

Grey Seal in Bewdley!

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Keith the Grey Seal in Bewdley, 6 January 2013

Rosemary Winnall

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Just after our Worcestershire Mammal Atlas had been published with no mention of the species, a Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) appeared in the county along the River Severn! It provided headline news in local papers and caused much discussion amongst naturalists and anglers. Her inquisitive nature endeared her to many onlookers and she became quite a celebrity. People were seen in all weathers staring out across the water with a wistful look in their eyes; complete strangers were seen talking to each other in animated fashion; and this single animal brought people and nature together in a unique way. Keith the Seal even had an internet Facebook page of her own and people were following her on Twitter!

The seal was first spotted on 17 November 2012 by a group of Wychavon Kayak and Canoe Club canoeists paddling down the River Severn near Powick, just south of Worcester. They watched it for half an hour as it swam between their boats, and they were able to take photographs of this surprise addition to their flotilla! It was these kayakers who named the seal Keith after

the Scottish aristocrat Royalist Commander Colonel George Keith who fought for Charles 1 against the Roundheads in the English Civil War, and whose troops were eventually defeated as they tried to defend Powick Bridge in the Battle of Worcester in 1651.

The Grey Seal was soon confirmed as a female, but the name Keith stuck for the duration of her stay. Grey Seal females do not mature until they are 4 or 5 years old, and young animals are known to disperse widely from the rookery where they were born; the nearest known breeding colonies are on Lundy Island and Skomer Island. Females (cows) are smaller than the bulls, and can grow up to 2.0m in length and weigh up to 420lb.

Over the next few weeks Keith was seen and photographed at a number of places along the River Severn and I attempted to record her movements from newspaper and internet reports, as well as from personal observations, checking head markings in photographs to confirm identity. The most northerly record I had for Keith was just upstream of Bewdley near the stanchions of the old railway bridge that used to cross the river by the Dowles confluence. Table 1 documents these confirmed sightings.

Table 1	SIGHTINGS OF KEITH!	
17 Nov. 2012	near Powick, followed canoeists	eating salmon
18 Nov. 2012	Diglis Weir, Worcester	eating chub and 2 pike, 3 in 30 mins!
22 Nov. 2012	Ketch Caravan Park, Worcester	playing with plastic bottle
30 Nov. 2012	Upton-upon-Severn	
01 Jan. 2013	Bewdley, Severnside North	eating fish
02 Jan. 2013	Stourport Marina	present all day, eating salmon. pike
04 Jan. 2013	Bewdley	in river close to the town
05 Jan. 2013	Bewdley and north near Dowles	playing around canoeists
06 Jan. 2013	Bewdley town and near Dowles	caught fish, 2 hrs. rest in shallows
12 Jan. 2013	Bewdley	
13 Jan. 2013	near Dowles and Bewdley all day	with rowers, eating mallards
17 Jan. 2013	Bewdley	eating fish
19 Jan. 2013	Lenchford Hotel nr Holt Fleet, evening	out on the bank in the snow
09 Mar. 2013	below Gloucester	tried to climb on paddle board!
early Oct. '13	Worcester	
11 Nov. 2013	Stourport - Lincomb Lock	
13 Nov. 2013	Astley Burf	
13 Dec. 2013	Worcester	
20 Dec. 2013	Diglis Lock	eating salmon

Table 2. WEIRS BETWEEN BEWDLEY AND THE SEA

WEIR	NEAR	BUILT	FROM BEWDLEY
Maisemore Weir	Gloucester	1871	45 miles
Upper Lode Weir	Tewkesbury	1858	34 miles
Diglis Weir	Worcester	1844	18 miles
Bevere Weir	Grimley	1844	13 miles
Holt Weir	Holt	1844	10 miles
Lincombe Weir	Stourport	1844	5 miles

Keith spent over two weeks in Bewdley in January 2013 where I was able to watch her on 3 occasions on the 4th, 6th and 13th of the month. The last two days were both Sundays during which I watched her for about 2 hours each time. She seemed to enjoy playing amongst the boats out for their Sunday practice from the Rowing Club, and she stayed around in the centre of Bewdley even though (or because?) there were so many people walking the banks. It was an amazing sight to witness a Grey Seal so far from the sea and so close to people, dogs, boats and traffic!

We Bewdley inhabitants were rather touched that this wild animal had adopted our stretch of the river for so long during January and we felt privileged that it often seemed to choose to be close to people. However, the reason for this was probably not to do with the charisma of the local residents, but linked to the local geology and history of the river!

To swim from the sea in the Bristol Channel as far as Bewdley Keith will have had to cross six weirs. Before these were constructed seals and porpoises were occasionally recorded in Worcestershire and even Sturgeons were recorded as far up as Worcester.

An Act of Parliament was passed in 1842 to allow the River Severn to become navigable between Gloucester and Stourport. During the next 30 years, not only were six locks and weirs constructed, but the river was dredged and deepened by the removal of rock bars, so that a consistent depth of 10 foot was obtained for the passage of boats. Table 2 shows details of these weirs.

So how did Keith manage to find her way upstream of the weirs? The lowest weir Maisemore near Gloucester, is overtopped by each high tide so seals have been recorded in the river as high as the Tewksbury weir fairly frequently, but seal records above this are very unusual. The next weir near Tewksbury, the Upper Lode, is covered at exceptional high tides, but all the other weirs upstream are only covered when the River Severn is in flood. There were flood conditions on the Severn at various times during the late autumn and winter of 2012/13 providing Keith with the opportunity to cross the weirs with no trouble as she followed the

Salmon coming up river to spawn.

I first watched this seal when the flood barriers were up in Bewdley town. The water was running very fast and it was brown with sediment. But Keith seemed perfectly at home swimming against the current, resting in the eddies and catching fish regardless of the poor visibility. Although seals have good eyesight, underwater they rely predominantly on hearing and touch to detect their prey, having highly sensitive whiskers. They can stay submerged for up to 20 minutes due to high haemoglobin content in their blood that allows the absorption of high levels of oxygen.

I went to talk to one of the fishermen to see what he thought about the presence of this mammalian predator in the river. He stressed that although he loved the wildlife of the river, this seal was certainly affecting the fish population. Apparently the fishing is particularly good around Bewdley because the river has not been dredged and canalised. The geology and river erosion result in a good mixture of deep pools, cracks and crevices in the bedrock in which the fish can hide and rest. He explained, that although there were originally no native Barbel in the Severn, they were introduced in 1955 and now the Severn is one of the best rivers for these fish in the country. They are very long lived and some of the individual Barbel near Bewdley are between 7 and 12 years old. During the winter they go into a state of quiescence, becoming very sluggish, and they hide in the rocky crevices on the riverbed. They only gain mobility again when the water reaches 7°C and above. Barbel were being eaten regularly by Keith along with Salmon, Chub, and Pike, and they were easy prey in this state. Also the fish were not used to predators of this sort and so had not developed escape tactics.

I was surprised at just how large the fish were that Keith caught, but she was regularly observed eating just part of the fish, particularly the blood-rich parts such as the intestines and the gill rakes, then going off to catch another one, thus killing many more than was needed to sustain her! Perhaps Keith became bored of fish, because on Sunday 13 January, she was seen catching and eating ducks! Now these were not any old ducks, they were our Bewdley ducks, and one could sense some dismay amongst the town residents as Keith floated past dismembering a Mallard drake close to Severnside North, his second of the afternoon! Interesting discussions ensued, especially amongst those who knew nothing about fish and had no concerns about Keith eating them; but Bewdley ducks that we could see, throw bread to, and tame were different - or were they? All interesting!



Keith close to the bank with admirers! 6 January 2013

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The local anglers became very concerned about the depletion of fish stocks around Bewdley and the Angling Trust applied to Natural England for a licence to shoot Keith. There was outcry from the seal enthusiasts and an online petition was launched to try to save her. The Environment Agency became involved and stated: "We are aware of the seal at Bewdley and understand the concerns of the salmon and coarse fisheries and anglers. However, one animal on a large river like the Severn is unlikely to have a significant impact on fish stocks. This is 'natural predation' and it will eventually make its own way back out to sea. With this in mind, and also because seals are a protected species, we won't be taking any action." Eventually an agreement was reached between the Angling Trust and the British Divers Marine Life Rescue to monitor the seal's movements and to rescue it if it stayed in one place for too long. They also recommended a scammer that emitted a loud noise to act as a seal scarer. I can find no record of any action being taken by these organizations.

Soon afterwards sightings of Keith stopped and we all hoped that she was making her own way back downstream, and intervention would be unnecessary. One late record and internet movie of her near Gloucester playing with some paddle boarders on 9 March was the last confirmed winter sighting. But after 7 months during which there were no reports of Keith being seen in our locality, she was spotted again, first in Worcester in early October 2013, then in Lincomb Lock on 11 November, Astley Burf on 13 November and Worcester on 13 December. On 20 December she was seen near Diglis locks enjoying a salmon and evading capture to return her to the sea. What will her fate be in 2014?

Recent records of seals in the Severn include an injured Grey Seal found on the bank of the river near Lower

Lode, just inside Gloucestershire. This was taken to the Vale Wildlife Rescue Centre in December 2010. It was dehydrated and underweight and had bite marks on its back end, but it was nursed back to health and released down at the coast some weeks later. There was apparently one seen near Holt Fleet in the 1980/90s, although no confirmation of that record can be found.

The UK has about 36% of the world's population of Grey Seals and numbers have increased since culling was stopped in the 1970s. So we might see *Halichoerus grypus* (meaning hook-nosed sea-pig) more regularly in the county when the Severn is in flood and as female Grey Seals live for about 20 years, Keith may yet return..... if she isn't 'removed' by officialdom before then!

References

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Keith with Mallard drake, 13 January 2013 Rosemary Winnall