



Origins of the Selkie Folk

The legend of the Selkie exists in the folklore of many cultures. This bittersweet tale is well known among the people of the Western coast of Scotland, Ireland, Wales Norway, Sweden and the Inuit tribe of North America. The word derives from earlier Scots selich, (from Old English seolh meaning seal).

Selkies are said to live as seals in the sea but shed their skin to become human on land. The legend apparently originated on the Orkney and Shetland Islands. Coastal regions of these countries are full of seal populations where people make their living from the sea, fishing all day long. So, it is quite common for people on the shore to look out over the water and see seal heads bobbing above the waves, their gaze returned by inquisitive, eerily human eyes.

While most mythological sea creatures are considered frightening and unfriendly, it is perhaps the kind, mournful eyes of seals which allowed them to become transformed by myth into kindly beings. It often appears that they seem to understand the depths of human emotion as they understand the depths of the seas.

The times a selkie could assume human form was not the only subject once debated around the peat fires of old Orkney. The mythological origin of the selkie-folk was no clearer. When the ancient tales were committed to paper, in the 18th and 19th centuries, some of the old folk claimed that the selkie-folk were, like fairies, fallen angels, condemned to live as animals until the Biblical Day of Judgement. Others insisted that the selkie-folk were once human beings who, for some grave misfortune, were doomed to assume the form of a seal and live out the rest of their days in the sea. The third possibility discussed by the Orcadian storytellers of yesteryear was that the selkie-folk were actually the souls of those who had died at sea. One night each year these lost souls were permitted to return to their original human form. So as you can see, there was no firm agreement. The origin of the selkie-folk legends is varied and unclear.

One thing is clear however, fantastic tales that help us to understand the world we live in show what is possible with the power of storytelling, imagination and a little magic!



Selkie Gazette

"I believe that the tale of the Selkie teaches us that the ultimate power of love is stronger than the devastation of loss. The Selkie teaches us that we can be whoever we want to be as long as we are loving creatures."

LINDA MARIE SMITH, CREATOR OF MEARRA - SELKIE FROM THE SEA

When angels fell, some fell on the land, some on the sea. The former are the faeries and the latter were often said to be the seals.

Anonymous Orcadian



Mearra ~ Selkie from the Sea A Classic Celtic folk tale with a twist

The story of the Selkie is based on the folklore of seals that could transform themselves into humans and back again. Oftentimes the story started from tales of fisherman who stole the sealskin of the seal to keep her on land to cook and clean and be his wife. The fishermen would hide the sealskin of their selkie wife so they could never return to the sea. In the classic tale, the selkie was never to return to the sea and would become ill and tired and lose her beauty and vitality.

In the more modern story Mearra: Selkie from the Sea, Mearra gives her sealskin to Ian, a lonely fisherman because they fall in love when Ian sings to her while he is fishing. The tale is a story of how people can help each other through love and not selfishness.





Did You Know?

FUN FACTS ABOUT SEALS

- There are plenty of fun facts to learn about seals. They are very interesting creatures that you may think do nothing but lie on the beach all day and seek food in the water.
- There are 33 known species of pinnipeds (fin-footed) found in various locations around the world. The gray seals are very popular and you may find it interesting that many of them breed in Scotland annually.
- Don't be alarmed if you see a seal that you think is frozen. There is a very good chance that it is simply sleeping. Their breathing slows down to save energy.
- You will find many species of seals live in very cold environments. They are able to do so comfortably due to the thick layers of blubber they have under their skin. This fat helps to keep them well insulated. Seals give birth to their offspring on land rather than in the water.
- The milk that the females offer their pups can be up to 50% fat. This accounts for astonishing growth. Researchers observed that pups gain 3 to 5 pounds per day!
- Seals don't really have any defenses that can do much against predators. They can bite but that is no match for what wants them for lunch. They stay extremely close to each other for protection.
- Most seals live where there is plenty of salt water. They love to dive deeply to find the best selection of fish. They enjoy land that has rocks and that is close to the water since they don't move fast and need to get to the water easily.
- Depending on the type of seal, they can dive at least 1,000 feet. Some of them can dive up to 3,000 feet. It is believed they can go deeper than that if necessary for food.
- Seals live in many different areas around the world. They can be found from the cold regions of the Antarctic to very warm areas where it is sunny. The majority of them are found in the Antarctic though where it is extremely cold. They are able to survive the low temperatures and icy conditions due to the layers of blubber they have on their bodies.

Mearra wants to teach you about her world under the sea with her seal friends.

Take this quiz and see how many you can get right!

(Answers on next page)

1. Seals are called pinnipeds which means fin footed. The latin translation of pinniped is

- a. flipper footed
- b. feather footed
- c. wing footed
- d. flipper handed

2. From what land based animal did the seal evolve?

- a. bear
- b. mongoose
- c. monkey
- d. guinea pig

3. What is a baby seal called?

- a. A kitten
- b. A pup
- c. A mutt
- d. A kid

4. What is the average lifespan of the seal?

- a. 10 to 15 years
- b. 5 to 10 years
- c. 25 to 30 years
- d. 45 to 50 years

5. How do seals detect their prey?

- a. With their fins
- b. They smell underwater
- c. With their whiskers
- d. With their eyes

6. How many species of seals are there around the world?

- a. 20
- b. 8
- c. 33
- d. 110

