

Petunia's Rescue, Rehabilitation, Release and Post Release Monitoring

Rescue

The [Cornish Seal Sanctuary](#) (CSS) received a telephone call on the 18th of February 2010 from a member of the public about a seal pup with an entanglement on the beach at West Cornwall. [CSS](#) arranged for Dan, a member of the animal care team, to go and check on the pup. Upon arrival Dan assessed the situation from the top of the cliff and noticed that the seal was alone on the beach. Arrangements were made for Dan, along with other trained expert climbers from the [British Divers Marine Life Rescue](#)'s (BDMLR) marine mammal medics, to abseil down the cliff. They slowly made their way across the beach, hoping that the seal would not see them until it was too late to escape, luckily the seal did not notice them. The team quickly picked up the seal in a specially made bag and transported it back to the [CSS](#) for treatment, care and rehabilitation.

At the [CSS](#)'s hospital the seal was placed in the isolation pen and an assessment was carried out by the [CSS](#)'s local vets [Head & Head veterinary practice](#) in Helston. Along with members of the animal care team, the monofilament netting was carefully removed from the pup's neck. The wound was cleaned and treated with a course of antibiotics to fight any infection. The pup was a female and was named Petunia, she was about a year old.

Rehabilitation

After a few weeks in the hospital, Petunia was moved to the outside nursery pools, to continue her rehabilitation gaining further body weight and the strength needed to ensure her safety when she finally returned to the sea.



Petunia – Nursery pool – 27th February 2010

As she was doing well gaining weight and looking strong in the nursery pools, Petunia was moved into the deep convalescent pool for her final stage of rehabilitation learning to dive and compete for her food.

Petunia's flipper ID tag number was 41 (light blue). This is a small identification tag which is attached to the seal pup's rear flipper, right for a girl, left for a boy.

Rehabilitation is not always easy, some pups come to the [CSS](#) in a very bad way, so to see the transformations some of the pups go through is incredible.



Petunia – Convalescent pool – 1st April 2010

Release

It is always a good day when the animal care team return the rescued seal pups back to the wild where they belong, but at the same time it is a bit emotional saying goodbye after being with them for a few months.

When a seal pup reaches their ideal target release weight, it is time for them to return to the wild. On the 13th of April 2010, after a final weight check, it was decided the time had come for Petunia, along with other rescued seal pups, Angelina Johnson, Dumbledore, Lilly, and Pomona Sprout, to be returned to the wild. The pups were transferred from the pool into the back of the [CSS](#)'s seal release trailer and then safely transported to their release location.

There was lots of excitement as the [CSS](#)'s release vehicle made the journey to the beach, with all the seals trying to get the best view of the countryside in the trailer.

The [CSS](#) try to release pups back to a beach on the coast that they were rescued from. This release took place on the beach in St Ives Bay along the North Atlantic coast.

Post Release Monitoring

Post release monitoring provides information on survivorship, breeding, and lifelong movements. Initially the unique flipper tag helped [Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust \(CSGRT\)](#) build up a photo ID catalogue page of Petunia's unique fur pattern which then gets memorised by [CSGRT](#)'s photo ID volunteer teams. Over the years, the number wears off the tag and it becomes hidden as her rear flippers grow bigger, but [CSGRT](#) were able to continue to identify Petunia from her fur pattern. Traced rehabbed seals like Petunia can be accurately aged and we can learn fine scale data – for example about the individuality of seals in terms of size. Older seals are not always bigger.

By monitoring the behaviour of seals after release back into the wild, the [BDMLR](#), [CSS](#), and [CSGRT](#) can use this information to define the best practice standards and policies for rescue, rehabilitation and release that they can share with the international rescue community.

Find out more by reading our collaborative paper published about this work along with the [RSPCA](#) "Post release monitoring of rehabilitated grey seal pups over large temporal and spatial scales" (<https://doi/10.1111/mms.12885>). Available via this link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/192Rv95k47Kyb-quko9U-wtDwzO365meP/view?usp=share_link

This data represents a huge team effort of four different areas of Cornwall, with surveys carried by 33 different volunteers and four boat survey teams of volunteers over nearly 12 years since Petunia's release from the [CSS](#) in April 2010. In addition, multiple volunteers will have processed the survey photos in order to make all Petunia's IDs independently verifiable and scientifically robust. Then this information gets digitised ready for entry into a database (which was also designed and created by expert volunteers).

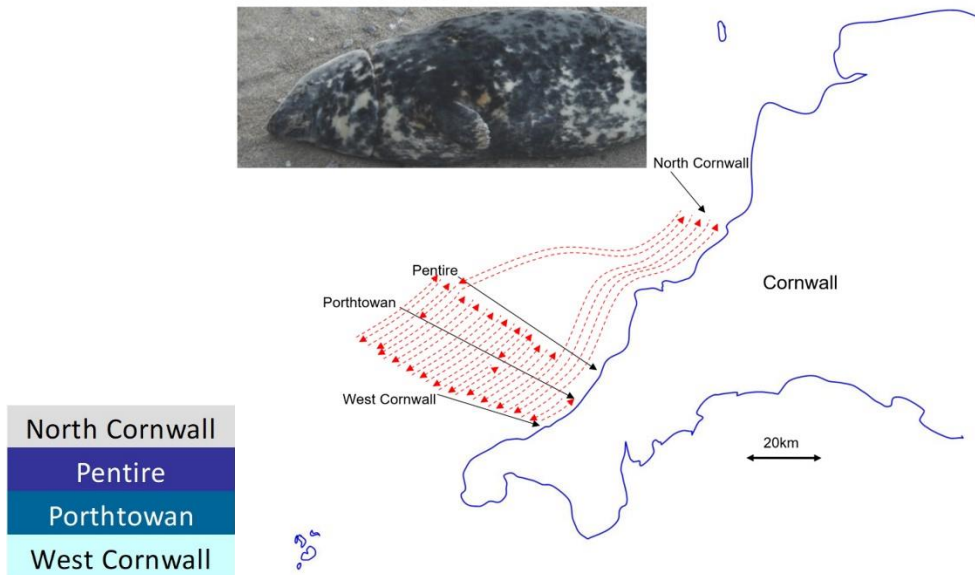
Seals across the southwest of England are oblivious to how lucky they are having a team of amazing volunteers giving them a voice and being wonderful ambassadors - sharing their stories with planning and policy decision makers, as well as raising public awareness.

For more information about the work of [CSGRT](#)'s multi award winning marine conservation charity visit their [website](#) or [sign up for free newsletters](#) and watch [talks on YouTube](#).

Many seals on [CSGRT's](#) database are identified at multiple sites. [CSGRT](#) volunteer Photo ID Hub teams cover the whole of the southwest from Somerset to Dorset.

The map below shows Petunia's sightings in the southwest of England over the past 12 years since she was released back into the wild in 2010.

LP88 Petunia



In total, [CSGRT](#) have identified Petunia 135 times! Below is Petunia's sightings calendar – the numbers represent monthly ID confirmations showing when she was seen in the wild at a number of sites along the coast of Cornwall.

Petunia was first sighted after her release at haul-out site on 8th of May 2010 along the west coast of Cornwall.



Photos Credit : Sue Sayer MBE – [CSGRT](#) – 8th May 2010

Re-Rescue / Release

But, unusually Petunia's rescue and rehabilitation story continued! The [CSS](#) received a telephone call about a seal at Mawgan Porth at Newquay on the 3rd of February 2011.

The [CSS](#) arranged for [BDMLR](#) medics to check on the seal, when they arrived they found the seal unresponsive on the beach, a decision was made for the seal to be rescued and transported to the [CSS](#). Sadly they described her response as 'the lights were on, but no-one was home'.



Photo Credit : Faye Archell – [BDMLR](#) – 3rd February 2011

The pup arrived at the hospital and the first thing that was noticed was the pup had a tag on the back right flipper, it was a blue tag with the number 41, she also had a scar around her neck. The animal care team checked the pup rescue and release records from 2009/10 rescue season and found the pup was Petunia, she was quickly put in to an isolation pen and started on a drip.

The drip contains vital fluids, straight into the seal, rather than giving her these fluids via a stomach tube, because of her condition. While the drip was doing its job the animal care team did a clinical assessment and found her to have no injuries which was good news.

The animal care team spent the next eight hours sitting with Petunia making sure the drip did not come out and around 4.30am in the morning Petunia showed signs she was

responding to the treatment. The next few days were going to be critical due to her condition on arrival. Thankfully the team did an outstanding job and within a week Petunia was feeling a lot better and could be moved through to the main hospital.

After a few weeks in the hospital, Petunia was moved first to the outside nursery pools and then in to the convalescent pool, monitored by the team to check she was continuing to improve and gain weight, ready to be released again.

When Petunia was rescued in 2010 she was already one year old, so when she was rescued again in 2011 she was two years old, the [CSS](#) hoped that this would be the last time that Petunia would need the help of their expert and dedicated staff.



Petunia was taken by Simon Bone on 23rd February 2011

On the 7th of April 2011 it was time for Petunia to be re-released back out into the wild at Porthtowan beach along with other rescued seals, Dash, Hopper and Splash.

First in the water was Dash making a dash for the sea, next Petunia followed closely by Hopper and Splash. The [CSS](#) hoped that this time would be second time lucky for Petunia.



Continual Post Release Monitoring

LP88	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Jan							1		1		4	2	4	12
Feb	1			1	1	5	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	17
Mar			1	2				2	1	1	2			10
Apr			1	1		1		1	1	1	1	2		9
May	1								1					2
Jun									1					1
Jul			1	1					2			1	1	9
Aug		2				1		3		2	2	2	1	13
Sep		3	3	4	2		1	2			3			18
Oct			2	1	3	1		3	1	2	1	1		18
Nov		2			1	1	1		2	1	2			10
Dec		2					2	1	1	5	2	1	2	16
Total	2	9	9	13	9	3	6	15	13	15	19	16	6	135

Following Petunia's re-release in April 2011, she was sighted at the West Cornwall haul-out on the 28th of August 2011. She looked fine, fit and healthy and none the worse for wear for being one of only a handful of seals that have been rescued twice and in different years. This made her a celebrity seal!

North Cornwall
Pentire
Porthtowan
West Cornwall



Photo Credit : Sue Sayer MBE – [CSGRT](#) – 6th November 2011

Petunia was regularly sighted between 2011 and 2016. With great delight volunteers realised that she was looking very heavily pregnant on the 12th of September 2016. It is now known where she pupped that year.



Photo Credit : Sue Sayer MBE – [CSGRT](#) – 12th September 2016



Photo Credit : Sue Sayer MBE – [CSGRT](#) – 28th February 2019



Photo Credit : Sue Sayer MBE – [CSGRT](#) – 22nd August 2019

Petunia was sighted again on the 23rd of August 2022 and most recently in 2023!



Photo Credit : Sue Sayer MBE – [CSGRT](#) – 9th February 2023

The wonderful news is...although Petunia was rescued and rehabilitated twice, she is still being ID'd today after 13 amazing years in the wild!!! What a great team effort and hugely successful rescue, rehabilitation, release and resightings story!

The scar on Petunia's neck from the entanglement wound which was slowly strangling her as she grew is still visible. But because of the [CSS](#) and [BDMLR](#) skill in getting to the seal and the [CSS](#)'s care and rehabilitation programme, Petunia is a good example of how the life of a seal can be saved and successfully returned in to the wild.

Thank you for caring and helping us to protect our globally rare, UK speciality, wild seals.

Case Study for Petunia was produced by Joyce and Barry Williams

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Websites:

BDMLR <https://bdmlr.org.uk/>

CSGRT <http://www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk/> and <http://sealresearchtrust.com/>

CSS <https://sealsanctuary.sealifetrust.org/en/> <https://www.sealsanctuary.co.uk/corn1.html>

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