

California Sea Lion

Zalophus californianus



Photo by John Aschoff

Physical Description:

California sea lions range from a chocolate brown color in males to golden brown in females. Males can weigh 700 to 1,000 pounds and reach 7 feet in length. Females can reach 200 to 250 pounds and 6 feet in length. At about 5 years old males develop a ‘sagittal crest’ – a visible bony bump that sometimes lightens in color as the sea lion ages. California sea lions are known for their noisy barking along piers and marinas.

Photo Identification Methods:

NOAA Fisheries has traditionally branded some California sea lions as a means of long-term tracking.

Natural History:

Species Subtypes:

Historically, the Galápagos sea lion and Japanese sea lion were classified as subspecies of the California sea lion but they may in fact be separate species. There is disagreement amongst scientists about this. A population in the Gulf of California may be genetically isolated from the larger population.

Reproduction:

Breeding takes place mainly from the Channel Islands in Southern California to Mexico. California sea lions reach sexual maturity at 4 to 5 years old and generally breed from May to August. Males are polygamous and gather harems of ten or more females. They aggressively defend their breeding territories with posturing and vocalizations. Most pups are born in June or July. Two to three weeks after giving birth, the females mate again but, like all pinnipeds, they undergo a delayed implantation before the embryo implants in the uterus.

Life Cycle:

Pups are about 2 to 2.5 feet long and weigh 15 to 20 pounds at birth. They nurse for approximately 6 to 10 months, sometimes over a year. California sea lions can live 25 to 30 years.

Range:

California sea lions live along the coastlines of western North America from the Gulf of Alaska to the southern tip of Baja California, Mexico and into the Gulf of California. There is also a population near the Galápagos Islands that may or may not be a separate species.

Diet:

Squid, octopus, rockfish, mackerel and small bait fish like herring and sardines. California sea lions are opportunistic and they feed mainly in upwelling areas. They will also take fish from commercial fishing gear and from dammed rivers.

Status:

The total population of California sea lions is estimated to be over 387,000, with the total population in the USA, alone, to be over 296,000 (including the population between Point Conception and Point Reyes of around 153,000). In Mexico, the species occupies both sides of the Baja California Peninsula and the total population size on the Pacific coast has been estimated at around 59,000 individuals while the population in the Gulf of California consists of around 32,000. They are currently considered of least concern by the IUCN. The population of sea lions in the Sea of Japan became extinct around the 1950s possibly due to habitat destruction during World War II and overharvesting by Japanese fisheries.

Threats:**Historical:**

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, California sea lions were harvested for a variety of purposes and bounties were placed on them to reduce fisheries impacts.

Current:

Poaching, entanglement in fishing gear and marine debris, and predation by killer whales and great white sharks are all threats to California sea lions. During El Niño years prey is greatly reduced and many die of starvation. They also accumulate pollutants and toxins such as DDT, PCBs, urban runoff and waste. They sometimes die of poisoning from domoic acid or diseases contracted from terrestrial animals.

NOAA declared an unusual mortality event (UME) for California sea lions during 2013-2017. High mortality of pup and juvenile age classes were documented during this time in Southern California and NOAA identified changes in the availability of sea lion prey species, particularly sardines, as a contributing factor. Most of the pups were emaciated and dehydrated. Changes in prey abundance and distribution have been linked to warm-water anomalies in the California Current that have impacted a wide range of marine taxa.

Columbia River Sea Lion Conflict:

For several years there has been an ongoing conflict involving sea lions at the Columbia River. The sea lions (mostly California but a few Steller's as well) have been taking advantage of the bottleneck at the Bonneville Dam fish ladders and helping themselves to threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead. Non-lethal hazing attempts were mostly ineffective. Beginning in 2008, state and tribal resource managers were given authority to use lethal measures to remove California sea lions from the area. In December 2018, the president signed into law legislation that gives these managers more flexibility to manage sea lion predation on Columbia River fish populations including expanding the sea lion removal area both above and below Bonneville Dam, allowing the removal of Steller sea lions as well as California sea lions, and not requiring as stringent procedures to qualify sea lions for removal. From 2008-19, wildlife

managers for WDFW, ODFW, and IDFG removed (not all by lethal means) a total of 219 California sea lions that met the federal criteria for removal below the dam.

Fun Facts:

- California sea lions are known for their intelligence and playfulness and are usually the trained ‘seals’ found in zoos and aquariums.
- California sea lions are incredibly social and often float together in ‘rafts’.
- The California sea lion is the fastest pinniped reaching speeds of 25 miles per hour.
- The deepest dive ever recorded for a California sea lion was 1,760 ft, and the longest dive was 12 minutes.
- Mother and pup sea lions can recognize each other in crowded rookeries through their unique vocalization and scent.
- Pier 39 in San Francisco is world famous for its California sea lion population. Anywhere from 150 to 600 animals arrive there each year and naturalists are even on hand to provide education.
- There are rumors that South Korea would like to relocate California sea lions into the Sea of Japan habitat of the extinct Japanese sea lion.

Sources:

www.marinemammalcenter.org

animals.nationalgeographic.com

www.nmfs.noaa.gov

www.iucnredlist.org

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