



Cape Cross Seal Reserve

The facts of life in a seal colony

The coastline of Southern Africa is the only place in the world where you find Cape fur seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus*), and the Cape Cross Seal Reserve is home to the largest breeding colony in the world.

Based on aerial photographs taken during the breeding season, there are up to 210 000 seals at Cape Cross during November and December. These pictures represent the story of fighting, mating, breeding and fishing – the facts of life and death in a seal colony.

Breeding season

In mid-October bulls come ashore to establish breeding territories. In dramatic displays of chest-to-chest combat, pushing and biting, they defend their territories, waiting for pregnant, adult females to arrive. Then it is the turn of the females to fight for a place within a territory. When the sand has settled, a male may have shrunk in size from 360 kg to 187 kg, but the reward is control of a territory with seven to 66 females in his harem.

Females breed in synchrony once a year. After an eight-month gestation period, they give birth to one pup in late November/early December. In a 34-day period, 90% of pups

are born at Cape Cross. Pups weigh between 4.5–6.4 kg and are 60–70 cm in length, similar in size to human babies. Pups suckle soon after birth and a strong bond is established between mother and pup. This bond is essential for mothers to find their young in the midst of tens of thousands of bleating pups! Sound and scent play an important role in mother-infant recognition.

The first few months of life are perilous for the pups. There is a 30% infant mortality rate, with jackals and brown hyaenas the principal predators. When they are eight months old, pups take to the water to fish, sometimes staying out at sea for four or five days. They continue to nurse from their mothers for a year, and at three years old, females are ready to mate.

Built for the sea

Streamlined for fast and effective swimming, the limb bones of seals are almost completely withdrawn into their bodies, with only the flipper protruding. Unlike other mammals, the normal relaxed position of the seal's nostril is closed, and their eyes, which are very large, can see forward and to the sides. These adaptations help them when hunting for prey underwater.



Ridges on the soles of their flippers help seals climb on wet, slippery rocks. Their teeth are sharp and pointed to grip slimy food, but small fish are swallowed whole, headfirst so that the scales don't scratch their mouths. Shaking their heads from side to side, seals tear larger fish before eating them and attract gulls and other scavengers, which stand by to catch a piece of flying meat.

Like us, seals are warm-blooded, which means they can regulate their body temperature, with an internal temperature of 37°C. Since the Benguela Current varies from 10–15°C, seals need to be well insulated. Blubber and two layers of coarse hair help to keep them warm. When the outer guard hairs are wet, the dense, fine inner hairs remain dry. Air trapped in this layer provides additional insulation.

With bodies designed for the sea, Cape fur seals spend 30% of each month in the water.

Did you know?

One of the most endearing features of Cape fur seals – their ears – sets them apart from true seals. Cape fur seals have external ears, but true seals don't.

The Cape fur seal is one of three species of fur seals that occurs off the coast of Southern Africa.

These seals do not migrate, but they do travel long distances. A seal tagged at Geyser Rock, South Africa, was found at Cape Cross, after travelling 1 600 km in just 20

months. Seals have also been found 200 km away from shore.

The first recorded sighting of Cape fur seals off the coast of Southern Africa was in 1884. In 1922 Namibia (then South West Africa) introduced legislation to control the utilisation of seals. Since then the population has increased dramatically.

Questions about seals:

What do seals eat?

An adult Cape fur seal eats about 270 kg (594 lbs) of food a year. The main food choices for these top predators are Cape horse mackerel, Cape hake, lantern fish and pelagic goby.

What animals prey on seals?

At sea sharks and killer whales prey on Cape fur seals and on the mainland black-backed jackals and brown hyaenas are their main predators.

What is the unpleasant odour at Cape Cross?

The prevailing odour at Cape Cross is one of life and death – a combination of dead seals, excrement and strong winds that stir the smells of the sea with those on land before delivering them directly to your nostrils.

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Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- Do not feed or throw objects at the animals.
- Stay on the walkway and keep to existing roads and tracks.
- Do not litter.
- Please do not remove any plant, animal or mineral material from the park.
- Please adhere to the rules and regulations as printed on your park permit.

Have fun!

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