

JR FACT FILE



BORN TO EXPLORE

AUSTRALIAN FUR SEAL

Arcetocephalus pusillus



AT A GLANCE

Size:

Females average 125-170 centimetres in length and weigh between 50-120 kilograms, whilst the males are larger, averaging 200-225 centimetres in length and 220-360 kilograms in weight.

What It Eats:

Fish, squid, octopus and cuttlefish.
Life Span: 19 years for males and 21 years for females.

Habitat:

Coastal waters and oceans south of NSW including Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia.

Threats:

Sharks and Killer Whales, entanglement in fishing net and other debris, toxic pollution and oil spills.

What is an Australian Fur Seal?

Australian Fur Seals are among 14 species belonging to the Otariidae family. These differ from other seals (true seals) because of their external ears and the ability to use all four limbs to move across land resulting in greater agility.

During the 1800s Australian Fur Seals were hunted to the brink of extinction for their meat, oil and fur, resulting in their status as the fourth rarest seal species in the world. They are now a protected species and their recovery, whilst slow, is secure.

Females (cows) are slender, silvery-grey on the back, with a creamy yellow throat and chocolate brown belly. Males (bulls) are usually dark grey/brown. Pups are born black but after the first month develop grey brown backs and a yellowish fur belly.

Their fur is made up of an outer coat of long, coarse guard hairs that protect a dense underfur which insulates them from the cold. They also have a layer of fat to assist with warmth and streamlining. Each year they moult and replace their old fur with new growth.

When swimming and diving, Australian Fur Seals use their large front flippers to propel and the back flippers to steer. They are very good deep sea divers, sometimes diving as deep as 500 metres. They have large eyes to help them see their prey in the dark water and long whiskers which can detect the movement of nearby fish.

They are usually very quiet, although they can become vocal while breeding as the males will bark and growl during to defend their territory.

Where Do Fur Seals Live?

The Australian Fur Seal is unique to Australia's southern waters, found in coastal waters and oceans south of NSW including Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia.

What Does an Australian Fur Seal Eat?

Australian Fur Seals sometimes travel long distances and swim to great depths in search of food (prey). Their diet consists mainly of fish, squid, octopus and cuttlefish.

An Australian Fur Seal's Family Life:

Females begin breeding anywhere between 3-6 years of age, however males are generally older than 6 years as breeding is restricted to the largest and most aggressive bulls. These males arrive at breeding sites in late October and fight for a territory before approximately 9 females come ashore. Defending their territory is an exhausting activity during which the bulls don't eat for several weeks. It involves

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FASCINATING FACTS:

- THEY LOVE HUMAN COMPANY AND ARE EXTREMELY INQUISITIVE. SOMETIMES REST ON BEACHES WHERE THERE ARE PEOPLE.
- REMEMBER TO KEEP A SAFE DISTANCE SO YOU DON'T DISTURB THEM WHILE THEY ARE ASLEEP!

ritual shows of strength and force by stretching to their full height, pushing and shoving each other and roaring threats which at times lead to bloody combat.

Mating occurs over a period of six weeks from November to December. The gestation is 12 months and includes a 3 month 'delayed implantation', which means the fertilised egg remains undeveloped for some time before implanting and resuming development.

This ensures that the pups will always be born in summer when chances of survival are highest because of the warmer weather and abundant food supply. The female gives birth to one pup weighing approximately 4kg. She returns to the water after 6 days to mate again and search for food. She continues to suckle the pup from mammary glands over a period of 12 months until the birth of the next pup. When on land the cow maintains contact with her pup through a series of vocalisations.

Australian Fur Seals are social animals, highly fond of company and are often found in large colonies. They are extremely inquisitive – which unfortunately results in frequent entanglement in fishing nets.

Entanglement in fishing gear and other debris is a major threat to seals, particularly juvenile seals as they are more likely to play with floating objects.

Some parks to see fur seals:

Fur seals are found in most coastal waters throughout Victoria. Some good marine parks to spot them in include:

- > Merri Marine Sanctuary
- > Bunurong Marine National Park
- > Port Phillip Heads Marine Park
- > Marengo Reefs Marine Sanctuary
- > The Skerries - a rocky outcrop just off shore from Croajingolong National Park

Want to Know More?

www.environment.gov.au/coasts/

www.amonline.net.au