

Ab-Seal-utely Wellington

What seals are found around the Wellington coast?

NEW ZEALAND FUR SEAL

These are the most frequently encountered seals in this area. Every year between May and the end of October males dispersing from rookeries make their way to distant feeding grounds which include Cook Strait and other parts of the North Island. Fur seals are very good swimmers and recently weaned pups are capable of turning up almost anywhere around New Zealand. A fur seal pup tagged on the west coast of South Island has even been caught in Australia. On land they sometimes become disoriented and have been found in unusual places such as backyards, drains and streets.



Fur seals have clearly visible external ears, a pointed snout and long pale coloured whiskers. Adult males reach about 2 m nose to tail length, and may weigh 185 kg. Adult females reach 1.5 metres long and weigh up to 70 kg. Their coat is a dark grey-brown on the back, and lighter below. The thick underfur is a rich chestnut. In some animals the guard hairs have white tips giving them a silvery appearance. They feed mainly on squid and small mid-water fish but also take larger species such as conger eels, barracuda, jack mackerel and hoki.

Seals belong to a group of mammals known as "pinnipeds" (feathered feet), and are distantly related to bears and dogs.

All pinnipeds have streamlined bodies, and limbs modified into flippers. Pinnipeds are divided into three families: the walruses, true seals and eared seals. True seals do not have external ears, cannot turn their hind flippers forward and have fur on both surfaces of their flippers. On land they move in a caterpillar-like hitching motion. Eared seals include fur seals and sea lions. They have external ears, hind flippers that can be turned forward under the body and the undersides of their flippers are naked. They are capable of "walking" on land.

OTHER SEAL SPECIES

Subantarctic fur seal



This species looks very similar to the New Zealand fur seal but has a conspicuous two tone coat, a blunt nose and simple teeth. The closest rookery to New Zealand is located on Macquarie Island. A small number of subantarctic fur seals have been recorded in the Wellington region since 1995.



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Leopard seal (sea leopard)



Adult leopard seals are normally found along the edge of the Antarctic pack ice but in winter young animals disperse throughout the southern ocean, regularly visiting New Zealand. Sightings on Wellington's Coast are not uncommon in late winter.

Leopard seals are easily identified by their long slim body, dark grey back, light grey muzzle, throat and belly and scattered dark grey and black spots. They also have a disproportionately large snake-like head. Adult males reach 3 metres nose to tail length and about 270 kg. Females may reach 3.6 metres and weigh over 300 kg.

Leopard seals are highly carnivorous and take a wide variety of prey including tiny krill, fish and sea birds. They are the only seals known to regularly hunt and kill other seals, and large adults have attacked humans.

Southern elephant seal (sea elephant)

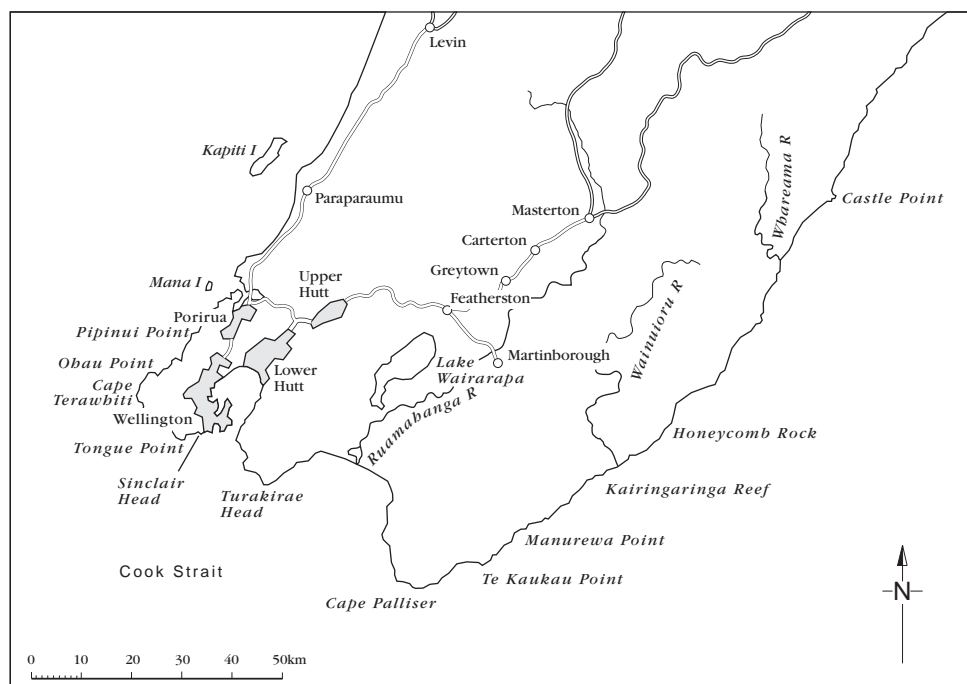


This is the largest species of seal. Adult males reach 4-5 metres nose to tail length, and 3.6 tonnes. Females are 2-3 metres long and weigh about 900 kg. They are dark grey immediately after the moult but this fades through the year to greyish brown. Large bulls can be heavily scarred from fights with other males during the breeding season. Their most

outstanding feature is their inflatable snout, which only reaches full development in adult males. Elephant seals are infrequent visitors to this coast but occasionally young animals come ashore to moult, and may stay in one location for several months.

Where can I find seals in Wellington Conservancy?

NZ fur seals breed at Honeycomb Rock, Cape Palliser, and possibly Kapiti Island. During winter, fur seals regularly haul out at Kapiti Island, Mana Island, Pipinui Point, from Ohau Point to Cape Terawhiti, Tongue Point, Sinclair Head, Turakirae Head, Cape Palliser (three sites), Te Kaukau Point, Manurewa Point, Kairingaringa Reef, Honeycomb Rock, and occasionally at Castlepoint.



Why do seals come ashore?

In this region seals normally come ashore to rest after long periods at sea, or sometimes to moult. Occasionally they are forced ashore by rough weather, fatigue, illness, injury, or they may be entangled in debris or net fragments.

Should I approach a seal that has come ashore?

All seals should be treated with caution. They have large teeth and can become aggressive. All seals move surprisingly quickly on land. Leopard seals in particular should be treated with great respect. Unlike fur seals, they are not afraid of people and are unlikely to retreat into the water when approached. Fur seals can bite with up to 2 tonnes per cm² pressure, and shake vigorously while biting, inflicting serious injury.

How do I determine if a seal needs help?

Unless there is a good reason to think a seal needs assistance, it should be left alone. Seals can survive quite major injuries if they are in good condition. Injuries such as cut or torn flippers, or minor gashes are not cause for concern. Unnecessary disturbance and a close approach can do more harm than good. Always keep dogs and small children well away from seals. Do not feed seals. This may prevent weanlings learning how to catch food. They could also become a nuisance, or aggressive towards people that do not feed them.

- Approach the seal slowly, making sure you do not cut off its escape route to the sea; try to avoid making eye contact with it; keep a safe distance away (about 5 metres).
- Look for obvious signs of ill health or distress such as large open wounds, or strapping or ropes embedded in the fur around the neck.

What do I do next?

Do not attempt to move, or assist the animal yourself. Even if it is sick or injured it may still be capable of inflicting serious injury. Seals can also carry infectious diseases that can be transmitted to humans, and are difficult to treat.

If the animal is sick, injured, tagged or being harassed, please contact your nearest DOC office. DOC have experienced staff who will respond to the animal if necessary. When taking your call DOC will need the following information:

- Where is the seal and how can they get to it?
- What species of seal is it (or a description of what it looks like)?
- What size is it?
- What is wrong with it?
- What is the state of the tide?
- What are the local weather and sea conditions?

More information

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