

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



Gray Seal

Halichoerus grypus

Region:

Atlantic Ocean

Area affected:

Nova Scotia coast

Climatic change:

Sea ice loss

Impact:

Disease

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Gray seals are a temperate to subarctic species found off the coasts of Scandinavia, the British Isles and Iceland, New England and eastern Canada. Males grow to eight to 10 feet long and more than 800 pounds and have a distinct “roman nose” when viewed in profile. Females average around six feet long and 400 pounds. Coat color varies from light to dark gray, with variable spotting. Gray seals can dive up to 1,500 feet to forage for fish, squid and crustaceans in waters just off the coast. They rest and give birth on small, rocky islands.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

As sea ice retreats and key cold-loving prey species like cod move northward, gray seals are also ranging farther north than traditionally found. This means that for the first time, gray seals are encountering ringed seals, and being exposed to a parasite that the ringed seals carry. The parasite, *Sarcocystis pinnipedi*, is relatively benign in ringed seals, replicating within tissues for a while, then forming a cyst and moving to another host. When the parasite infects a gray seal, however, it does not form a cyst; it just continues replicating in the animal’s liver like a cancer, until it destroys the organ and kills the host seal. **On one island off the coast of Nova Scotia, the parasite killed more than 400 young seals in 2012, nearly 20 percent of the island’s population.**

References

Lee, J. J. 2014. Is climate change increasing the disease risk for Arctic marine mammals? *National Geographic*. February 14. <http://on.natgeo.com/1jFU3Ff>

NOAA Fisheries. Gray seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) (species profile). <http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/seals/gray-seal.html>



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