

The Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus* (Fabricius) and the Common Seal *Phoca vitulina* L. in Lofoten and Vesterålen, northern Norway

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ABSTRACT

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Grey and Common Seals were surveyed in Lofoten and Vesterålen, northern Norway, by boat during the summers 1987 and 1988. 86 Grey Seals were counted in the outer part of Lofoten. This is an area where breeding is known to occur. A total of 565 Common Seals was recorded in Vesterålen in 1987, and 701 in Lofoten and Vesterålen in 1988. The breeding season was dated to the second half of June. The exact date seems to vary between nearby colonies.

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INTRODUCTION

Øynes (1964) reviewed the regional distribution of Grey Seals and Common Seals in northern Norway. He estimated the number of Common Seals in Lofoten and Vesterålen as 300, while only a few breeding Grey Seals were recorded in the area. Benjaminsen et al. (1977) recorded, however, several breeding Grey Seals in Lofoten. Since then little new information has been gathered except by Wiig (1986), who gave 150 Grey Seals as a rough estimate of the population in Nordland county. The present paper reviews information on the distribution of Grey Seals and Common Seals collected during a survey in summers 1987 and 1988 (Bergflødt et al. 1987, 1988).

METHODS

Information on coastal seal localities in Lofoten and Vesterålen was collected from Øynes (1964) and local sources. In 1987 Andøya and northern parts of Langøy were surveyed, while most of Vesterålen and Lofoten was surveyed in 1988.

The surveys were performed by the use of 12'—15' Zodiac inflatable boats, which are well suited for landing on rocky shores and skerries.

According to Venables & Venables (1960) the highest numbers of Common Seals are hauled out at low tide. Summers et al. (1980) presumed that the extent to which the haul-out site is exposed at high tide is important in determining the validity of counts. In the area covered by these surveys the difference between high and low tide in June/July is about 1.5—2.0 m. It was considered desirable to visit all sites at low tide, and every attempt was made to work as close to low tide as possible.

RESULTS

Most of the Grey Seals recorded were observed in Lofoten in 1988. These include 36 at Røst, 40 at Mosken and 10 at Høsholmene (Fig. 1).

The numbers of Common Seals are given in Table 1, and the localities are shown in Fig. 1. The number of pups included in the total count is given in brackets. The minimum estimate of Common Seals at a locality is usually given by the maximum number observed (Wiig & Øritsland 1987, Wiig 1988a). The

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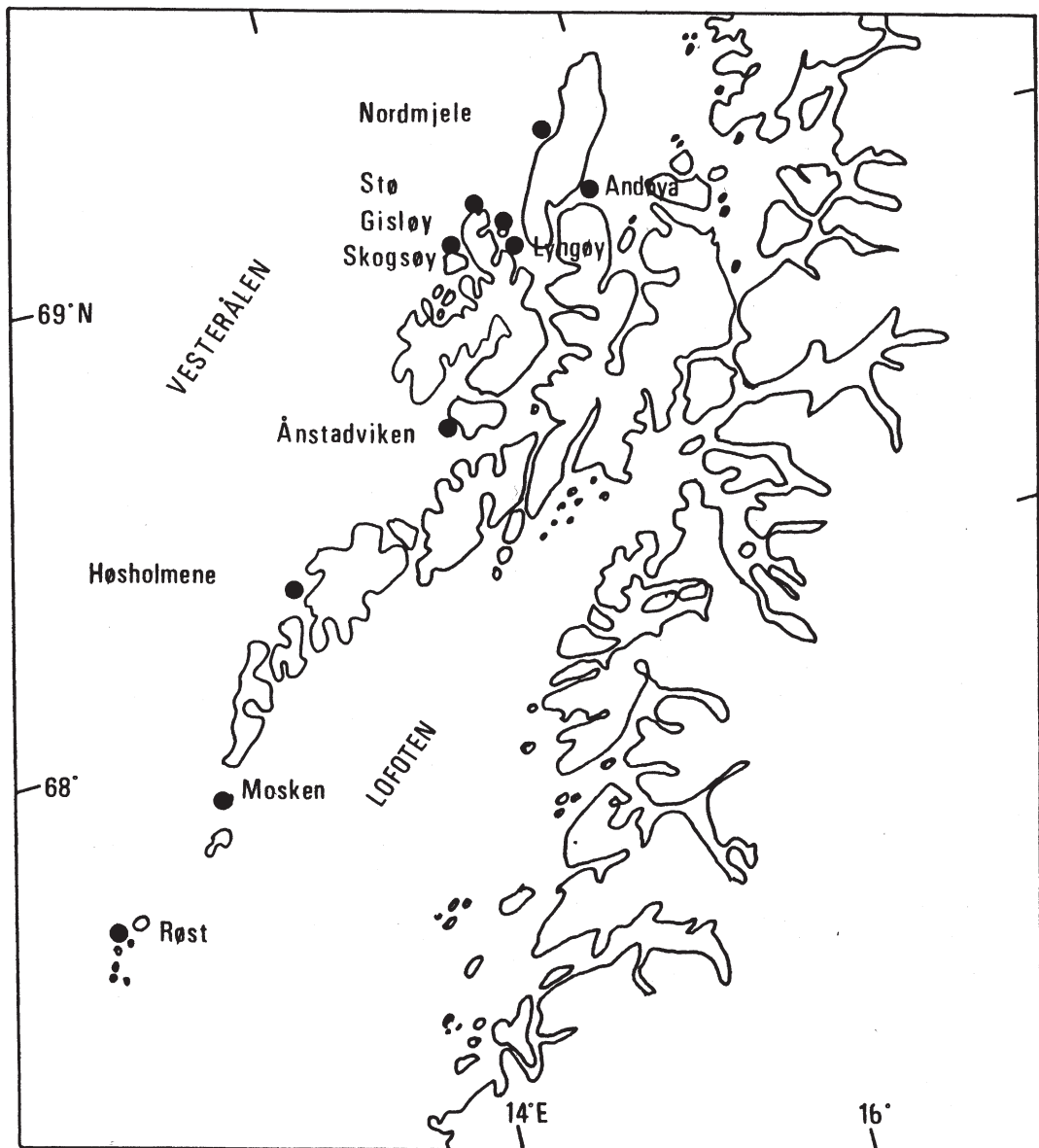


Fig. 1. Coastal seal localities in Lofoten and Vesterålen, northern Norway.

numbers given for Nordmjele and Stø in 1987 are inaccurate and the counts from 1988 are regarded as more correct. No seals were observed in the inner parts of Lofoten.

The proportion of pups counted in 1987 was 81 out of 625 (13%) and in 1988 156 out of 699 (22%).

DISCUSSION

The population of Common Seals in Nordland county has for a long time been kept low due to heavy hunting (Øynes 1964). Today Grey Seals and Common Seals in the area are protected during the summer season (Wiig 1987a). The hunting pressure today is not

Table 1. Total counts of Common Seals (pup counts in brackets) in Lofoten and Vesterålen, based on ground surveys in 1987 and 1988.

	July 1987			June—July 1988								
	6	7	8	20	21	22	24	25	26	29	30	1
Andøya Ø.	25											
Nordmjele		250(40)		229(68)							227(70)	
Stø			150(25)		77(22)						233(49)	
Gisløy			85(16)			48(3)						83(22)
Skogsøy			55									
Lyngøy			40									
Aandstadviken						48(1)						
Røst								103(14)				

known but it is believed to be low. Several culling programs of coastal seals along the Norwegian coast have, however, involved the killing of 70 Grey Seals at Værøy and Mosken during the period 1982 to 1987 (Wiig 1987b, 1988b).

Grey Seals are not usually found at the breeding site throughout the year. Those counted during the summer might therefore be migratory animals. According to the figures given by Øynes (1964) very few Grey Seals breed in the area of Lofoten and Vesterålen. Fifteen years later breeding had become more common and Benjaminsen et al. (1977) gave 21 pups as a minimum production at Mosken and Røst.

The population size of Common Seals in outer Vesterålen was recorded as 70 specimens in the early 1960's. The results presented here clearly indicate that this population has increased considerably. The colonies at Nordmjele and Stø are among the largest along the Norwegian coast.

About 150 Common Seals were recorded in the outer parts of Lofoten. Øynes (1964) gave 200 as an estimate of the population in the area. It is not known how the population size has varied during the 30 year period between these estimates. The apparent increase observed in Vesterålen has not occurred in Lofoten.

The peak in breeding season of Common Seals along the Norwegian coast is usually in the second half of June (Wiig 1988a). The results from the 1988 survey presented here indicate that the peak in breeding season might vary between nearby colonies. At Nordmjele 68 pups were counted at 20 July. Ten days later the number of pups had not increased and the pups observed seemed rat-

her old. At Stø and Gisløy about 25 km away the pup count increased considerably during the week between the two surveys of the colonies. It seems therefore that the pups were born one week later here than at Nordmjele.

The number of Common Seals pups in relation to the total count at the end of the breeding season may vary considerably (Wiig & Øritsland 1987). The percentage recorded in the present study from 1987 corresponds to the figures from comparable surveys from Sogn og Fjordane (Wiig & Øritsland 1987) and Troms (Wiig 1988 a). The percentages recorded in the present study from 1988 are much higher. As pointed out by Summers et al. (1980) differences in pup proportions between sites may reflect different timing of the breeding season or be a result of undercounting.

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