



Seals

Marine life

Today New Zealand values and protects its seal populations but that was not always the case. The first Europeans to settle in New Zealand for any length of time were sealers, who systematically harvested seals to near extinction by the mid 1800s. Sea lions were given legal protection by 1893 and fur seals in 1916 – about the same time that the sealing industry became uneconomic due to the low numbers of seals left. Today all species of seals, along with whales and dolphins are fully protected under the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978. These popular mammals are known as pinnipeds, meaning fin-footed in Latin, and are divided into three families; walruses, true seals and eared seals.

Eared seals include fur seals and sea lions and are the most prevalent group of seals in New Zealand. They have external ears, no fur on their flippers, and they can turn their hind flippers forward under their body to walk on.

Introducing . . .

Kekeno / New Zealand fur seal

The most common seals in New Zealand waters, kekeno are very good swimmers and can cover large distances. Fur seal pups tagged on the west coast of the South Island travel as far a field as Australia. Generally fur seals occupy rocky shores in places that have some protection from heavy seas. Occasionally when on land they can become disoriented and have been found in unexpected places such as backyards, drains and streets.

Fur seals have clearly visible external ears, a pointed snout and long pale whiskers. Their coat is a dark grey-brown on the back, and lighter below. The thick under-fur is a rich chestnut colour. Sometimes the longer upper hairs have white tips, which give the animal a silvery appearance.

Adult males reach 2 m in length, and may weigh 185

kg. The smaller females reach 1.5 m in length and average about 40 kg in weight.

Fur seals are sometimes caught in trawl nets and long-lines in the course of fishing. This is an on-going concern for their conservation.

Rapoko / New Zealand sea lion

The New Zealand sea lion (formerly known as Hooker's sea lion) is our only endemic seal – which means it is found nowhere else in the world. It's one of the world's rarest sea lions – with an estimated population of only eleven to fifteen thousand. This threatened species breeds mostly in the Subantarctic Auckland Islands with smaller populations found on Campbell Island, Stewart Island and the south east coast of the South Island.

The males are much larger and bulkier than the females, reaching up to 3.5 m in length, and weighing 3–400 kg. Females are about 2 m long, and average 120 kg in weight. The fur of adult females is creamy grey, with darker fur around the muzzle and flippers, while adult males are blackish-brown with a mane of thicker and longer fur around their necks.

Fur seals
R Morris





Hookers sea lion
M J Williams

Midden records from around the North, South and Stewart islands show that sea lions were once found around the entire coast of New Zealand and were an occasional food source for early Māori. Their numbers were drastically reduced by early sealers. Sea lions have only started to recolonise the southern parts of the South Island in the last twenty years; the most northern sighting in recent times was at Banks Peninsula on the east coast of Canterbury. They have only been seen once in the North Island since the turn of last century.

The biggest threat to sea lions today is drowning as by-catch in the Subantarctic squid trawl fishery. Because of their limited range they are also thought to be vulnerable to disease.

Leopard seal (sea leopard)

Adult leopard seals are normally found along the edge of the Antarctic pack ice but in winter, young animals may visit New Zealand. They are the only seals known to regularly hunt and kill other seals, and large adults have attacked humans.

They have a long slim body, dark-grey back, light-grey muzzle, throat and belly with scattered dark-grey and black spots. They have a disproportionately large but streamlined head. Adults reach 3–3.6 m long and weigh 270–300 kg.



Leopard seal
J L Kendrick

Ihupuku / Southern elephant seal (sea elephant)

This is the largest species of seal, with adult males growing up to 5 m long and weighing 3.6 tonnes! Immediately after moulting males are dark grey but this fades to greyish brown. Large bulls can be heavily scarred from fighting during the breeding season. Their most outstanding feature is their inflatable snout, which reaches full development only in adult males. Ihupuku breed at Campbell Island and Antipodes Islands in New Zealand's subantarctic region, but young animals occasionally visit the mainland to moult, and may stay in one location for several months. Their numbers were reduced by the early sealing industry, and they are now a threatened species listed as 'nationally critical'. Populations of southern elephant seals are declining throughout the southern hemisphere.



Elephant seal
R Nilsson

Other seals

Several other species of seal move through New Zealand waters and may occasionally stop on our shores to rest. They include the sub-Antarctic and Antarctic fur seals, Weddel seal, Ross seal and Crab seal.



Fur seal
T De Roy

resting between feeding trips or engaged in breeding behaviours when on land. Remember that seals are wild animals and should therefore be treated with caution. All seal species have large teeth, and can become aggressive if disturbed or antagonised. They can move surprisingly fast on land and will at times chase people. Seals can and do bite. They have sharp teeth, and incredibly strong jaws which are typically three times as strong as an average dog. Leopard seals in particular can become very aggressive towards people and dogs.

- Stay at least 10 m away from all seals and keep dogs and small children under control at all times.
- Do not feed seals. Feeding them dead fish and other food disrupts their natural diet and encourages them to approach people and become a nuisance. Humans also carry some diseases that may be transferred to seals through food or direct contact.
- Most seals reported as injured or sick are just resting. Do not attempt to move, or assist adults or pups. Even if it is sick or injured it may be capable of inflicting serious injury.
- Do not touch seals, dead or alive. Seals harbour infectious diseases that can be transmitted to humans, and are difficult to treat such as pneumonia, tuberculosis and salmonella.

How can you help?

By reporting sightings of any marine mammals you will be helping increase our knowledge of their distribution and movements around New Zealand. Make a note of the following information: species; location; number of individuals; estimated sizes; their behaviour, the shape, colour and location on the body of any tag and the tag number (if you can read it safely). Pass this on, along with your name and a contact phone number, to your local DOC office.

If a seal is sick, injured or being harassed, please contact DOC on 0800 DOCHOT (0800 362 468) or your local Marine Watch. Give the following information: where is it and how to get to it, what species and size is it, what seems wrong, tide, local weather and sea conditions.

For more information

Visit the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz

Further reading – *Handbook of NZ Mammals*; Edited by Carolyn M King. 2nd Edition 2005, Oxford University Press.

What should I do when I see a seal?

Seals are fascinating creatures that people are encouraged to watch and enjoy respectfully from a safe distance. It is recommended that you keep at least 10 m from all seals both for your personal safety and to reduce disturbance to seals that are primarily