



# Seals

by Susan Brocker

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Imagine swimming underwater for an hour without coming up for air! Some seals can. Like us, seals have to breathe air to stay alive. But unlike us, seals have **adapted** to living both in the sea and on land. They can store lots of oxygen in their blood. This lets them stay underwater for a long time without needing to breathe.

# Made for Land and Sea

Seals are found in every ocean of the world. They eat mainly fish and squid. Their long whiskers help them to find **prey** by sensing movement in the water.

Seals have **streamlined** bodies so they can swim underwater easily. They also have four powerful flippers to push themselves along. Seals have a layer of fat under their skin called blubber. It keeps them warm in cold water and also helps them to float.

Seals don't just live in the water, though. They can move about on land too. They often come ashore to rest, and once a year, female seals (cows) come out of the sea to give birth. Each cow has one baby, called a pup. Like all mammals, young seals drink milk from their mothers. Most cows come together to care for their pups in large areas called rookeries.

# Rookeries

Rookeries are noisy, busy places. When a mother seal heads out to hunt in the sea, she leaves her pup behind to sleep and play. When she returns, she finds her pup by calling out with loud barks. Each mother has her own special "voice" and smell, and so does each pup.

Meanwhile, the male seals (bulls) defend their territory by snorting, grunting, and roaring. Sometimes they pump up their chests and thump into each other until one of them gives up and goes away.



## Seals – adapted for living in the water



# New Zealand's Seals

Three **species** of seal live around the coast of New Zealand.

## New Zealand fur seal (kekeno)

This is our most common seal. Fur seals have large dark eyes and a pointed nose, as well as the furry coat that gives them their name.



## New Zealand sea lion (whakahao) (also known as Hooker's sea lion)

The New Zealand sea lion is larger than a fur seal and has a flatter nose. The females are cream-coloured, and the males are dark brown. The male sea lions are a lot bigger than the females. The adult males also have thick hair around their necks like a lion's mane. (This is how sea lions get their name.) There are only about 10,000 New Zealand sea lions left alive.



## Southern elephant seal (ihupuku)

This is the world's largest seal – some elephant seals are as heavy as a small truck (weighing up to 3,700 kilograms). The male has a big, fleshy nose like an elephant's trunk. Because of its size, the elephant seal moves very slowly on land.



## New Zealand Seals: Where they mostly live

**New Zealand fur seals:** along mainland New Zealand's rocky coastline, on small outer islands, and on the Chatham Islands

**New Zealand sea lions:** Auckland Islands, Campbell Island, Snares Islands, Stewart Island, and the Otago coast

**Southern elephant seals:** Campbell Island, the Antipodes Islands, Macquarie Island, and sometimes on the mainland



## Leopard seal

Another seal that can sometimes be seen around the New Zealand coast is the leopard seal. Although the species lives mainly near Antarctica, leopard seals visit our beaches now and then.



# Seals in Danger

When the first people arrived in New Zealand from Polynesia, they found huge **colonies** of seals. They hunted the seals for their meat and used their fur to make warm clothing. Seal teeth also made excellent fish-hooks.

In 1792, the first European sealers arrived in New Zealand. Over the next hundred years, they killed tens of thousands of seals for their fur and the oil in their blubber. Seals almost became **extinct**, so the government passed a law to protect them.



## SEAL SOS

If you see a seal in trouble, call the Department of Conservation hotline on 0800 DOC HOT (0800 362 468)

Today, seals still face many dangers. A big problem for seals is human rubbish, such as plastic bags, in the sea. Chemical and oil spills can also kill seals. Another danger is fishing nets. Sometimes seals are trapped in nets and drown.

## Seal Spotting

Seals are very social animals. In summer, large numbers gather at rookeries to have their pups. Seals usually return each year to the same place. They also come ashore to rest at areas called haul-outs. Look out for them on rocky beaches that have big boulders for shade and pools for cooling off. In Otago and Southland, you might also see them on sandy beaches, or in sand dunes behind the beach.



## TAKE CARE!

Remember that seals are wild animals and can move quickly for their size. Watch them from a safe distance (at least 10 metres).

- Don't make loud noises or throw things.
- Keep dogs away.
- Never touch a seal; they can get angry.
- Don't feed seals; it can make them sick.



## Glossary

**adapted:** become better suited to conditions

**colonies:** large groups of the same species living together

**extinct:** no longer existing

**prey:** an animal hunted by others for food

**species:** a group of living things that can breed with one another

**streamlined:** shaped to move easily through water

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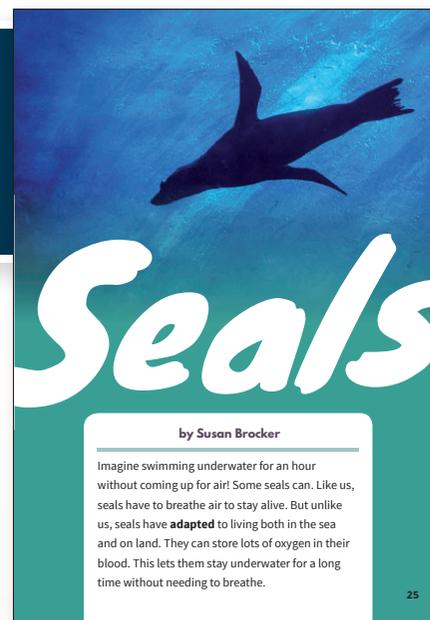
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