

Montague Island Seals

Featured Dive

Category: Boat dives

Depth: Various, shallow (snorkel) to 20 m

Rating: Moderate due to the exposed nature of the island and the potential for adverse currents

Access: Commercial boat operators out of Narooma

Special equipment: Camera!

John Turnbull

Executive Committee Member, National Parks Association of NSW

Australian fur seals *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*, like all marine mammals in Australia, are a protected species. Decimated by hunting in the 19th century, they are making a slow recovery but still face a range of ongoing threats, particularly entanglement in fishing gear and habitat loss.

Unlike whales and dolphins which spend their entire lives in water, seals must leave the water to breed so they need suitable haul-out sites. Montague Island is the largest fur seal colony in NSW with around 2,000 seals. The island is a critical seabird breeding site, home to NSW's largest little penguin colony, and is culturally significant for the local aboriginal people.

Montague Island is a nature reserve which was recently awarded green list status by the IUCN, recognising the quality of its natural values, shared social benefits and effective management. You can visit for a day of walking and sightseeing or stay overnight on the island. For divers, however, the best plan is to stay in Narooma and travel out to the island for double boat dives with one of the local charter operators.

Once underwater, the games begin. Seals, particularly pups, are curious and playful. They actively seek out interesting objects like big black neoprene-coated mammals with shiny hoses and tanks on their backs. They seem to particularly like cameras with dome lenses, perhaps as they see their reflection in the lens. They are very fast and appear out of nowhere; pause to



Australian fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus* **Photo:** John Turnbull

look at you, maybe even inch up for a closer look, then shoot off. The really curious ones may even tap your lens with their nose.

As a responsible diver, it's important to allow the seals to come to you. Stay close to the bottom, and make no sudden movements. You are in their territory and they are, after all, wild animals. Under no circumstances should you reach out to a seal or attempt to touch it. Overt interaction with marine mammals can lead to changes in their behaviour and consumption of energy stores (eg in flight response) which they cannot afford.

In our recent November trip to Montague Island we saw dozens of seals. Conditions were not great, with

low visibility, yet the experience was one we will not forget. Water temperatures were cool, as low as 14 degrees C, so a dry suit or thick wetsuit and hood are essential. As usual in open water conditions, safety gear including surface marker buoy and signalling device should also be carried.

Visiting Montague Island is a must for anyone interested in our unique Australian fauna. Seals are truly the playful puppies of the sea. Watching them in their natural habitat, surrounded by thousands of kilometres of open ocean, brings real meaning to the phrase "marine park".

Photos: bit.ly/montagueisland