



ANTARCTICA NEW ZEALAND INFORMATION SHEET

SEALS

Introduction

Four species of these carnivorous mammals live and breed in the Antarctic and are all found in the Ross Sea region. These four are true or earless seals, those without flaps on their ears. They are well adapted to the cold climate, with their big round bodies, layers of blubber and small extremities.

Fortunately these species of seals were not hunted extensively by sealers, who concentrated instead on the southern fur seal and the elephant seal, commonly found in the sub-Antarctic as well.

Seals catch most of their prey under water, but spend some time on land or ice floes giving birth, raising their young and basking in the sun. On land they are quite ungainly but in the water they are very graceful and are excellent swimmers. Much larger numbers of seals are found in the Antarctic compared to the Arctic, which reflects the much greater abundance of food resources in the Southern Ocean.

Crabeater seal - *Lobodon carcinophagus*

Despite its name, the crabeater seal feeds almost exclusively on krill, which it strains through its teeth. They are the most numerous of the Antarctic seals and live on the pack ice. They reach up to 2.7 metres long and weigh over 250 kilograms, but little else is known about them.

Weddell seal - *Leptonychotes weddelli*

More is known about Weddell seals because they live along the Antarctic coastline. In the winter, though, they spend a lot of time under the inshore sea ice because it is warmer in the water than in the air. They enlarge holes and cracks in the ice by chewing so they can come up for air and, in summer, to lie on the ice. They are about the same size as crabeaters. In spring, groups of pregnant females and a male gather on the ice. A single pup is born which feeds on its mother's rich milk, which is the richest milk of any mammal.

They can dive to 600 metres in search of fish and have specially adapted eyes for underwater vision in low light levels. While underwater, seals call to one another, and this can sometimes be heard above on the ice.

Leopard seal - *Hydurunga leptonyx*

Like crabeater seals, leopard seals are surface feeders with krill an important part of their diet. They also prey on penguins and other seal species and hunt for fish and squid. Not much is known about their breeding habits. They live mostly on the pack ice.

Ross seal - *Ommatophoca rossi*

Ross seals are rarely found anywhere but on floating ice, and until 1963 fewer than 20 Ross seals had ever been seen. Little is known about them. They hunt squid and fish at depths below the pack ice.

FURTHER READING

Antarctica (2nd edition). Readers Digest. 1990.

Explore Antarctica. L. Crossley. Cambridge University Press. 1995.

Life in the Freezer. A. Fothergill. BBC Books. 1993.

Antarctica: A lonely planet travel survival kit. Jeff Rubin. 1996.