



BEESTON WILDLIFE GROUP

The Welsh Walrus

by Sean Browne

The Walrus *Odobenus rosmarus*, is a pinniped mammal of the Arctic ocean and subarctic seas of the northern hemisphere. There are two subspecies, the Atlantic Walrus and the Pacific Walrus. The Atlantic Walrus is found in the northern seas of Canada, Greenland, Norway and Russia. The Pacific Walrus is found in the Bering and Chukchi seas. Records in British waters are very rare and are usually immatures of the Atlantic subspecies that have wandered too far and got lost. They will stay with their mother until they are five years old and can live for 20-30 years, feeding on bivalve molluscs which they Hoover up from the sea bed.

In February 2021 a Walrus was seen in Denmark. The following month, on March 14th, what was probably the same one turned up on Valentia Island in County Kerry, Ireland. An immature with short tusks, it was gone the next day. Then on March 19th what was almost certainly the same Walrus was seen in Wales on Broadhaven South beach, Pembrokeshire. It disappeared, only to turn up at Saundersfoot on March 22nd where it stayed for a couple of days, before moving just down the coast to Tenby and taking up residence on the Lifeboat Station ramp, where it remains to this day, April 13th.

I was so keen to see this magnificent beast, after chickening out of twitching one in Scotland in 2018 and regretting it. Here was one that seemed to be happy, settled and accessible. Unfortunately, because of the Covid-19 travel restrictions, it was not possible to visit Wales from England until April 12th. I kept an eye on the reports and counted down the days, only for it to disappear on April 5th. I thought my chance had gone, but it turned up again and the wait continued.

At midnight on April 12th I set off for Tenby. I had hardly done any driving over the last year and felt quite apprehensive about a long journey, but arrived in one piece 5 hours later in the dark. I sat in my car drinking coffee until the light started to creep in. I had a rough idea where the Lifeboat station was and set off through the narrow streets, eventually finding the right spot. There are two lifeboat buildings, the old one and the new one and both ramps were Walrus free.

Just as a feeling of disappointment started to creep in, I heard a snuffling and bubbling noise below the cliff path and there he or she was, cruising slowly along, before diving. I was ecstatic. What a fantastic sight, although, like an iceberg, you could only see a fraction of it above the water.

The light slowly improved and a few people started to turn up. I took a lot of pictures of the Walrus as it swam around, but wasn't that happy with them. They didn't do it justice. Talking to locals, I was informed that it would feed for hours, then as the tide began to drop, it would haul out onto the ramp and give much better photo opportunities. Seeing that it was high tide, I had a few hours to wait. It spent the next four hours feeding, never venturing out more than 100 yards. It also used a large metal buoy to scratch its back on. Eventually as the tide dropped, it swam towards the ramp and began its laborious climb out of the water, revealing its true bulk. The sun was now out and the Walrus basked in it. I took hundreds of pictures, as it never seemed to fully settle down, one minute laying flat, then up on its front flippers, rolling onto its side, then a good scratch. A local told me that the Lifeboat station had received two "shouts" recently, and had to shoo the Walrus off the ramp before they could launch the boat.

Finally, the lack of sleep started to take its toll and I made my way back to the car, finished off the rest of the coffee and headed for home. The first day out of lockdown had certainly been one to remember. Some people celebrated with a pint, I celebrated with a Walrus.

