

WorldWideWonders



THE BROWN FUR SEALS OF CAPE CROSS

LORDS OF THE ATLANTIC

Smells, sounds and spectacular sights overwhelm the senses of travellers visiting the sprawling pinniped colonies along Namibia's foggy Skeleton Coast



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

In this and the preceding page, two partial views of the Brown (or Cape) fur seal colony at Cape Cross, Namibia. While fur seals spend most of the year at sea, they never fully evacuate the rookeries as mothers and pups return to them throughout the year. There normally is no established dispersal from a colony.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

These seals have external ear flaps and very long whiskers (*vibrissae*) which may extend backward past the ear flaps, especially in adult males.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

Those driving across Namibia and travelling along its legendary Skeleton Coast on the route from Windhoek to Etosha should not forget to plan a short detour to visit the spectacular Brown (or Cape) fur seal colony at Cape Cross, a desolate wind-swept beach by the ever-pounding, grey Atlantic ocean - even a brief visit with just an overnight stay at the beautiful **Cape Cross Lodge** will yield excellent photographic opportunities and wonderful memories. The Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*, also known as the Cape fur seal, South African fur seal and Australian fur seal, is one of the nine species of pinnipeds in the *Otariidae* family, which are much more closely related to sea lions than true seals, sharing with them external ears, relatively long and muscular foreflippers, and the ability to walk on all fours. Fur seals - as their common name implies - are also marked by a dense underfur, which made them a long-time object of commercial hunting. Brown fur seals are very social animals, which often gather into colonies or rookeries in numbers ranging from 500–1500; they prefer to haul out and breed on rocky islands, rock ledges and reefs, and pebble and boulder beaches, but some large colonies can also be found on sandy beaches. Fur seals spend most of the year at sea, but are never too far from land. They have been occasionally recorded 160 km from land. The African fur seal population lives around

the southern and southwestern coast of Africa, from Cape Cross in Namibia and around the Cape of Good Hope to Black Rocks near Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape province. The Australian one is instead found in Bass Strait, at four islands off Victoria in southeastern Australia and on five islands off Tasmania. Australian fur seals were hunted intensively between 1798 and 1825 for commercial reasons, but hunting stopped in Australia in 1923, and their population is still recovering, causing increasing friction with South Australian fishermen as their range expands. South African fur seals currently have a very robust and healthy population, as harvesting of seals was outlawed in South Africa in 1990. Brown fur seals however are still slaughtered in Namibia. Permits are issued for the killing of pups for their luxurious fur and adult males for their genitalia, which are considered an aphrodisiac in some countries. It is also considered necessary to limit seal numbers in Namibia because of the supposed effect seals have on the country's fish harvest, but research by environmental groups disputes this. Wildlife photographers and nature lovers will naturally tend to strongly side with this latter view, as the idea itself of slaughtering such intelligent, interactive, highly vocal animals becomes quite unthinkable after having admired them freely socializing, resting and rearing their young in their harsh, barren and dangerous world. ●



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

The brown fur seal is the largest and most robust of the nine species belonging to the family *Otariidae*. It has a large and broad head with external ear flaps and a pointed snout that may be flat or upturned slightly. Fur seals share with other otariids the ability to turn their rear limbs forward and move on all fours.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Many fur seal species were heavily exploited by commercial sealers, especially during the 19th century when their fur was highly valued. Many populations, notably the Guadalupe fur seal, Northern fur seal, and Cape fur seal, suffered dramatic declines and are still recovering. Currently, most species are protected and hunting is limited.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

The hindflippers are short relative to the large body, with short, fleshy tips on the digits.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Fur seals are fast, powerful hunters endowed with fearsome teeth.



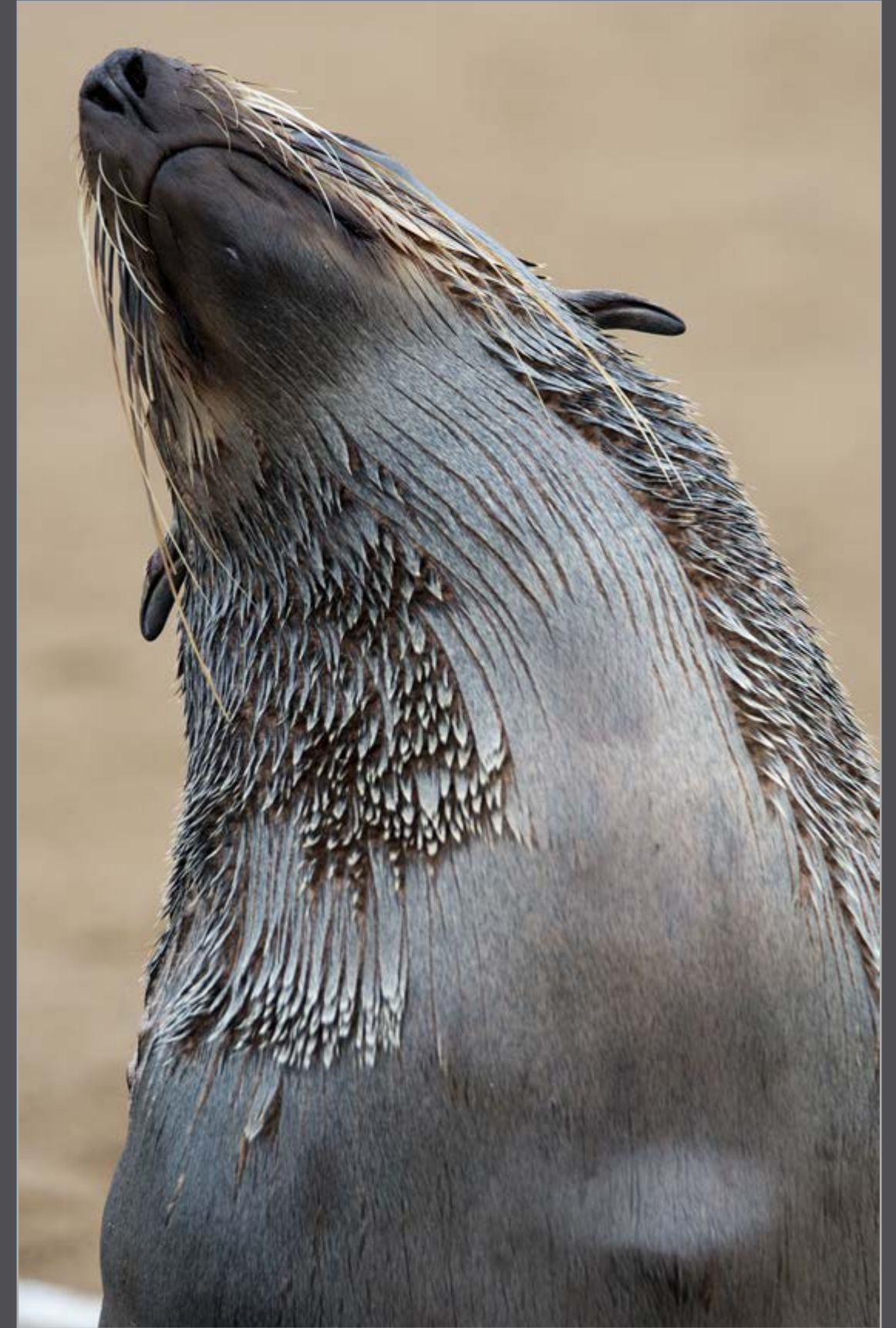
Cape gull *Larus vetula* feeding off Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus* pup carcass

After several continuous days of nursing the newborn pups, females go on extended foraging trips that can last as long as a week, returning to the rookery to feed their pups until they are weaned. Pup mortality however is high, as seen here. Males instead fast during the reproductive season, unwilling to leave their females or territories.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

The Brown fur seal's main predator is the Great White shark, although they are also preyed upon by Killer whales. Land-based predators in Namibia include black-backed jackals and brown hyenas.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

The brown fur seal dives for its food. The African subspecies can dive as deep as 204m and for as long as 7.5 minutes.



Cape gull *Larus vetula*

The African fur seal's diet is made of up to 70% fish, 20% squid and 2% crab, but other crustaceans, cephalopods and sometimes birds are also eaten. The acrid smell of their excrements permeates a rookery - and can be quite overwhelming. Here a pair of Cape gull *Larus vetula* buzz the colony while searching for dead pups.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

When not mating, fur seals lead a pelagic existence in the open sea. Fur seals feed on fish, squid, and krill. Several species of the southern fur seal also have sea birds, especially penguins, as part of their diets. The fur seals, in turn, are preyed upon by Great White sharks, Orcas, and occasionally by larger sea lions.



Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

The harsh, hostile environment of the Cape fur seals of Cape Cross is shared by several other terrestrial and marine species. This adult Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* - a powerful diver and active hunter - is skimming the ice-cold waves of the Atlantic surf while searching for fish disturbed by the seals' activity.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Pups are born black and molt to gray with a pale throat within three to five months.



Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

The shipwrecks littering the Skeleton Coast often become nesting site for cormorants and other sea birds.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Fur seals are generally smaller than sea lions. However, their flippers tend to be proportionately longer, their pelage tends to be darker, and their *vibrissae* are more prominent. Males - seen here - are often more than five times heavier than the females, making them among the most sexually dimorphic of all mammal groups.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*
Male territories are established through display, vocalisations, sparring and combat.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*
The foreflippers of the fur seal are dark brown to black.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Males of the African subspecies *A. p. pusillus* are 2.3 metres (7.5 ft) in length on average and weigh from 200 to 300 kilograms (440–660 lb). Females are smaller, averaging 1.8 metres (5.9 ft) in length and weighing an average of 120 kilograms (260 lb).



Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

A panoramic shot of a low-flying flock of marauding Great cormorants above the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.



Ruddy turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Several species of waders and shore birds share the environment of Cape Cross.



Grey-headed Gull *Larus cirrocephalus*

Several gull species can be observed along the shore.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

The foreflippers of fur seals are covered with sparse hair over about three-quarters of their length - notice the vestigial claws.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Fur seals gather in large assemblages at specific beaches or rocky outcrops to give birth and breed. All species are polygynous, meaning dominant males reproduce with more than one female. For most species, total gestation lasts about 11.5 months, including a several-month period of delayed implantation of the embryo.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Globally, most fur seal populations today can be considered healthy, mostly because they often prefer remote habitats that are relatively inaccessible to humans. Nonetheless, environmental degradation, competition with commercial fisheries, and climate change potentially pose threats to some populations.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*
This species is an inquisitive and friendly animal when in the water.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*
Males fur seals are dark gray to brown, while females are light brown to gray.



Brown fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Fur seals are very vocal. When a mother returns from sea to feed her pup, she emits a loud call which attracts all the nearby pups, but she only responds to her pup.



White-fronted Plover *Charadrius marginatus*

Like many other shore birds, Plovers are very cryptic and not easily spotted in their natural environment.