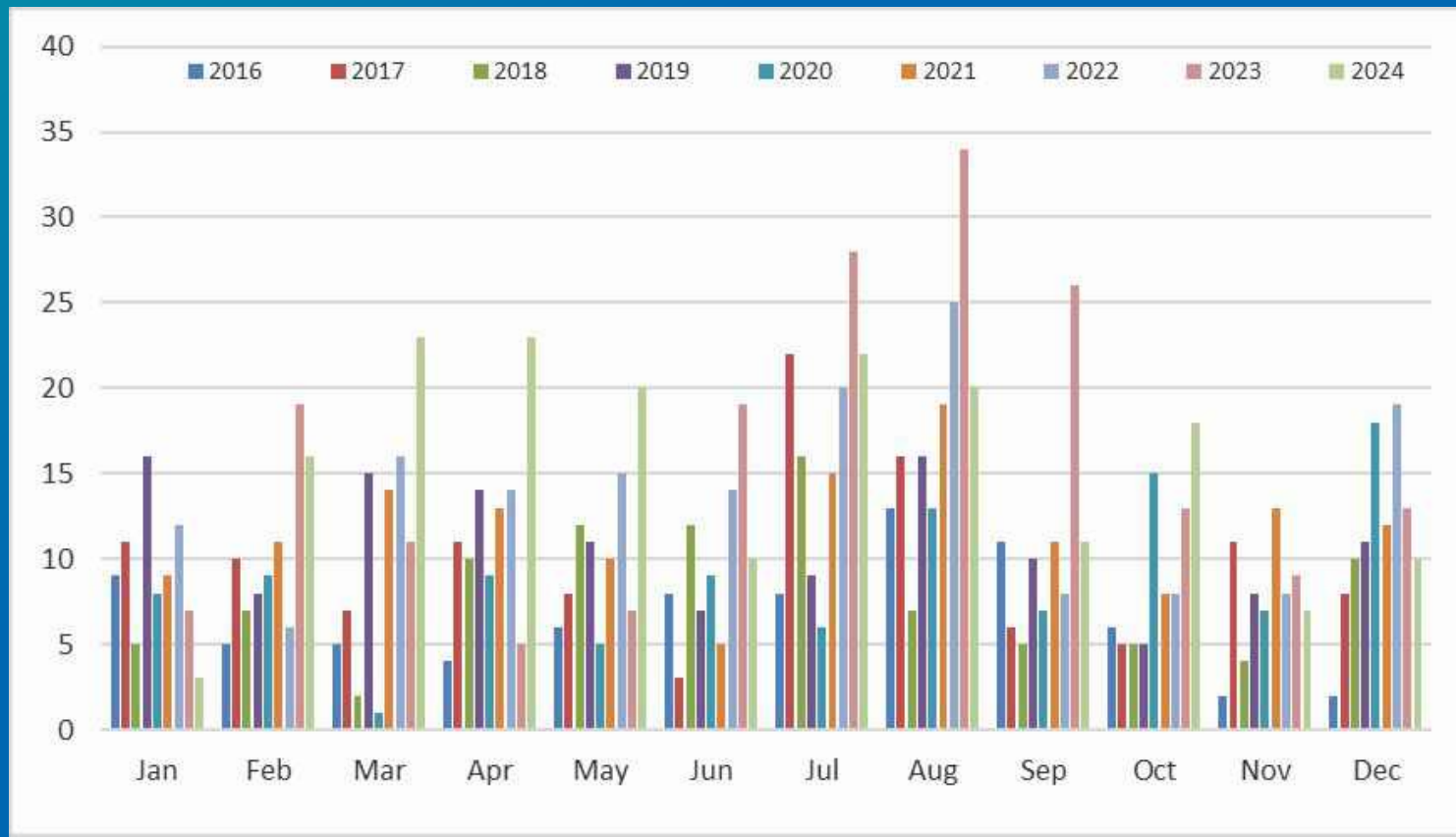
Annual calls for cetaceans experienced their first decline in recent years. Despite this, we are still seeing a significant number of strandings where members of the public are attempting to refloat the animal themselves and a variety disturbance cases from vessel activity. This highlights the need for continued advancements on raising awareness on how best to behave around cetaceans and as stated in The WiSe Scheme.





Calls: cetaceans by month

Monthly reports in recent years have shown an increase in the months of June, July and August. This appears to have changed in 2024 as although reports still remain high for those months, March, April and May have seen a significant growth whilst the June, July August months have shown a decline. There is not enough data to date that can be used to confidently suggest a shift in temporal abundance, but if trends continue this could be a possible reality for certain species.

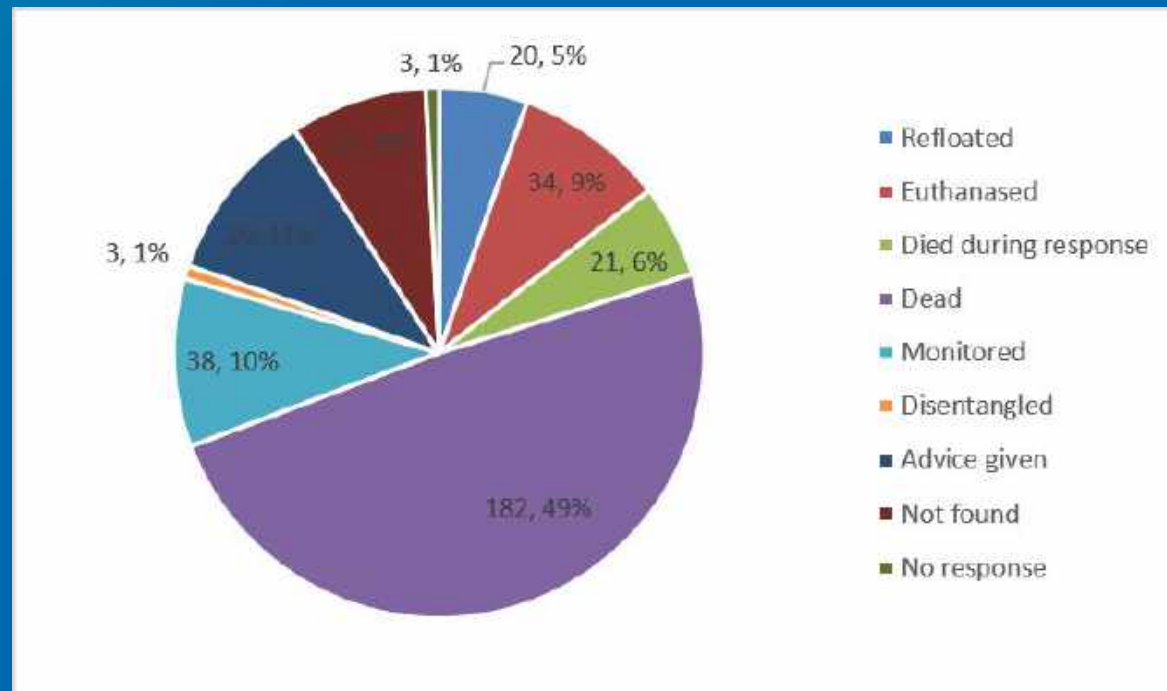


[illegible]



Calls: overall cetaceans by outcome

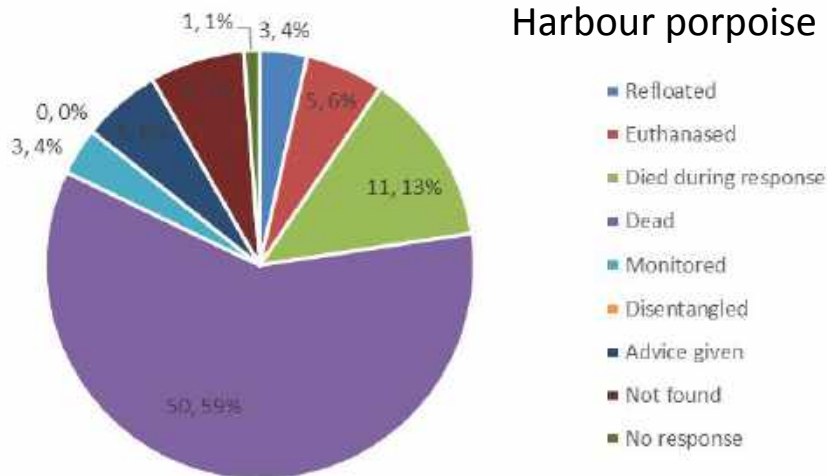
This chart depicts the outcomes of all individual animals recorded across all incidents. A tenth of cetacean reports resulted in monitoring of the animal(s) where they may have been in an area of concern but eventually reached safe waters without intervention - this was more than 50% less than the year before, likely as there was a combination of less cetaceans but more that were in need of help when reported. There was a continued increase in the number of animals which were deceased, this was, like the year before, largely skewed as a result of the pilot whale mass stranding on Orkney which involved 77 animals. This was a mass casualty incident where the majority of animals had passed prior to Medics arriving on site. This incident too skewed our data on successful refloats (decreased), animals which died during response (deceased) and those euthanised (Increased).





Calls: overall cetaceans by outcome

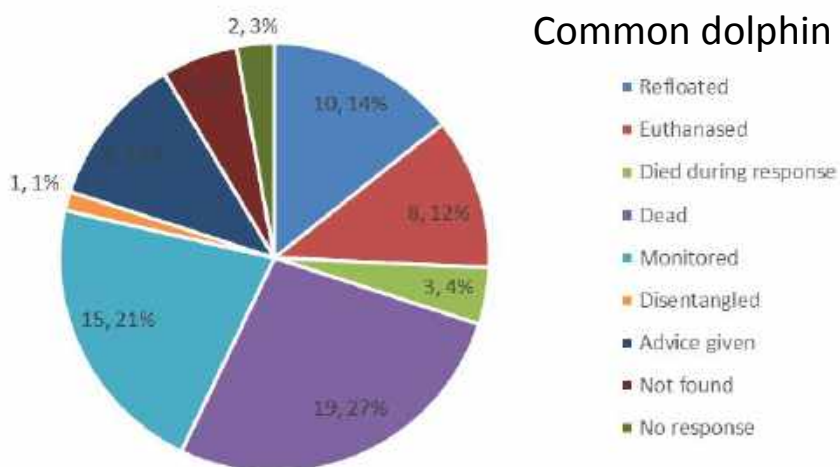
Harbour porpoise



Species outcome data remains to be only prevalent enough for harbour porpoises and common dolphins to be looked at individually.

Harbour porpoise refloats are slightly lower than 2023 with those euthanised remaining the same. A large portion of outcomes included the animal passing during our response. This tends to be the case with harbour porpoises due to their sensitive nature and high stress levels, even with first aid measures in place.

Common dolphin



Common dolphin refloats were also lower, in addition to less animals being monitored and less being euthanised. These outcomes are expected as we had less common dolphin incidents overall in 2024 compared to 2023. The number of animals which died during response continues to decline, again reflecting improved triage and response time.



Calls: cetaceans summary

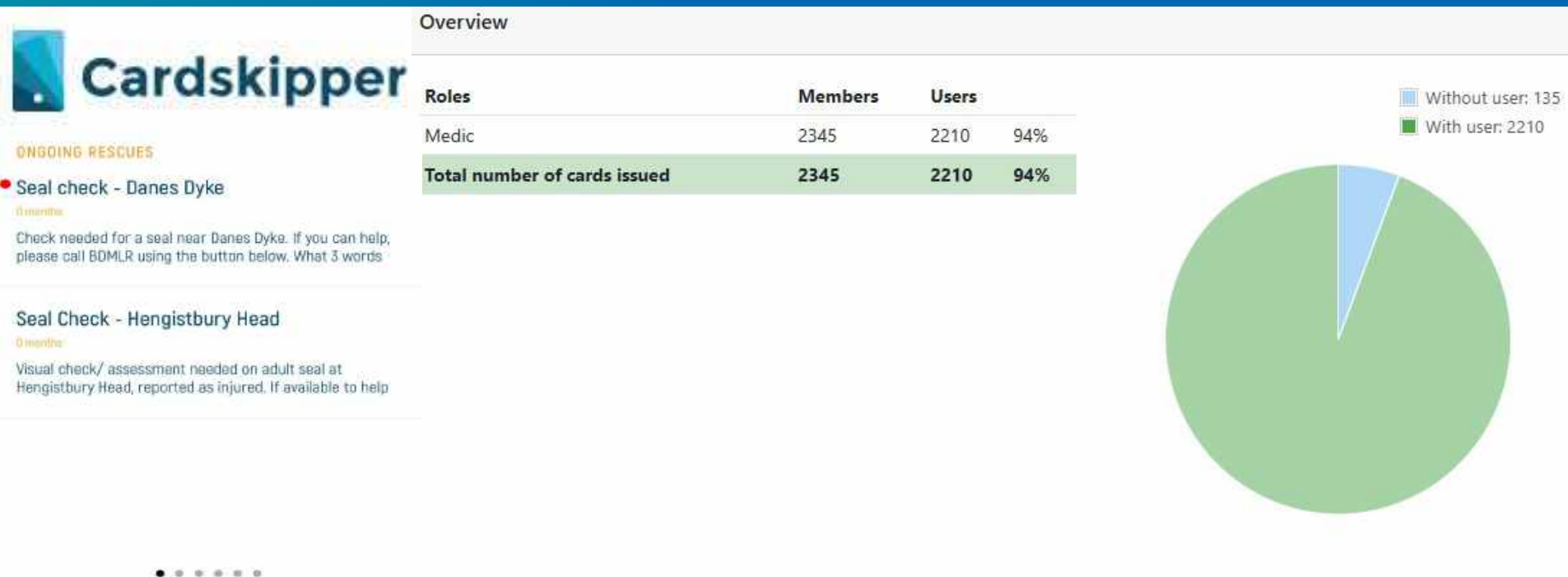
Harbour porpoises were the most reported cetacean in 2024. This could be due to a combination of influencing characteristics such as spatial distribution, susceptibility to disease and being more prone to injury in extreme weather conditions which we have been seeing increasing amounts of through the UK. As mentioned in previous slides, the temporal abundance of both species (particularly harbour porpoises) appears to be shifting as reflected in 2024 compared to other years, increasing the probability of stranding during those months.





Operations: Cardskipper

After months of hard work by Molly and Gavin, Cardskipper was finally launched during 2024. This transition was in response to the financial demand that came with the previous SMS system Clicksend. To date Cardskipper has had fantastic feedback from both staff and volunteers as it acts as a central hub where Medics can access vital information in a simplistic and time efficient manner. The software also allows for additional detail to be added onto each alert, providing Medics with more initial information about a rescue prior to calling in and speaking with the Rescue Coordinator. Cardskipper also contains other beneficial components such as a Medics ID, making it more sustainable then the physical, laminated copies which would be printed for each volunteer. We look forward to further exploring Cardskippers capabilities as it continues to improve our communication and rescue response across the UK.





Training

We aim to run around 30 – 40 Marine Mammal Medic courses annually (37 in 2019; 21 in 2020; 43 in 2021; 39 in 2022; 46 in 2023) to maintain a relatively consistent and reliable funding stream for the charity. In 2024 we ran 28 MMM courses, a lower number than usual but with greater numbers of attendees in each. This proved to be more financially viable and also reduced pressure on the limited number of instructors as well as staff time, which was an issue in 2023. Our waiting list remains substantial and with past experiences in trialling different approaches to MMM course organisation, we aim to maintain course attendee numbers but also increase the number of courses slightly which will hopefully act as a good middle ground.





Training

Two Mass Stranding Exercises were held in 2024, including the first ever one for Wales that was open for all Medics in that country, followed by another at Ullapool in North West Scotland open to those in Wester Ross, Argyll and Lochaber and the Western Isles.

The map below shows the locations of all MSEs held since 2017, giving an idea of coverage and noting the change in format starting in 2023 of holding them annually and concentrating on neighbouring regions working together. Future MSEs in Scotland will continue to rotate clockwise, whilst in the rest of the UK work continues to fill some gaps.



MSE locations map.

1. 2017: Mablethorpe, Lincolnshire (national)
2. 2017: Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire (national)
3. 2019: Swanage, Dorset (S, SW England, Midlands)
4. 2019: Musselburgh, Lothians (SE Scotland, NE England)
5. 2023: Herne Bay, Kent (SE England, East Anglia)
6. 2023: Sizewell, Suffolk (East Anglia, Midlands)
7. 2023: Largs, Ayrshire (SW Scotland, Western Isles)
8. 2023: Jersey, Channel Islands (CI)
9. 2024: Aberystwyth, Ceredigion (Wales, Midlands)
10. 2024: Ullapool, Wester Ross (NW Scotland)





North-East Seal Triage unit

In the winter of 2024 BDMLR opened the new North-East Seal Triage (NEST) unit, a temporary facility designed to support full rehabilitation centres by reducing the pressure which they face year on year as seal pup casualties grow. The NEST unit was made possible thanks to the collaborative effort of Robson & Prescott Vets, a vet practice which BDMLR have worked closely with over the years. It also would not have been possible without the incredible support of the Joanna Toole Foundation who provided significant financial aid. To date, the unit has already welcomed its first seal pups through the doors. We would like to say a huge thank you to Robson & Prescott Vets, the Joanna Toole Foundation, the local community and our amazing Marine Mammal Medics who volunteer at the unit and who without, it would not function. The support and effort from all involved have already begun to provide vulnerable seal pups with a second chance at living a healthy life.





Large Whale Disentanglement Team

The Large Whale Disentanglement Team continue to improve their skill sets and experience of members with regular training sessions throughout the year.....

In November, the Large Whale Disentanglement Team attended reports of a humpback whale entangled in anchored creel lines in Loch Fyne, Argyll and Lochaber. Available members of the team mobilised in the early hours of Tuesday 5 November and, thanks to excellent information from the first informants, were able to locate the whale quickly and assess the entanglement using 360 cameras. The exhausted whale had wraps around the head, pectoral fins and through the mouth, and was only just able to reach the surface. Assessing the entanglement material is vital to plan a safe disentanglement, without causing the whale to become free-swimming with lines still attached. Cut by cut, the ropes were successfully removed by the team, and the whale was checked underwater before swimming away clear. The rescue was an enormous collaborative effort, supported by local people, businesses and the wider community.

Earlier in the year, the team was tasked to Cornwall after a regularly sighted humpback whale which was reportedly entangled in rope. The team mobilised, but before their arrival the RNLI inshore lifeboat had intervened and cut some of the rope, freeing the whale. It could not be confirmed whether all entanglement had been removed, highlighting the importance of trained response and continued public education around the risks of attempting whale disentanglement. The team also responded to further reports during the year, including an entangled Minke whale in Whitby Harbour and a suspected entangled whale near Applecross on Skye.



Tim Bain Memorial Award

Our Tim Bain Memorial Award winner for 2024 was Katie Tunn!

Katie was recognised for her extensive dedication to her fellow Medics and the animals which she so passionately cares for, despite the long hours and hardships of her personal life. As an Area Coordinator Katie always goes above and beyond to inspire and support the Medics within her region, ensuring that they feel comfortable and confident to get involved and learn new things. Katie was presented with her award by Trustee Martin Boon at a training course where she was “totally shocked and humbled”.

Huge congratulations from all of the BDMLR team!





Trustee Awards

The recipients of the Trustee Awards in 2023/24 for their outstanding contributions to the charity were Darryl Thorpe, Louise Round, Darren Martin, Cath Bain, James McKenzie, Simon Dennis, Mark Noone and Dave and Lesley Jarvis.

Massive congratulations to all award winners and a big thank you to each of them for the impressive efforts they support us all with!





Collaborations and research

- **Common seal mouth rot investigation:** sampling for the BDMLR Common Seal Mouth Rot Project continued across the UK, with 103 individual animals being recorded as showing symptoms of the disease. Three deceased grey seals were also sampled as controls. Norfolk and Suffolk recorded the highest number of cases, accounting for 60 of the 103 records. The majority of cases were seen in August, when 72 of the records were logged overall. Mouth rot grades 2 and 3 were most commonly reported, with the clinical symptoms mostly commonly reported as swollen muzzles in 52 of the seals and hard palate ulceration or bone exposure in 60 individuals. Of the 103 records, 50 seals were taken for rehabilitation. This work represents an enormous collaborative effort from BDMLR Medics, veterinary practices and rehabilitation centres, all who have contributed to clinical and welfare assessments, sample collection and specialist care of affected pups.
- **Seal Alliance:** this year the group focused on launching and maintaining the flying rings online petition as it's key priority. Work continued in the background on seal disturbance legislation but with the election coming up most political work was held up for a while but pushed where opportunities arose. Discussion also began on a National Seal Release Protocol in conjunction with the Cornish Seal Sanctuary, BIAZA, RSPCA and BDMLR, which is due for release next year.



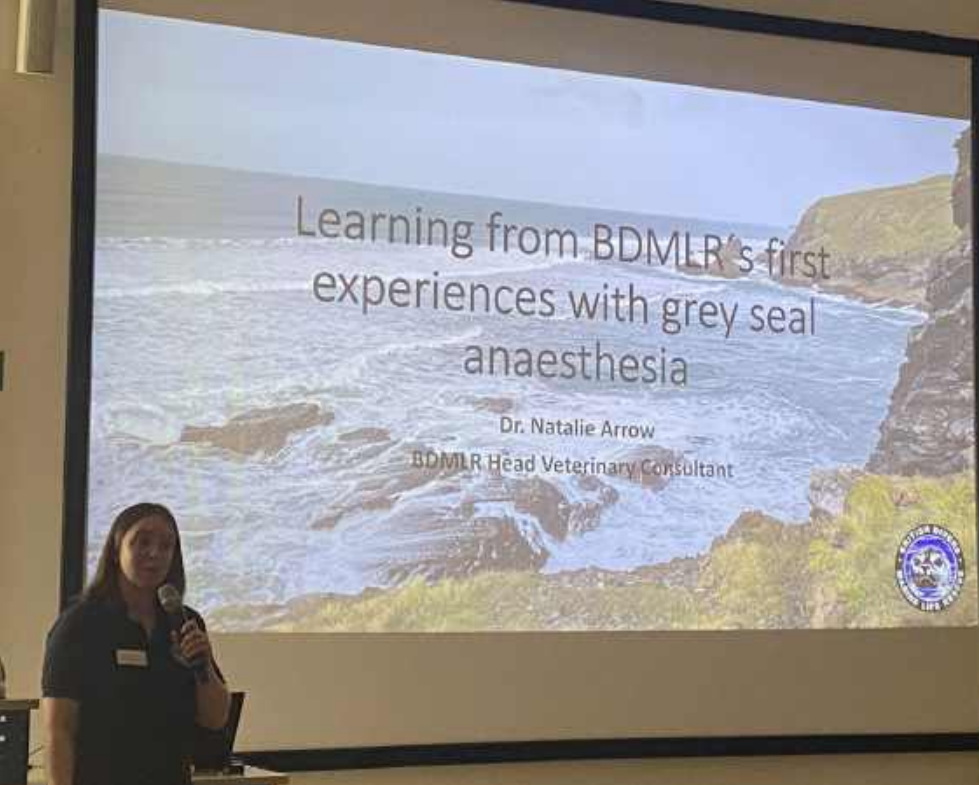
Collaborations and research

- **Partnership For Action Against Wildlife Crime:** this group has re-established itself with an annual conference held at ZSL in London. Julia and Dan attended this year and were able to make new useful contacts in the Police National Wildlife Crime Unit and with others. Key messaging from the conference included that violence towards animals can escalate into violence towards people, particularly with domestic abuse, as well as other forms including organised crime networks who target youths with wildlife crime as a form of recruitment via social media.
- **Dolphinaria-Free Europe:** the coalition organised an event at the European Parliament to increase the campaign's visibility and impact with politicians by publicising a new policy brief document with them. Molly assisted Margaux with the development and launch of the new DFE website (<https://dfe.ngo/>), which is much more accessible and able to be updated regularly more easily.
- **Scottish Entanglement Alliance:** the project supported trials for sinking lines on creel fishing vessels, funded by the Nature Restoration Fund. The gear was being tested on 15 vessels between late 2022 to early 2024. Additional funding is being sought to extend the length of the trial period and include more vessels to gain improved results for analysis.



Collaborations and research

- **Pinniped Entanglement Group:** we are represented on this international forum for rescue organisations to share new rescue techniques, raise awareness of the issue and find new collaborations. Work has begun to gather together data from global partners with the aim publish a paper on the extent of pinniped entanglement issues via the coalition.
- **Seal Rescue Conference:** the annual conference was hosted by Seehundstation Norddeich, Germany, and was attended by Natalie and Dan. Natalie presented a talk on grey seal anaesthesia, while Dan provided an overview of seal rehabilitation infrastructure in the UK.
- **European Cetacean Society:** this year's conference was held at Catania in Sicily, Italy, and was attended by Alan, Molly, Mark, Dan, Natalie, Gem and Vicky. BDMLR were involved in two co-authored posters on the welfare challenges of climate change on marine mammals (<https://bdmlr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Welfare-challenges-from-climate-change-for-seals-compressed.pdf>) by OceanCare colleagues, and a case study of a spinal condition in a live stranded minke whale (<https://bdmlr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Perkins-ECS-90-x-90-2024-1.pdf>) with colleagues from the Cetacean Stranding Investigation Programme. Meanwhile, a film night presentation was created and presented by Dan on the unique rescue of an adult female grey seal entangled in a frisbee (https://youtu.be/E_NTmsvEbxo?si=PlMpg4bqP7DUer51).



Chronic discospondylitis in a UK stranded minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)

CSIP
ZSL Institute of Zoology

Authors: Matt Perkins¹, Julia Cato¹, Rob Davies¹, Teresa Delgado¹, Simon John¹, Shaheed Mangun², Jo Mearns³, Alexandra Ivanova⁴, Elinor Wigglesworth⁵, Simon Spall⁶.

1 University of Exeter, **2** University of York, **3** University of Lincoln, **4** University of Cambridge, **5** University of Exeter, **6** University of Exeter

Abstract: On 10th April 2022 a juvenile minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) (J1) was stranded on a beach in Exmouth, Devon, UK. The animal was found by a local fisherman and was brought to the University of Exeter for necropsy. The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis. The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis. The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis.

Introduction: On 10th April 2022 a juvenile minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) (J1) was stranded on a beach in Exmouth, Devon, UK. The animal was found by a local fisherman and was brought to the University of Exeter for necropsy. The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis.

Investigation: The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis. The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis.

Results: The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis. The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis.

Conclusion: The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis. The animal was found to have a large, well-defined, abscessed area on its back, which was identified as a site of chronic discospondylitis.

an opportunity to disentangle healthy adult seals, as the majority of

Don Jarvis, British Divers Marine Life Rescue

The image shows a man, Don Jarvis, speaking at a podium. Behind him is a large screen displaying a presentation slide. The slide features a photograph of a seal and some text. The man is wearing a dark shirt and has a microphone in front of him. The background is a stage with blue lighting.





British Divers Marine Life Rescue

www.bdmlr.org.uk



Please help us to help them

British Divers Marine Life Rescue: Registered Charity England & Wales No. 900438 Scotland SC020004