

CALIFORNIA SEA LION

Zalophus californianus



Location: The California sea lion is commonly found off the west coastal waters of North America from British Columbia southward to the tip of Baja California and in the Sea of Cortez. This species also resides around the Galapagos Islands.

Diet: This sea lion is carnivorous, able to consume a wide variety of prey. Squid appears to be the most common food, but various fish species, birds, abalone and octopuses may be included in the diet.

Sea lions search for food primarily at night, using sonar for underwater navigation and prey location. They search among the rocks with their muzzles, which may pick up vibrations in the water. The jaws and teeth of the sea lion are adapted for grasping prey but not for chewing. Most prey is swallowed whole, although pieces may be torn off a large item. The layer of fat, or blubber, acts as a food store as well as insulation.

Life Cycle: Sea lions are highly gregarious. Outside of the breeding season, the bulls (males) travel north as far as British Columbia, while cows (females) and young remain in the waters just off their territories known as rookeries. During the birthing and mating season, sea lions gather in the thousands on shore.

After a gestation of about 7-12 months, the cows come ashore shortly before giving birth. A portion of the gestation includes a period of delayed implantation of roughly 2.5-3.5 months during which time the embryo does not develop. Each female usually gives birth to a single pup. The blue-eyed newborn is about 14-36 pounds in weight and measures approximately 2.5-3 feet in length. The mother identifies her pup by scent. The offspring is covered with a special birth coat called lanugo. This is woollier than the next coat and is often dark brown to black. The lanugo is typically molted in 2-3 months into a lighter brown, by which time the pup has acquired some blubber.

While the mothers are tending to their newborns, the males are busy establishing territories in preparation for next breeding opportunity. Most encounters between neighboring bulls go no further than display and threat, but actual fights are frequent when a newcomer attempts to establish a place on the beach. The development of a tough hide and a massive mane over the forequarters may lessen injuries. Approximately 2-4 weeks after the female gives birth, she is ready to breed. A bull attempts to mate with as many females as possible but does not try to keep specific harems. Once the cow has mated with a bull, she goes into the water to feed, returning intermittently to nurse her pup.

While the offspring learns to swim, it may rest on its mother's back. The pup nurses until about 6 months of age, when it is slowly weaned to an adult diet. The youngster becomes independent between 6-12 months of age. Females breed at approximately 4-5 years of age but males wait until they are large enough to compete for territories, between 5-7 years of age. At maturity, sea lion bulls reach around 6.5-8.5 feet in length and weigh roughly 440-660 pounds; the cows are approximately 5-6.5 feet in length and weigh about 110-220 pounds. The life span of California sea lions is approximately 10-15 years in the wild and roughly 20 years in captivity.

Remarks: California sea lions have torpedo-shaped bodies with minimal external projections. Their ears have been reduced to tiny furls, and their genitals and mammarys are tucked inside so as not to interrupt the smooth flow of their bodies through the water. Sea lions paddle with their large front flippers, using their back flippers for steering. They are fast swimmers, capable of reaching speeds of 20-25 miles per hour. They can increase their speed by porpoising or leaping clear of the surface in an arc.

On land, they travel about by using their fore flippers and rotating their hind flippers up under their bodies. They have fairly well developed hipbones, or pelvises, that allow them essentially to move on all 4 limbs like most 4-footed creatures. Since only the lower portions of the limbs show (the rest are tucked in for streamlining), a sea lion really walks on its wrists and heels, producing a stride that is short and awkward.