

Sea lions

Stat attack

Sea lions were granted full protection in 1893, but only began breeding on the mainland again in the 1990s. Between 1994 and 2006, 28 known pups were born on the Otago coast.

Local nuggets

A male sea lion has made himself quite at home in the Otago Harbour, and can often be seen 'cruising' around in search of octopus and fish. His favourite haul-out site is a small sandy beach and grassed area right next to the Ravensbourne Fertiliser works, where he has been spotted periodically for at least 10 years. He could hang around for a while yet, as Sea lions can live for up to 20 years.

Hey guess what?

Sea lions can travel inland to rest or give birth, and it is not uncommon to come across them in sand dunes, coastal scrub or forest.

Linnaeus says...

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Otariidae
Genus: *Phocarcos*
Species: *P. hookeri*

Jargon hunter

The New Zealand Sea lion was formerly known as the Hooker's Sea lion.

Most of us remember them for their smelly fish-breath and ferocious-sounding roars when we disturb their afternoon nap. There is more to Sea lions than buzzing flies and bad breath, however, and coastal New Zealand residents are fortunate to share their backyards with them, as they are the most threatened Sea lion species in the world.

Once common right around the New Zealand mainland, their numbers were drastically reduced by European sealers in the 19th century. Ever since then, colonies have been largely confined to the subantarctic Auckland Islands, with a small number on Campbell Island and the Snares Islands. The current total population does not exceed 12,000. It is encouraging, then, that New Zealand Sea lions have finally begun to return to the mainland in recent years, with a small number of females coming ashore on the Otago coast to pup. There are now approximately 150 Sea lions permanently based on the mainland, from Oamaru south.



Female sea lion and pup

Sea lions may be easily distinguished from the more common Fur seal by their blunt nose and short whiskers. They are also larger than Fur seals, with the dark brown adult males weighing in at up to 500kg and possessing a distinctive 'mane' of thick fur around their neck and chest. Female Sea lions, smaller at 100-160kg, are light buff, or creamy-grey in colour.

Unlike Fur seals, Sea lions prefer to come ashore to rest and breed on sandy beaches. The Catlins is a Sea lion 'hotspot', especially for males. Cannibal Bay and Surat Bay are popular 'haul-out' (rest) sites, and also offer fantastic opportunities to view these special creatures – just ensure you keep your distance (at least 20m), as sea lions can become aggressive if they feel threatened or disturbed.



Male sea lion (right) with two females – the colour differences are very clear

