**Parish Magazine Article March 2020**

**Common Seal** by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

***Here be monsters***

Legend has it that it’s been visiting Lewes for years. There have been sightings from Southease all the way up to Barcombe. In January, John glimpsed it vanishing into the murky waters of the River Ouse near Tesco. A few months later, Barry was on his way to work when he encountered the creature hauled out on a pontoon by the Cuilfail cliffs. You’ll find 38 species of wild mammal living in or around Lewes. Badgers, foxes, stoats, weasels, shrews, rabbits, hares, moles, voles, dormice, bats, rats, hedgehogs, mice and mink all form the mammalian fauna of a landlocked South Downs town. Yet there’s one salty surprise on the list; the Common Seal, an animal that’s typically found in Britain’s coastal waters 12 kilometres away.

And the seal’s certainly a surprise to any Lewes residents who, while innocently strolling along the Ouse, encounter their local leviathan. I’ve never seen the legendary beast myself but have received plenty of excited tweets, emails and mobile phone photos from amazed observers who can’t believe what they’ve seen. Throughout history, sailors (without the benefit of smartphones and a Twitter account) have confused seals for mermaids and sea serpents and, as Sussex mammals go, this seal is a real monster.

Common Seals can weigh up to 150 kg; twice the weight of a Fallow Deer, the second biggest wild mammal in this area (and 50,000 times heavier than the smallest; the Pygmy Shrew). As you’d imagine, on land this blubbery behemoth is about as agile as Peter Ustinov trapped in a sleeping bag but underwater they’re as balletic as Baryshnikov, gracefully swimming at speeds of up to 25 mph as they hunt fish, shellfish, squid and octopus.

It’s this quest for food that occasionally leads seals into Sussex rivers such as the Ouse and the Arun as they follow fish migrating upstream. Common Seals breed in Sussex, where there is a colony at Chichester Harbour. It’s a sink or swim situation for seal pups born on the sandbanks exposed during the low tides of summer. Their aquatic life starts as the next high tide rolls in and within hours of their birth they’re swimming in the Solent alongside their mother. Mother’s milk helps them to double their birth weight in just a few weeks. The name ‘common’ is a bit of a misnomer. In British waters you’re three times more likely to see their larger, Roman-nosed relative the Grey Seal. The patterns on each seal’s fur are as individual as fingerprints. Keep an eye out when you’re next walking by along a Sussex riverbank and see if a seal is giving the river its approval.

Ends

**Sussex Wildlife Trust is an independent charity caring for wildlife and habitats throughout Sussex. Founded in 1961, we have worked with local people for over half a century to make Sussex richer in wildlife.**

**We rely on the support of our members to help protect our rich natural heritage. Please consider supporting our work. As a member you will be invited to join Michael Blencowe on our regular wildlife walks and also enjoy free events, discounts on wildlife courses, *Wildlife* magazine and our Sussex guide book, *Discovering Wildlife*. It’s easy to join online at** [**www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join**](http://www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join) **or over the phone on 01273 497532.**