

Seals and People

A reference guide for helping injured seals



Seals are once again becoming a regular sight along Victoria's coastline. While seals spend most of their time at sea or on offshore islands, we often have the pleasure of finding them hauled out on rocky areas and beaches along many parts of our coast.

As their populations increase across Victoria, reports of sick or injured seals are also increasing. Fortunately, most of these turn out to be false alarms with the animal not requiring help.

The following guide will help you know when human intervention is required to help a seal and when you should report a sick or injured animal.

Is a seal sick or injured?

Some aspects of seal behaviour can make us think they are injured when they are not. For example, did you know that seals secrete a watery substance from their eyes when on land? This is often perceived as the seal crying or mistaken for an injury, when in fact it is a natural mechanism to protect their eyes.

Seals also have excellent recuperative abilities and some injuries they sustain don't need our help. For instance, they often get bitten or scratched by other seals. Such wounds are generally superficial and will heal by themselves.

Seals also spend a great deal of time out of water resting. This is normal. Some species, such as the Southern Elephant Seal, spend significant time moulting on land and should be left undisturbed during this process.

We also need to be mindful that many pups die from natural causes each year. More than 10% are lost in the first two months of life, and many more die after weaning when they have to learn to hunt for themselves. Seals also die of sickness and old age. In these cases, it's best not to intervene and instead let nature take its course.

Provided a seal is not in such poor condition that its ribs and hip bones are visible, and you see no major injuries or entanglements in marine debris, seals should be assumed to be healthy and left alone.

When does a seal need our help?

Should I report this?

Holding a flipper in the air



Photo: John Gibbons

Seals often raise a flipper in the air when lying on land or swimming. This is a natural behaviour they use to keep cool. People sometimes mistake this as a seal in distress. Seals holding flippers in the air should be **LEFT ALONE**.



Found in a dangerous location



Photo: Michael Lynch

Seals sometimes come ashore at places that are not safe. If you find a seal on a road, a busy beach or unusual location where its safety may be at risk, **REPORT IT IMMEDIATELY**.



Poor body condition



Photo: David Pemberton

Seals may suffer from poor health or body condition due to sickness, old age, dehydration or lack of food. If the animal is suffering (e.g. ribs or hip bones showing), it should be **REPORTED IMMEDIATELY**.



Minor wounds or wounds into muscle



Photo: Roger Kirkwood

Seals often fight with each other over territory or a mate, resulting in minor cuts or bites. Such wounds normally heal quickly and don't need human help. Animals with minor wounds or wounds into muscle should be **LEFT ALONE**.



Seriously injured or entangled seals should be reported to the DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

Should I report this?

Significant wounds to limbs, or where bones are exposed



Seals are sometimes seriously injured through boat collisions, shark bites or deliberately hurt by people. These injuries should be **IMMEDIATELY REPORTED**.



Lack of movement



A healthy seal may show little or no movement when resting, even when approached. Provided you see no obvious injuries, entanglements or ribs showing, inactive seals should be **LEFT ALONE**.



Eye secretions



Seals continuously secrete tears to lubricate their eyes. People often mistake this as an eye infection. This is natural and not of concern. If the eyes are not cloudy, then the seal should be **LEFT ALONE**.



Eye injuries and infections



Eye injuries and infections can affect a seal's ability to hunt. If the eye injury looks like it is healing, the animal will likely be ok. If the eye is cloudy or is heavily secreting mucous or blood, the injury should be **IMMEDIATELY REPORTED**.



Mammary glands and genital openings



Female seals have four mammary glands (teats) and males have a genital opening on their abdomen. These can be mistaken for wounds. These are natural and the animals should be **LEFT ALONE**.



Should I report this?

Moulting



Some species of seal come ashore to moult (shed their fur). This is a natural occurrence, and these animals should be **LEFT ALONE**.



Entangled seal



Seals occasionally become entangled in netting or other foreign objects. Entangled seals need help as soon as possible to remove entangled material. **REPORT IMMEDIATELY**.



Healthy pup on a beach or rocks



Seal pups are commonly left on their own for several days while their mothers are feeding at sea. Such pups should be **LEFT ALONE** unless injured. The mother may be nearby and your presence may cause it to abandon the pup.



Juvenile on a beach or rocks



Around November each year, pups are weaned and have to learn to feed on their own. During this period, juveniles in poor condition can often be found resting on our beaches. Unless in a dangerous location or in poor condition (see above), these animals should be **LEFT ALONE** to recover and return to their colonies of their own accord.

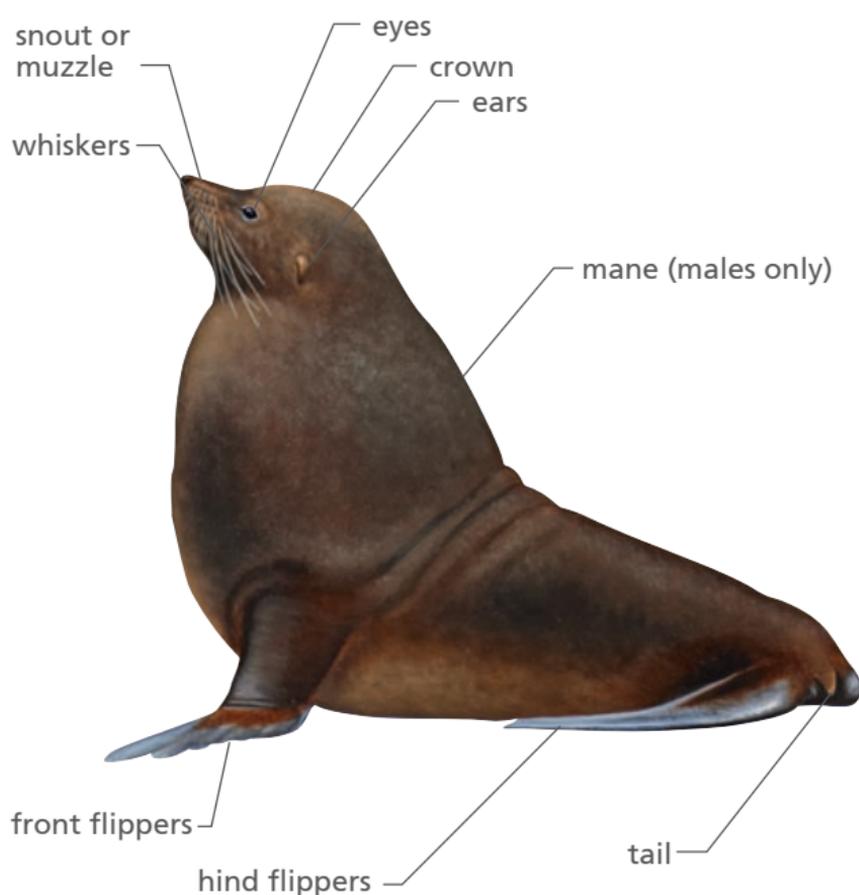


Identification chart

Two families of seals occur within Australian waters: the 'eared' Otariidae and the 'true' seals Phocidae. The most commonly seen seals, Australian Fur Seals, are in the Otariidae family, while the true seal group includes some less frequent visitors to our shores, such as the Southern Elephant Seal and Leopard Seal.

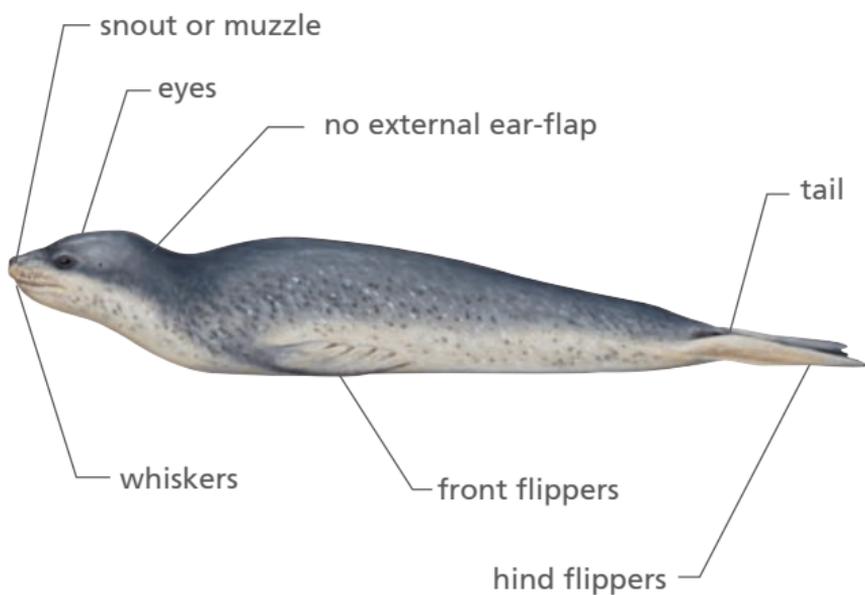
The diagrams below show the features of seals used for identification and their differences in size. These features are referred to in the descriptions (see right).

Eared seal



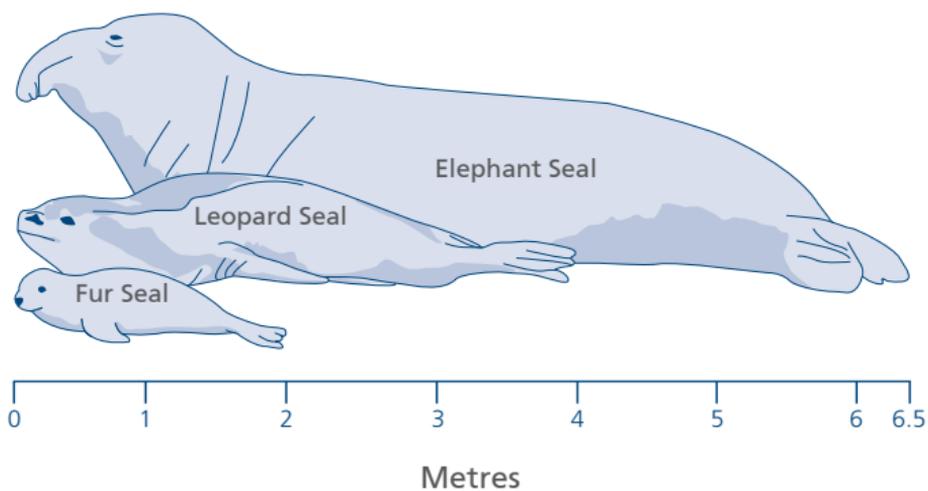
Australian Fur Seal

True seal



Leopard Seal

Scale



True Seals

Adult
Male & female



Leopard Seal (*Hydrurga leptonyx*)

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Distinguishing features: | Serpent-like appearance, with long neck and large, flat reptilian head. Powerful jaws and broad mouth gape. Sharp teeth. |
| Length: | Adult male: 4m. Adult female: 4.5m. Juvenile: 2m. Pup: 1.2m. |
| Weight: | Adult male: 350kg. Adult female: 400kg. Juvenile: 120kg. Pup: 30kg. |
| Colour: | Adult male and female: Silver to dark blue-grey, with pale silver underneath. Dark areas variably spotted darker grey and black. Juvenile: Similar to adult, but demarcation between dark above and pale underneath more obvious. Pup: Same as adult. |
| Coat: | Hair short and dense. |
| Flippers: | Front flippers long and broad, near the centre of the body. Hind flippers small and used for locomotion in the water. |
| Family: | Phocidae |
| Mating season: | Nov–Jan |
| Pupping season: | Sept–Jan |
| No. of pups: | 1 |
| Conservation status: | Protected in Victoria. |
| Distribution: | Occasional visitors to Victoria's coastline. |

True Seals

Adult
Male



Adult
Female

Southern Elephant Seal (*Mirounga leonina*)

Distinguishing features: Long body and heavy build. Adult male is noticeably larger than female, with conspicuous proboscis (nose) during the breeding season.

Length: Adult male: 6.5m. Adult female: 4m.
Juvenile: 3m. Pup: 1.5m.

Weight: Adult male: 4,000kg. Adult female: 500kg.
Juvenile: 400kg. Pup: 100kg.

Colour: Adult male: Dark brown with lighter brown underneath.

Adult female: Darker than males.

Juvenile: Greyish coat, slightly paler below.

Pup: Black to very dark brown.

Coat: Hair short and stiff.

Flippers: Front flippers small in relation to body size. Hind flippers cannot rotate under body, so unable to walk on land.

Family: Phocidae

Mating season: 18 days after birth of a pup, with delayed fertilisation to allow for birthing in summer.

Pupping season: Sept–Nov

No. of pups: 1

Conservation status: Protected in Victoria, "Vulnerable" nationally.

Distribution: Occasional visitors to Victoria's coastline.

Eared Seals



New Zealand Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus forsteri*)

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Distinguishing features: | Smaller than the Australian Fur Seal and darker in colouration. Sharply pointed snout. |
| Length: | Adult male: 2m. Adult female: 1.5m. Juvenile: 1m. Pup: 0.6m. |
| Weight: | Adult male: 100kg. Adult female: 35kg. Juvenile: 20kg. Pup: 7kg. |
| Colour: | Male: Grey to brown. Adult female: Grey to brown and lighter underneath. Juvenile: Similar to female. Pup: Black, but become grey to brown after first moult (4mths). |
| Coat: | Long outer fur conceals short thick underfur. Older males have mane. |
| Flippers: | Front flippers are long with straight sides, with little or no thickening where it joins body. Hind flippers rotate beneath body, enabling them to walk on land. |
| Family: | Otariidae |
| Mating season: | 7–8 days after birth of a pup, with delayed fertilisation to allow for birthing from spring to summer. |
| Pupping season: | Nov–Jan |
| No. of pups: | 1 |
| Conservation status: | Protected and considered vulnerable in Victoria.* |
| Distribution: | Can be seen along entire coastline. |



Australian Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*)

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Distinguishing features: | Larger than other fur seals and similar character to sea lions. Males are heavy chested with thick dark mane. |
| Length: | Adult male: 2.5m. Adult female; 1.5m. Juvenile: 1.2m. Pup: 0.7m. |
| Weight: | Adult male: 100kg. Adult female: 50kg. Juvenile: 25kg. Pup: 10kg. |
| Colour: | Adult male: Greyish brown with paler chest and dark brown belly. |
| | Adult female: Pale fawn to greyish brown with pale chest and brown belly. |
| | Juvenile: Similar to the female, coat pale when dry. |
| | Pup: Black with variable grey-brown underneath (Dec–Feb), same colouration as female (after Feb). |
| Coat: | Short thick underfur concealed by long outer fur. Older males have light coloured mane. |
| Flippers: | Front flippers rounded and thicker where they join body. Hind flippers rotate beneath body, enabling them to walk on land. |
| Family: | Otariidae |
| Mating season: | 6–10 days after birth of a pup, with delayed fertilisation to allow for birthing from spring to summer. |
| Pupping season: | Oct–Dec |
| No. of pups: | 1 |
| Conservation status: | Protected in Victoria. |
| Distribution: | Can be seen along entire coastline, with substantial breeding colonies at Phillip Island, Lady Julia Percy Island, Cape Bridgewater, The Skerries at Croajingolong National Park, Rag Island and Kanowna Island off Wilson’s Promontory. |

Adult
Female

Adult
Male



Australian Sea Lion (*Neophoca cinerea*)

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Distinguishing features: | Bulky, black nose with white ring around eyes. Males have a large head and yellow crown. |
| Length: | Adult male: 2.5m. Adult female: 1.8m. Juvenile: 1.2m. Pup: 0.7m. |
| Weight: | Adult male: 100kg. Adult female: 60kg. Juvenile: 25kg. Pup: 10kg. |
| Colour: | Adult male: chocolate brown, yellow crown with dark muzzle. Greyer back with dusky abdomen and flippers. Adult female: dark back and top of head, with creamy-yellow under-body and sides of head. Juvenile: Similar to female. Pup: Dark brown with paler crown and dark facial mask. |
| Coat: | Short hair with lack of dense underfur. Males have a mane. |
| Flippers: | Outermost digits of hind limbs are longer than middle digits. Hind flippers rotate under body enabling them to walk on land. |
| Family: | Otariidae |
| Mating season: | 7–10 days after birth of a pup, with delayed fertilisation to allow for birthing from spring to summer. |
| Pupping season: | Jan–Oct |
| No. of pups: | 1 |
| Conservation status: | Protected in Victoria. |
| Distribution: | Occasional visitors to Victoria's coastline. |

Adult
Female

Adult
Male



Sub-Antarctic Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus tropicalis*)

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Distinguishing features: | Smallest of the seals found in Victoria. Unique pale yellow colour underside. Colour around eyes contrasts with darker upperparts. Males have distinctive 'mo-hawk' crest. |
| Length: | Adult male: 2m. Adult female: 1.5m. Juvenile: 1m. Pup: 0.7m. |
| Weight: | Adult male: 100kg. Adult female: 35kg. Juvenile: 20kg. Pup: 7kg. |
| Colour: | Adult male: Dark grey with contrasting whitish-yellow face and chest. Adult female: Dark grey with contrasting whitish-yellow face and chest. Juvenile: Uniform dark olive-brown, occasionally with whitish-yellow face and chest. Pup: Glossy-black with dark chocolate brown belly. |
| Coat: | Dense, short underfur concealed by long outer fur. Adult males have prominent black crest on forehead and thick mane. |
| Flippers: | Front flippers short and broad in relation to body size. Fleshy extensions of hind flippers are shorter compared with Antarctic Fur Seal. Hind flippers rotate beneath body, enabling them to walk on land. |
| Family: | Otariidae |
| Mating season: | 7–12 days after birth of a pup, with delayed fertilisation to allow for birthing from spring to summer. |
| Pupping season: | Nov–Feb |
| No. of pups: | 1 |
| Conservation status: | Protected in Victoria, "Vulnerable" nationally. |
| Distribution: | Occasional visitors to Victoria's coastline. |

*Advisory List of Threatened Vertebrate Fauna in Victoria 2007.

Note: all lengths and weights are averages for an animal in healthy condition, but may vary.

How do I report a sick or injured seal?

Before reporting a seal in need of assistance, please note the following information:

- species (refer to guide overleaf)
- approximate age (pup, juvenile or adult)
- body condition (poor or healthy)
- extent and location of injuries on the animal
- is the animal moving?
- if it is entangled, the nature of the entanglement (type of material and location on the animal)
- a description of the seal's location.

Seriously injured or entangled seals should be reported to the DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

For veterinary advice, Melbourne Zoo may also be able to provide assistance on 9285 9300.

If you are able to provide a photo of the seal you wish to report, it will assist in deciding whether help is needed. If your mobile phone has a camera, send an image of the animal to the expert who takes your call.

For more information on seals, visit the DSE website at www.dse.vic.gov.au



Photo by Adrian Howard

Always remember...

Respect seals

All seals should be treated with respect. They can be aggressive when threatened, have sharp teeth and can move quickly over short distances. So give them space and observe seals from a distance.

Don't approach!

By law, you must keep at least 30m away from seals on land. Approaching a seal will scare the animal into the water, which may be a problem if it is injured or sick. Large seals can also trample young when fleeing.

Dogs and seals don't mix!

Dogs disturb seals from resting. If a seal feels threatened, it may attack your dog. Some diseases can also be transferred from dogs to seals or vice versa. When walking your dog, keep it on a leash and at least 50 metres away from seals.

Feeding seals is not good for them!

Seals are wild animals and know how to fend for themselves. Feeding a seal can encourage dependency on humans. It can also become aggressive around people when they are used to being fed. Animals can become malnourished or sick if given the wrong foods.

Prevent injuries to seals

If a seal approaches your boat, slow down. If fishing, remove your line from the water until the seal moves on. Baited fishing lines and hooks can cause injuries to seals.

Seals are protected by law

People who harm seals can be fined up to approximately \$6,000 or face up to 6 months imprisonment under the *Wildlife Act 1975*. Call DSE on 136 186 if you see anyone harassing or harming a seal.

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Service Centre 136 186

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