

Australian Fur Seals at Seal Rocks

As you look out over Bass Strait from The Nobbies, you see the rocky outcrop known as Seal Rocks. It is a special place where a large colony of Australia Fur Seals frolic, live and breed.

EARED SEALS

Seals belong to a group of animals called *pinnipeds*. They are mammals which means they have hair and feed their young on milk - just like humans.

Fur seals are *otariids* (eared seals). They have tiny ears and use both pairs of flippers when 'walking' on land - unlike *phocids* (true seals) who have no ears and can't use their rear flippers for 'walking'.

SEAL STATISTICS (average)

FEMALE

Length 125–170cm

Weight 36–110kgs

Colour light brown to pale grey with a fawn or cream throat

MALE

Length 200–225cm

Weight 220–360kgs

Colour dark brown to brownish grey with a lighter coloured 'mane' on the back.

Newborn Pup

Length 73cm

Weight 7–8 kg

Colour black when newborn up to 3-4 months old then moult into silver- grey pelage.

IT'S A SEALS'S LIFE

Seals spend their days swimming, rolling and diving for squid, cuttlefish and small fish - they do not eat Little Penguins. They have excellent underwater vision and can dive to 200m. It is thought they are able to detect vibrations from prey with their sensitive whiskers.



Seal pups are born in November/ December, each cow has a single pup. Pups are dependant on mothers milk until they are 8-10 months old.

Female seals mature at about 3-4 years old and then try to have a pup every year until they die, they live to about 20 years of age.

Males mature when they are about 6 but are not big enough to hold breeding territories until they are about 9, they live to about 15—18 years of age.

A DAY AT SEAL ROCKS

Seals of all ages need to feed then rest ashore for several days. The number of seals seen at the rocks varies with time of year, tide, temperature and time of day. For example if conditions are rough more seals come ashore to rest, in calm and hot weather more seals go swimming.

THE YEAR AT SEAL ROCKS

- October – females go on long foraging trips, big males return to joust for territories.
- November – females return and have pup, about 9 females per territorial male.
- December – peak of pupping, then breeding season ends and big males leave.
- January – pups learn to swim, females are on short trips returning to suckle pups.
- February – pups growing, seal's fur turning brown.
- March – moulting begins, many seals rest ashore for long periods.
- April to July – pups growing, seals coming and going.
- August – pups learning to catch fish for themselves
- September – pups starting to wear.

SEALERS WERE A WILD BUNCH

In the early 1800s, the seals at Seal Rocks were hunted for their skin and oil. Sealers set up semi-permanent camps on Phillip Island and bartered the skins with passing ships for products such as flour. Many 'stole' Aboriginal women and made them perform the hard task of sealing for them. Sealers had run out of seals to catch by 1825. It has taken a long time for the seal numbers to bounce back.

SEAL ROCKS

Seal Rocks provides an important breeding area and nursery for ~20,000 Australian Fur Seals. That is about 25% of the whole population at one place. At any given time there will be between 3 - 8000 seals there. The area became a sanctuary in 1928 and was declared a State Faunal Reserve in 1966.

RESEARCH

Between 1966 and 1977, a small research team visited Seal Rocks to study the seal's reproductive behaviour and diet. Many seals were tagged for identification.

Since 1997, Phillip Island Nature Parks research staff have been visiting Seal Rocks to continue studies of diet, foraging behaviour (using satellite tracking devices) and pup production. Each year about 5000 pups are born at these small Rocks.

MARINE DANGERS OF THE MODERN AGE

A seal's life is filled with many natural hazards, but unfortunately humans have created more. Many seals become entangled in fishing line, nets and other plastic rubbish whilst swimming - this leads to injury and death.

A CLOSE UP ON THE ACTION

You can view the seals from The Nobbies (binoculars essential). For a real wildlife experience in summer months, take a charter boat out there. Phone Wildlife Coast Cruises for details (03) 5952 3501

NOTE:

If you see an injured seal, please leave it where it is and inform the local wildlife rangers. Even a sick seal can inflict a nasty bite. The seals best chance for survival is to rest then return to the sea when it is ready.

