



# Seals

## of Tasmania

Thirty five species of seal inhabit the oceans of the world. They are found throughout the marine environment, from icy polar waters to the warm waters of the tropics. Much like whales and dolphins, seals are adapted to the marine environment with a streamlined body, limbs modified into flippers and a layer of blubber for insulation. They also have a specialised circulatory system that allows them to sustain prolonged dives while feeding. However, unlike whales and dolphins, seals are not confined to the water but regularly come out of the water (haul-out) to rest, mate, moult and give birth.

### Foraging

While at sea, seals alternate between resting on the surface and foraging for food. Although the diet varies between species, seals generally eat fish, squid, octopus and crustaceans such as krill. When foraging, seals can leave haulout sites for days, weeks or in the case of elephant seals — months. They may also travel vast distances and swim to great depths in search of prey. Southern elephant seals, which feed in the cold sub-antarctic waters, can dive to 1560 m for half an hour or more!

### Reproduction

Seals give birth to live young and suckle them from mammary glands just as humans do. Normally only one pup is born but twins can occur. Pregnancy in seals ranges from 6 weeks to 5 months depending on the species. However, all species are capable of suspending the development of the embryo so that births can occur at the desired time of the year.

### Types of seals

Seals are grouped as either otariids or phocids. Otariid seals, also called 'eared' seals, include sea lions and fur seals. They have obvious ears, large foreflippers and hind flippers which bend forward. Phocid seals, also called 'true' seals, have less obvious ears, relatively small foreflippers and cannot turn their hind flippers forward. Otariid seals can use their flippers to walk and are remarkably agile on land, while phocid seals move by 'humping' along on their belly and so are restricted to flatter shorelines.

## Seals of Tasmania

### Locals

A number of species occasionally visit our shores, however, only two species of otariid seals breed in Tasmanian waters.

The Australian fur seal is found from the coast of NSW, down to Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. It is the most common seal in Tasmanian waters and breeds on small isolated rocks in Bass Strait between October and January. It also hauls-out at various rocky areas around the Tasmanian coastline, especially outside the breeding season when many seals disperse from the breeding colonies. Mature males can measure more than 2 m in length and weigh up to 360 kg; females are much smaller. Australian fur seals are coloured brown to grey with males darker than females.



*Australian fur seal - male*

The New Zealand fur seal is found in Western Australia, South Australia and New Zealand. In Tasmanian waters it mainly occurs on the west and south coasts with a small population breeding at Maatsuyker Island. They are slightly smaller than Australian fur seals and are best distinguished from this species by their much darker colouration.

## Visitors

Southern elephant seals are the largest of all seals with males reaching 4 - 5 m in length and 3,600 kg in weight. Females are much smaller at 2 - 3 m in length and only 500 kg in weight. Southern elephant seals are coloured rusty grey-brown and are covered with thick blubber. Mature males have a large 'trunk' which is used to amplify their vocalisations and, together with their bulk, gives rise to their name 'elephant' seal. They often appear cumbersome and indifferent to humans. Yet, despite their awkwardness, their bulk and the speed with which they can move makes them potentially dangerous if harassed.

Leopard seals are one of the most ferocious marine predators, and the only seal to regularly prey on warm-blooded animals such as penguins, birds and other seals.

Female leopard seals are actually larger than males and can reach 600 kg and 3.6 m in length. Leopard seals are more slender than elephant seals, having a long streamlined body, constricted neck and a massive lizard-like head. They are coloured grey above and light grey below with dark spots (hence the name 'leopard' seal). Although both the elephant and leopard seal breed far to the south of Tasmania, individuals migrate into our waters and may come ashore to rest. Usually people assume the seal is sick or injured, however, often the seal is just resting and will head south after they have concluded their 'holiday'!



*Leopard seal*

The sub-Antarctic fur seal and Australian sea lion are rarely seen in our waters and are difficult to distinguish from the Australian and New Zealand fur seal.

All seals are **wholly protected** throughout Australian waters.

## Threats to seals

The greatest threat to seals comes not from their natural predators, the killer whale and great white shark, but from humans. Seals are shot, caught in nets and suffer from marine pollution. The most horrific effect of man is the entanglement of seals in man-made marine debris. Seals are among the most inquisitive of creatures and often end up with rope, fishing net or packaging strap wrapped around their necks.

As the seal grows, this material gradually strangles the animal. Before the seal dies it may suffer from starvation due to the entanglement restricting movement or preventing the swallowing of food, or the entanglement may cut through the skin. Ultimately, death is slow and very painful!



## Beached seals

Seals do not 'strand' in the true sense of the word, unless sick or injured, they are capable of movement on land. However, seals are often found lying on a beach. Determining the state of health should only be attempted by suitably qualified persons such as Parks and Wildlife Service personnel or vets. If one of these persons are not present the seal should not be approached unless you have been in radio or telephone contact with such a person who can advise you on a **safe** course of action.

The reason for not approaching the seal is simple. Unless the seal is dead there is a chance that it may bite you as you approach. Although they appear cute and sedate, they have large teeth and a long, flexible neck which they can whip around with surprising speed. They can inflict painful wounds and carry a number of diseases that may include tuberculosis.

## Watching seals

It is most likely that a seal seen in Tasmanian waters is an Australian fur seal due to their abundance and distribution. Seals are fascinating creatures that are captivating to watch in their natural environment, however, Australian fur seals are very wary of humans and will stampede if disturbed. In doing so, pups can get crushed, mothers may cease feeding pups and young pups may drown.

Therefore, there are important rules when watching seals:

- **Don't** attempt to view seals from low flying aircraft.
- **Do** lower sails when closer than 200 m to haulouts.
- **Don't** approach within 100 m if circumnavigating, 200 m between mid-October and mid-January.

- **Do** anchor more than 50 m away from the haulout, 100 m away between mid-October and mid-January.
- **Don't** swim near the shoreline as bulls hold territories during the breeding season.
- **Do** anchor downwind and refrain from making loud noises.
- **Don't** get on the haulout. Panicking seals can easily attack or run over visitors and haulouts are very slippery to walk on.
- **Do** enjoy watching the antics of this engaging marine mammal!

## What you can do to help

The following information is sought by researchers to help our understanding and management of seals in Tasmania. Any information should be passed on to the Biodiversity Conservation Branch.

Sightings of:

- entangled seals. It would be of great benefit if the type and colour of the material is recorded.
- shark bites. Seals are often seen with shark bites and information is needed on the position of the bite, approximate size and whether it is fresh or a scar etc.

- tags or freeze brands.
- masses of dead or dying cuttlefish and squid at the surface. As an important prey item for Australian fur seals the knowledge of such die-offs is important for research.

## Contact

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*Young fur seal*

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Wildlife – Seals of Tasmania



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