

Australian Fur Seal

(*Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*)



Species Profile

Animalia - Mammalia

LENGTH: 125 – 225cm

LIFESPAN: 15 – 20 years

Male (Bull)

WEIGHT: 220 – 360kgs

Female (Cow)

WEIGHT: 36 – 110kgs

Newborn (Pup)

WEIGHT: 7 – 8 kg

Australian Fur Seals

All seals belong to a group of mammals called *pinnipeds*. Fur seals are *otariids* (eared seals), this means they have tiny external ears and can also use both their front and rear flippers to 'walk' on land, unlike *phocids* (true seals) which have

internal ears and they can't use their rear flippers for 'walking' on land. The Australian Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*) is the largest of eight species of fur seal in the world. They have thick coarse brown fur, large eyes, long whiskers and big sharp canine teeth similar to a large dog.

Habitat

Australian Fur Seals are found in the coastal waters and oceans of Southern Australia. They haul out and breed in large colonies on rocky islands. Seal Rocks lies 1.8km off Phillip Island and provides an important breeding area and nursery for around 20,000 seals (approximately 25% of the total Australian population). At any given time there will be between 4,000 – 10,000 seals on land at Seal Rocks but this varies with time of year, tides, time of day, temperature and weather – like us, if it's hot outside more seals will go swimming.

Diet

Seals are skillful hunters in the water and spend their days swimming, rolling and diving for octopus, fish, cuttlefish and squid. They have streamlined bodies, strong flippers and excellent underwater vision and can dive to depths of 200m, spending a lot of time on the bottom of the ocean. It is thought they are able to detect vibrations and movements from prey with their sensitive whiskers.

Breeding

Adult males establish territories within breeding colonies and will aggressively defend their residence from other males. Females spend most of their gestation period at sea and come to shore to give birth to one pup in late spring - early summer, when the weather is warmer and food supply abundant and chances of survival are highest. Pups are born with a soft black coat that is not waterproof. They typically stay on land until they are a few weeks old, when they begin to play in rockpools and shallows, they're ready to spend time at sea and hunt on their own by 10 - 11 months old.

Threats

Natural threats include predation by large sharks, orcas and the dangers of living in one of the roughest bodies of water in the world, Bass Strait.

Human threats can include commercial fishing, toxic pollutants, marine debris entanglements, ingestion of marine plastic, loss of breeding habitat caused by rising sea levels under climate change and disturbance by recreational activities such as boats and jetskis.

In the early 1800s seals were hunted throughout the Bass Strait region, including Seal Rocks. By 1825 nearly all seals had been hunted. In order to protect the seal population, the Victorian Government created a wildlife research at Seal Rocks in 1928 and killing seals was banned in Victorian waters in 1975. It has taken a long time for the Australian Fur Seal population to become healthy again and they are still recovering from this exploitation.

Seals are considered 'marine sentinels' which means their health can signal early warnings of existing or emerging threats to the health of entire ocean ecosystems, such as climate change and pollutants, which ultimately affect the health of humans.

Island Ark

At Phillip Island Nature Parks marine scientists study seal diet, foraging behaviour and the population using methods like scat analysis and Remote Piloted Aircraft (RPAs or drones) to ensure the seal population remains healthy. Rates of entanglement in marine debris at Seal Rocks are also monitored, with researchers regularly helping these seals by visiting and removing entanglements. You too can help researchers with population monitoring by joining the SealSpotter citizen science program, choosing reusable alternatives to single-use plastics, participating in beach cleans, being a responsible recreational fisher by following the government regulations to protect seals and staying 30m away from them if you see one on the beach.

Securing a brighter future

Current research is being undertaken to assess the future implications of these threats on Phillip Island's Australian Fur Seal population including commercial fishing operations, toxic pollutants affecting the health of the seals, entanglement in marine debris, ingestion of marine plastic, loss of breeding habitat caused by sea inundation under climate change and potential disturbance by boat and jetski visitation. Understanding and predicting the influence of these threats on seals today and in the future helps us to put measures in place to protect them.

Australian Fur Seal guardians contribute to securing a brighter future for these playful sentinels of the sea by supporting scientific research and conservation efforts on Phillip Island.