

Rescue

Puffa, white coated seal pup, was rescued on the 7th of October 2001 from Sennen Cove near Lands' End. She was probably one of the fattest pups that the animal care team from the [Cornish Seal Sanctuary](http://www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk) (CSS) have had to rescue.

The only reason that Puffa needed to be rescued was because of public disturbance. She was at least two weeks of age and should still have been with her mum, but people had tried to move and handle her. If a pup is under three weeks of age and has a white fluffy coat, it should still be with its mum. If a young pup is handled by humans, its mum will not return to feed it.

Rehabilitation



On arrival at the hospital and following a clinical assessment, Puffa was found to have an infected claw. She was put onto a course of antibiotics to help clear the infection, but even a second course of antibiotics didn't help, so the decision was made for the Sanctuary's

local vet, from the [Head & Head Veterinary Practice](#) in Helston, to perform surgery to remove the nail/claw from her front right fore-flipper.

After a few weeks in the hospital, Puffa was moved to the outside nursery pools for her next stage of rehabilitation.

Pups in the nursery pools learn how to behave in the wild, interacting with other seals and competing for their fish. These are vital skills they will need when they are released back out into the wild.

It wasn't too long before Puffa was moved into the convalescence pool to get a used to deep diving. Here she spent a few months putting on weight until she was ready for release. Her flipper tag ID number was 79.



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 three months or more.

When a seal pup reaches their ideal target release weight of at least 30kg+, it is time for them to return to the wild. So, six months post rescue, on the 26th of March 2002, after a final weight check, it was decided the time had come for Puffa, along with other rescued seal pups, Piglet and Baramundi to be returned to the wild. They were taken to Church Cove beach which is a short drive from the [CSS](#) in Gweek.

Post Release Monitoring

Post release monitoring provides information on survivorship, breeding, and lifelong movements. Unusually, when [Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust \(CSGRT\)](#) first recorded Puffa back in the wild they used her beautiful fur pattern to build up a photo ID catalogue page, naming her 'Black anchor' as her flipper tag had not been seen. Her unique fur pattern was memorised by [CSGRT](#)'s photo ID volunteer teams. It was only when [CSGRT](#) later spotted she had a tag, and they zoomed in to read the number, did volunteers realise this was actually Puffa. They were able to verify this by matching her fur patterns in the wild with photos taken at CSS. Traced rehabbed seals like Puffa 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, [British Divers Marine Life Rescue](#) (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

Puffa's first wild re-sighting was on the 31st of December 2003 at the West Cornwall site.



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – 31st December 2003 when 'Black anchor' was added to CSGRT's Photo ID catalogue. She was having a whale of a time playing for hours with a young male on the water's edge.

This data represents a huge team effort; 17 different survey volunteers have spotted Puffa over the 21 years since her release from the [CSS](#) in 2001. In addition, multiple volunteers will have processed the survey photos in order to make all Puffa's IDs independently verifiable and scientifically robust. This information then gets digitised by other volunteers, 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.

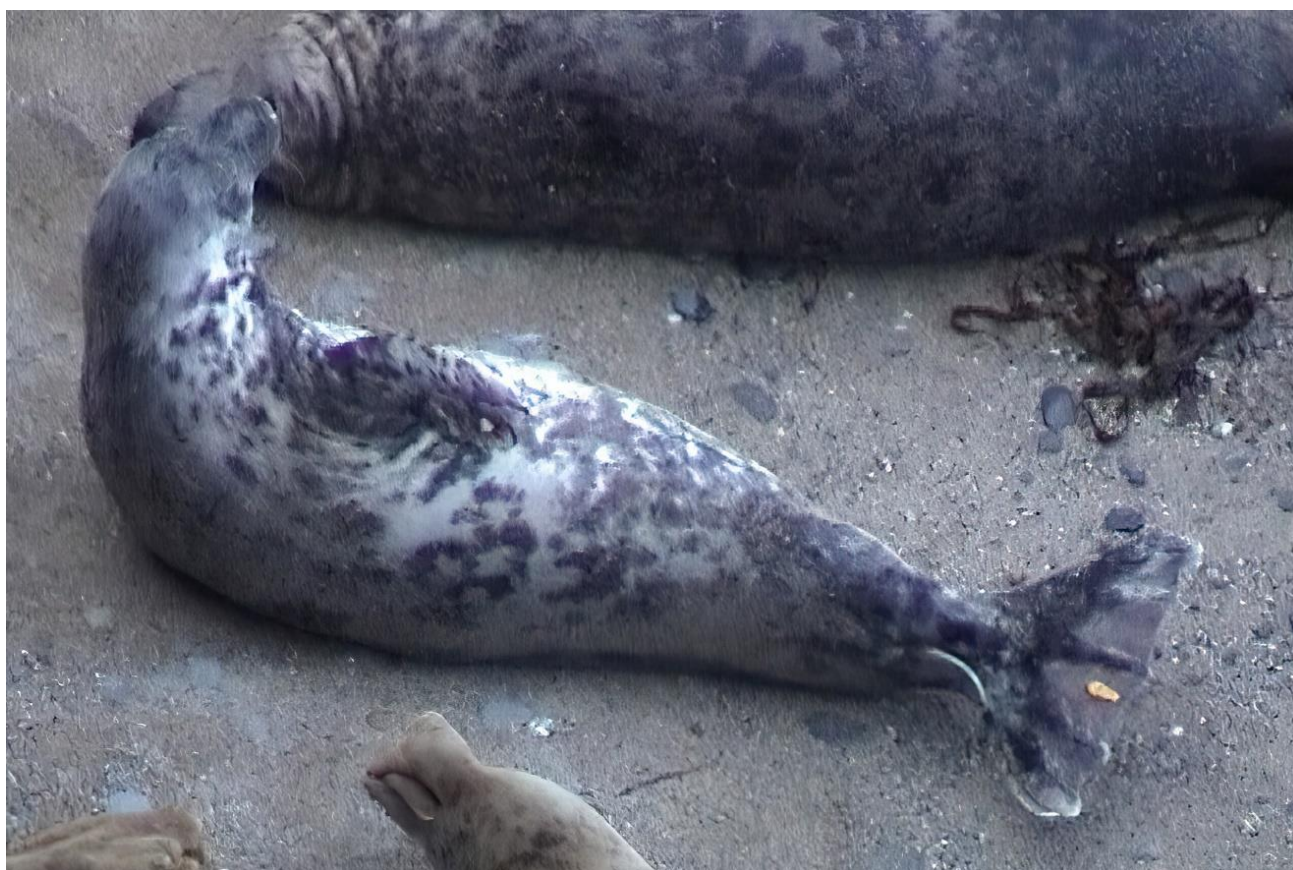
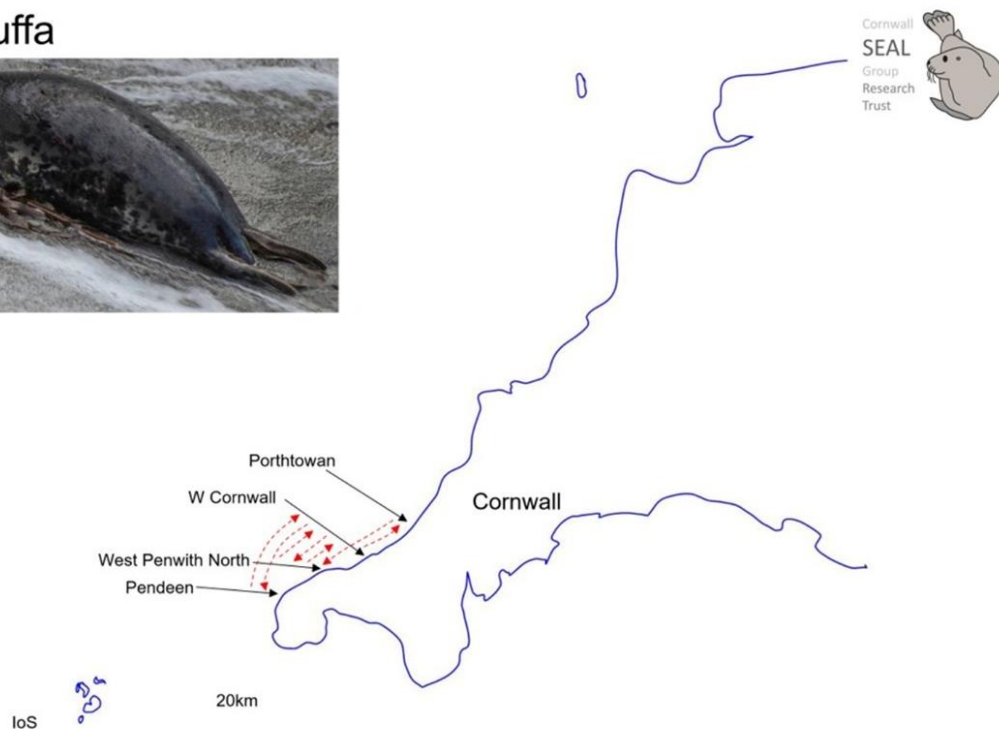


Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – [CSGRT](#) – 25th February 2006. Puffa's rear flipper tag was clearly visible. This is how CSGRT realised the seal they had added to their catalogues as 'Black anchor' in 2003 was actually Puffa!

Puffa has been seen in the wild by members of [CSGRT](#) at just a few sensitive seal sites along the north coast of Cornwall.

S123 Puffa



So far, [CSGRT](#) have identified Puffa 106 times! Below is Puffa's sightings calendar – the numbers represent monthly ID confirmations showing when she was seen in the wild at a number of sites along the north Cornish coast covering a range of at least 32 km.

West Cornwall
Porthtowan
West Penwith North
Pendeen

The key question is where does Puffa go in the summer? We can only guess that she may visit the Isles of Scilly, Wales, or France.

S123	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Jan			2	1	4			3			4	1	2	1		1				1	21
Feb			2	2	1	6	2	1	1	1	2	1		1		2					22
Mar			3	3	2	1	1						1		2	1	1				15
Apr		4	5	1			1	2						1	1						15
May		4		1																	5
Jun																		1			1
Jul																					0
Aug																					0
Sep				1		1			1						1						3
Oct			1	1	1						6				1						10
Nov		1																1	1		3
Dec	1	2	1				2				2			1	1			1			11
Total	1	11	14	10	8	8	6	6	2	1	6	10	4	4	5	4	1	3	1	1	106

On the 14th of October 2007, when Puffa was 6 years old, she was spotted at a haul-out along the west coast of Cornwall by Sue Sayer of [CSGRT](#). What made this event extra special was that Sue noticed that Puffa was pregnant. Sadly, CSGRT never saw her pup.



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – [CSGRT](#) – 14th October 2007

On the 13th of September 2008, when Puffa was 7 years old, she gave birth to her second pup. The following three photos were taken just a few minutes after Puffa gave birth.



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – CSGRT – 13th September 2008



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – CSGRT – 13th September 2008



Photos Credit: Sue Sayer – CSGRT – 13th September 2008

Sue Sayer of [CSGRT](#) said “I’m fairly sure that I heard her pup being born (it yowled very loudly!) I took the photos of Puffa sniffing her pup seconds afterwards! That’s why the pup looks so wet and bedraggled, she was still covered in amniotic fluid. 20 minutes later I saw Puffa eject her placenta, which was quickly gobbled up by gulls.”

Sadly very early the next morning when Sue returned, with some other members of [CSGRT](#), to the observation point overlooking the pupping site; they found the pup was dead and suspected it may have been caught out by the especially high tides during the September equinox. Poor Puffa and poor pup! 12 months effort and energy lost overnight.



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – [CSGRT](#) – 27th December 2009



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – [CSGRT](#) – 24th February 2010

Thankfully, Puffa continued to thrive and she has been identified ever since. Up to adulthood and sexual maturity, Puffa regularly visited the West Cornwall sensitive seal site during the autumn, winter, and spring months. Her rare IDs from March to August (inclusive) suggest that she visits other seal sites, but she has only had single sightings at three other sites both to the west and east including one offshore island. [CSGRT](#) volunteer Photo ID Hub teams cover the whole of the southwest from Somerset to Dorset, so she would likely be seen if she visited one of the other seal sites. Perhaps Puffa visits further away, maybe Wales or France. Since adulthood, Puffa has visited the West Cornwall site a lot less frequently, so it is always a treat to ID her – celebration time for us all!



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – [CSGRT](#) – 15th February 2018

Unfortunately, whilst she hasn't been seen much over the past few years, we know she is still thriving, as Puffa was last seen in January 2022. At the time of collating and writing her story, Puffa is 21 years old. That is so incredible. To watch and monitor her over these years have been amazing and an utter privilege. It makes the huge team effort worthwhile knowing that a seal pup in need got a helping hand. She has certainly made the most of her second chance, which makes us all smile!

How you can help – if you see a White Coated Seal Pup on a beach

Too many seal pups are taken into rescue rehabilitation centres because people mistakenly think they've been separated from their mothers. If you find a seal pup that looks fit and healthy and shows no signs of distress, monitor first from the coast path for at least an hour to see if there is another seal in the sea that could be its mum. If not and you are still concerned, please call BDMLR on 01825 765546.

People often mistakenly assume that seals on their own on land, especially pups, are in trouble. Another common misconception is that seals are safer in the sea. Seal pups can be left on the beach on their own for hours while their mother goes off to feed. Never return a seal to the sea. If it is a pup, it will be washed away, and its mother will have no chance of finding it to feed. If it has no mother, it may need help but BDMLR cannot rescue a pup from the sea.

Can we remind everyone to keep their distance if they spot a seal pup on the beach. The Wildlife Safe minimum approach distance is 100m. Ideally you will not go on a beach where you know there are seals, but if you accidentally come across one on a very public beach, then it might require a combined volunteer team effort to monitor it and to help explain to passers-by how best to help it. So please call BDMLR who can make arrangements for a volunteer rota of ambassadors to help visitors understand the seal's needs. If any of us get too close to a pup on the beach, it can result in the mother, who may be watching from the water, being too scared of people to return to feed her pup; this can be fatal for the pup. Each feed is about 1% of a pup's nutrition and just a few lost feeds can mean the pup won't gain enough weight to make it through its first winter.

Pups must rest and conserve energy; getting too close can result in them being frightened into the water. This means they waste precious energy, or worse they can be injured - particularly if they are startled off rocks. In the wild every calorie counts and can make the difference between life and death for any seal.

That's why it's incredibly important that, if a pup or seal is spotted, dogs are immediately put on a lead, and everyone stays as far away as possible or preferably leaves the beach.

Once pups have been weaned at three weeks their mother must leave. She has passed a third of her body weight in nutrition to her pup and must now go off to feed in the knowledge that she has given her pup the best possible start without threatening her own

survival. Around this time the pups have lost their white fluffy coat, growing a new, more waterproof one so they can spend more time in the sea on their post weaning dispersal.

So, remember: Give all seals space by staying off beaches where they are present, be quiet and stay out of sight, keep dogs on leads and call BDMLR 01825 765546 if you have any concerns – for example, if the seal is thin, injured or in a very public space where it will not be able to rest (to properly digest their food) before moving on.



Photo Credit: Sue Sayer – [CSGRT](#) – 10th January 2022 Puffa's most recent ID.

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

Case Study for Puffa was produced by Joyce and Barry Williams

Reviewed / Edited by Sue Sayer – CSGRT

Words by Sue Sayer - CSGRT / Joyce Williams CSS & CSGRT volunteers

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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