

HAND-REARING AND GROWTH OF A GREY SEAL (*HALICHOERUS GRYPUS*)

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Abstract

Typical grey seal lactation lasts 15-21 days, followed by abrupt weaning by the dam and a several weeks long period of relatively significant weight loss while the pup learns to feed and fend for itself. It was with this natural history in mind that we formulated a grey seal hand-rearing protocol pending the birth of a female pup in early 2014. After the pup showed continuous weight loss, despite frequent nursing bouts, we elected to assist-feed. The pup was pulled for scheduled tube-feedings every day, but otherwise remained with the dam for rearing up until weaning. Through the hand-rearing and weaning process, she continually defied expectations in terms of her consumption, activity level, and weight gain. Weight gains were slow in the beginning, leading to questions about energy consumption vs. expenditure. When she obtained an appropriate weight for weaning she did not experience the period of expected weight loss while learning to eat fish, leading to excess body condition during the first year of growth. While our efforts were ultimately successful, these experiences led to alterations of our hand-rearing protocol.