



CALIFORNIA SEA LION

Pinnipedia

Family: Otariidae

Genus: *Zalophus*

Species: *californianus*



Range: Found from Vancouver Island, British Columbia to the southern tip of Baja, CA in Mexico

Habitat: coastal waters, hauling out on rocks, beaches, docks and other floating objects.

Niche: Diurnal, aquatic but terrestrial for breeding, carnivorous

Wild diet: wide variety of seafood, mainly squid and fish, and sometimes even clams

Zoo diet: fish

Life Span: (Wild) 15-20 years, F 20-25 years, (Captivity) 30+ years

Sexual dimorphism: Males much larger than females, have a sagittal crest and a slight mane.

Location in SF Zoo: Seal pool

APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

Sea lions have streamlined bodies with external ear-flaps, long fore-flippers, and short thick hairs. In the water, they swim using their front flippers like oars and their hind flippers as a rudder. On land, sea lions rotate their hind flippers forward and use all four flippers to move around and support their body weight. A male has a dark brown coat while the female's is slightly lighter in color. Their snout is long, straight and narrow with smooth vibrissae, which they use to help them find their way around and locate prey.

Nostrils automatically close as they dive; sea lions are able to remain submerged for up to 40 minutes. They can bend their long necks back allowing for maneuverability in the ocean waters. Eyes are large, which allow them to see dimmer light. Their underwater vision is acute; like other pinnipeds, California sea lions have rounded lenses that allow their eyes to focus on light that is refracted upon entering water. California sea lions have a well developed tapetum lucidum, which reflect light back through the retina a second time, allowing them to see in low levels of light while diving. Sea lions can discriminate color in the blue-green spectrum; this is probably an adaptation for their aquatic environment as the longer wavelengths of red, yellow and orange are filtered out through water.

Weight: M 600 - 850 lbs F 200 - 250 lbs
Length: M 6 ft - 8 ft F 5 ft - 6.5 ft

STATUS & CONSERVATION

The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972 made it illegal to hunt or harass any marine mammal in U.S. waters. Nevertheless, their population has increased and now conflicts with humans and other wildlife. Many of the prey species of California sea lions are also commercially fished, leading to widespread interactions between sea lions and some fishermen resulting in illegal shooting of sea lions. There has been an increasing mortality of sea lions by entanglement in fishing nets and gear throughout their range.

COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

Emit deep, loud, dog-like barks. They are gregarious and very vocal, particularly during the breeding season. They form groups of several hundred individuals onshore called rafts. Female sea lions are less vocal but emit a unique vocalization when calling their pups, and the pups themselves will bleat and make a high-pitched alarm call. The olfactory lobes of the pinniped brain are generally small; however, on land, smell is important in female-pup recognition and male recognition of estrous females.

They not need to drink water, as they get all the water they need from the food they eat. Most of the sea lion's food is just swallowed whole. They will porpoise out of the water to play and increase swimming speed.

COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

California sea lions prefer to breed on sandy beaches and form large aggregations when ashore. Most births occur in late June and females are able to mate three weeks after birth. Males establish breeding territories that may include up to 14 females. They defend their territories with aggressive physical displays and vocalizations. Females chose their mate rather than the territory where the male is. Delayed implantation of fertilized egg(s) may serve to enable seals to combine birth and mating into a single period and avoid potentially dangerous time ashore.

Pups are born with a dark gray pelage, which changes to dark brown soon after birth. In 4 -5 mos the coat changes to the lighter brown pelage. Females stay with their pups for about 7 to 10 days and then begin to forage at sea for 1 to 3 days at a time and then nursing their pups ashore for a day. Pups are abruptly weaned and abandoned at 6 months.

Gestation: 11 mos (8 mos dev. with a 3 mos delayed implantation)	Sexual Maturity: M 6 -10 yrs, F 3 – 8 yrs
# of Mammas: 2 pair	Weaning Age: 6 mos
# of Young: 1 (rarely 2)	Weight at birth: 13 – 20 lbs , length 13 in.

MISCELLANEOUS

The Ca Sea Lion is the noise of the velocoraptor in “Jurassic Park” and also of the Orcs in “Lord of the Rings” movies. They are easily trained and are common performers in animal acts.

The deepest dive ever recorded for a California Sea Lion is 1,760 feet and the maximum duration recorded is 12 minutes.

Sources:

Walker's Mammals of the World Vol II © 1999 Ronald M. Nowak, pgs 852-855

<http://www.marinemammalcenter.org>

Marine Mammal Center: Pinnipeds of California Handout

Guide to Marine Mammals of the World © 2002, Alfred A. Knopf Inc., p 90-93

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