

Endangered Finnish seals go online to highlight plight

May 12 2017, by James Brooks



This is an undated image made available by the World Wildlife Fund Finland of a Saimaa Ringed Seal as it rests on a rock in Lake Saimaa, Finland. Wildlife conservationists in Finland are giving endangered seals in Europe's fourth largest lake a spot of online fame—they plan to stream encounters with some of the estimated 360 remaining seals in southeastern lake of Saimaa, in a bid to raise awareness of their plight. (Ismo Marttinen/WWF Finland via AP)

Wildlife conservationists in Finland are planning to give endangered

seals a spot of online fame by streaming encounters with some of the few hundred remaining mammals in a bid to raise awareness of their plight.

The Saimaa ringed seal, named after their home in Europe's fourth-largest lake, is found only in these waters and is one of just five remaining freshwater seal species in the world. But milder winters have left few shoreline snow banks for the [seals](#) to burrow into lairs where they give birth to pups, and many get caught in fishing nets.

During the next few weeks, viewers will be able to tune into the seal watch stream known as "Norppa Live," from the Finnish name for seal, although not that much action is expected. Often the seals are difficult to spot, lying motionless on the smooth rounded rocks they resemble. Sometimes all you can see is just an empty rock.

"Not a lot happens," says Joonas Fritze, a conservationist from World Wildlife Fund Finland. "The highlights are seal climbing on a rock, seal turning on a rock, seal scratching itself, but that's the beauty of it ... I guess that's part of it, like, real slow TV. So it's kind of like an opposite of the hectic life people live."

The organization is hoping for a large audience after its successful launch last year became an online hit in Finland, where it was broadcast in offices, schools, libraries and hotel lobbies, drawing more than 2 million viewers in the Nordic nation of 5.5 million.

The irresistible seal pups, with their furry heads, often find rocks sheltered by tall reeds near the shoreline. Other, bigger specimens, sprawl out like lumps of soft rock, unaware of the hidden camera.

Last year a male seal became so popular that thousands of people sent in suggestions to name him—the winner was Pullervo, which referred to

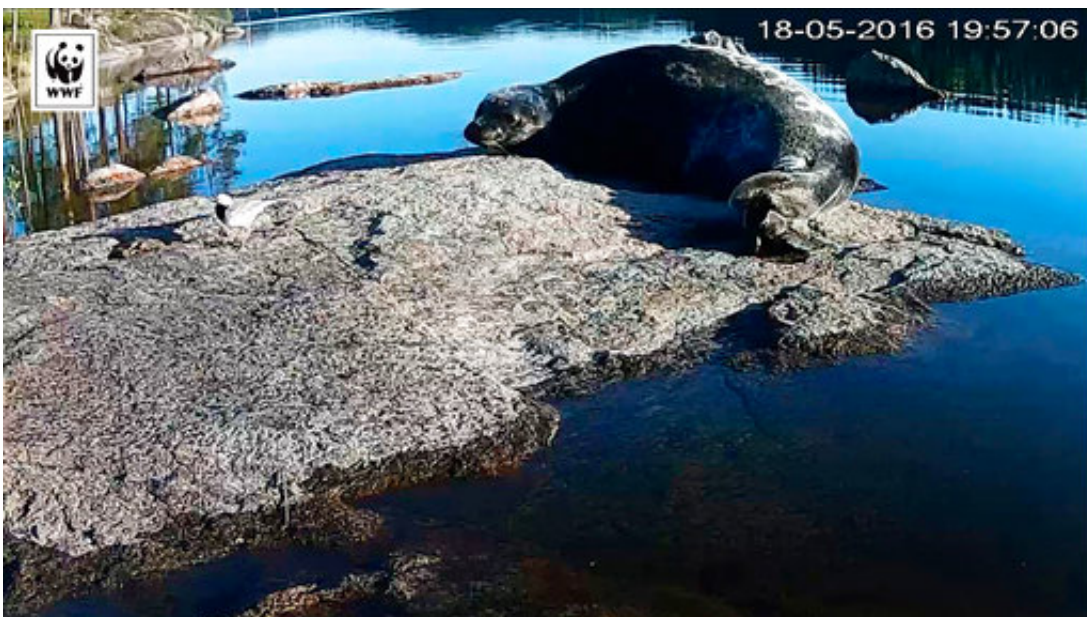
his "chubby" shape. There were hopes of a romance with a popular female seal, but that apparently didn't materialize.

As word has spread about the seals' plight, conservationists again expect millions of viewers to tune in hoping to catch a glimpse of one of the remaining 360 Saimaa seals—according to the latest count by Parks and Wildlife Finland.

Although the seals have a fairly carefree existence in the sprawling labyrinth of waterways that make up Lake Saimaa, dotted with more than 1,300 islands, there is one real threat—fishing nets.

The lake is a popular venue for Finns, who flock to thousands of summer villas spread along the shores of the country's 180,000 lakes, where fishing plays a major role in everyday activities, including laying nets.

Young pups are particularly prone to getting caught in them and consequently drown.



This is grab taken from a World Wildlife Fund Finland live stream shows a Saimaa Ringed Seal resting on a rock in Lake Saimaa, Finland on May 18, 2016. Finland. Wildlife conservationists in Finland are giving endangered seals in Europe's fourth largest lake a spot of online fame—they plan to stream encounters with some of the estimated 360 remaining seals in southeastern lake of Saimaa, in a bid to raise awareness of their plight. (WWF Finland via AP)

Fritze hopes that seals online will help.

"We hope we can raise awareness of this special animal and tell people about the species and its threats," he says. "And people learn that a net fishing is a big threat to the seal."

Lack of snow is also causing a worry for conservationists.

"The ice came quite early, already in December, and there was time for the snow to accumulate and build those snow banks," said Petteri Tolvanen from WWF Finland. "And now the situation is much worse for the seals and in some years there (are) hardly any natural snow banks."

In 2016, helped by a band of volunteers, conservationists decided to build their own snow banks, creating 211 man-made snowdrifts where 40 seal pups were born. Earlier this year, they constructed 277. "The ringed seal is totally dependent on ice and [snow](#) when breeding," Tolvanen said.

Scientists from the nearby University of Eastern Finland in the city of Lappeenranta, are studying the seals with camera traps, using their unique fur patterns to identify them and produce useful data about their movements and population changes.

It's not all bad news. The population has been slowly growing since hunting them was banned in 1955.

"The population is slowly growing, the situation is getting better," said Meeri Koivuniemi, a scientist at the University of Eastern Finland, but cautions that should remain alert to the dangers facing the seals.

WWF Finland launched the live stream wwf.fi/en/norppalive/ on May 10 and is expected to continue till the beginning of June. By that time the seals will have finished molting and will retreat back into the lake's cool waters.

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