

Farne Island seals

with Jack Perks

The Farne islands are a renowned location across the UK for diving with grey seals, the more prolific species of seal in the UK, which is ironic as the other species is called the common seal! We have over half of the entire world's population of grey seals around the British coastline so going after them, I thought, would be a piece of cake! Having been lucky enough to live in Cornwall for three years I saw plenty of seals at places like Newquay harbour and Gwitherian but never in the water while diving until I was offered a chance to go and dive the Farne islands in Northumberland, a chance I simply couldn't pass up.

We arrived at St Ebbas house and I'd recommend it if you're planning on diving up there. The rooms are basic but you're there for the seals not fluffed up pillows! We got up at 6.00am got all the dive gear ready and had a hearty breakfast before meeting skipper Dave aboard the boat to set off to the islands. We couldn't have asked for better conditions; the sun was out and I was very excited for my first seal dive (the largest thing I've dived with in the UK before that was a rather sad looking dogfish). The boat was equipped with a lift so when coming out of the water you simply grab hold of it and get pulled up which was a godsend for myself!

Having to choose between the GoPro or D7000 to take down was my first issue as I'll be the first to admit I'm not the most experienced diver out there and hadn't dived in the sea for over a year.

My other issue was I don't own a strobe so would have to use natural light so needed to stay fairly shallow. In the end I went with the camera



An inquisitive pup approaches.

Nikon D7000 in an Ikelite housing with a Tokina 10-17mm lens at 13m. Available light with manual exposure 1/200th @ F9. 640 ISO.

as it has a video function on it so the best of both worlds. We dropped in and surface swam close to the rocks and descended into the water. I noticed a lot of come jellies floating around which was a pleasant distraction on the dive as they are bioluminescent producing vivid colours along their flanks. Hitting the bottom I looked at my dive watch to see I barely hit 3 metres so a warning to

all depth junkies, seal diving probably isn't for you! The shallow water was helpful though because I was using natural light and it was still getting fast enough shutter speeds to get the action in.

At first the seals were wary staying back and for every inch I swam towards them they would swim 5 ft away so I tried out something Rob Cuss told me which is to ignore the seals and let them



*Pack your telephoto lens for individual puffins.
Nikon D7000 with a 70-300mm lens at 250mm. Available light with manual exposure. 1/1000th @ F8. 800 ISO.*

come to you, I then turned my back on them and swam the other way and within about a minute I could feel a slight tugging on one of my fins. Thinking I'd got stuck in some kelp I turned around and sure enough two seals were taking turns nibbling and rubbing against my fins! I turned to take a picture and then they left and this continued for about 5 or so minutes until they went off to see other divers, a truly amazing experience. I had heard of the nickname fin nibblers but always thought

(Above right) The seals love nibbling fins.

Nikon D7000 in an Ikelite housing with a Tokina 10-17mm lens at 13m. Available light with manual exposure 1/200th @ F9. 640 ISO.

(Right) The Farnes has more to offer than just seals and there are several dive boats available for charter. Nikon D7000 with a Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10m. Available light with manual exposure 1/640th @ F9. 640 ISO.





What a poser! Nikon D600 with a 16-35mm lens at 16mm. Available light with manual exposure 1/200th @ F8. 250 ISO. (Photo by Spencer Burrows)

other divers were winding me up until then.

Now I'd seen seals I needed to start thinking about getting some photography done! Using the 17mm end of my trusty 10-17mm Tokina fisheye I started to think about what kind of shots I wanted, the main one just being a plain seal portrait for talks and magazine articles as I mainly deal with freshwater fish which I'd happily talk about all day but a few seal shots would just brighten up the talks!

As the tide was starting to pull

back a bit and with other divers around the area the visibility was decreasing so knew I had to get a shot sooner than later.

I was with a dive group from Nottingham called Manta Scuba which was mainly made of pleasure divers which if you need a model to get in with the seals is great however trying to single one out or coax the seal to come to you and not them can be harder. However I noticed that two divers were sticking their GoPro poles at something so went over to



Say Aargh! Nikon D7000 in an Ikelite housing with a Tokina 10-17mm lens at 13mm. Available light with manual exposure 1/200th @ F9. 640 ISO.

investigate and saw them playing with a seal pup probably no more than a year old and just starting to fend for itself.

I waited next to them as the seal was checking out each diver to find out what it was. It glanced at me and started to approach at the time I held the trigger down like a crazed gunman hoping to get that shot I had in mind until I saw its mouth open and start chomping on the dome port which makes for great images but a slightly scratched port! As soon as

it came, it left and when reviewing the image and showing it to people I got a strange reaction from most saying 'weren't you afraid' or 'that looks nasty' to which I say the seal was half my size for a start and seals explore their world with their mouth as they don't have hands like us to pick up things and see what they are, the seal was likely curious at what this funny looking creature had in its hand or maybe saw its reflection in the camera. For all I know it could have been the first camera it had ever seen!



What lens are you using? Nikon D7000 ,Ikelite housing with a Tokina 10-17mm lens at 13mm. Available light with manual exposure 1/200th @ F9. 640 ISO.

Of course the Farnes have other diving available than the seals and if you're getting a few dives in I'd recommend doing at least one other dive; we did a wreck further offshore and after the seals I was less than optimistic about what we would see as I'd caught seal fever by then and just wanted to get back to them but I have to admit the wreck was more like a reef; full of soft corals and fish and was a lovely little dive. I'd also recommend take a long lens with you for the seabirds as the Farnes has one of the UK's largest seabird colony's

including razorbill, terns, guillemots and of course puffins.

Jack Perks

www.jackperksphotography.com



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THE IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



Image: Adam Hanlon

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