

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System

California Department of Fish and Wildlife

RIBBON SEAL
Family: PHOCIDAE
M227

Histiophoca fasciata
Order: PINNIPEDIA

Class: MAMMALIA

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The ribbon seal is extremely rare in California; one extralimital occurrence was recorded in November 1962. A 200-pound male in unhealthy condition was found on a beach just south of Morro Bay (Roest 1964). Ribbon seals are found in North Pacific waters, especially in the Bering and Okhotsk Seas. Usually solitary, although loose aggregations may occur on large ice flows. The least abundant species of ice seal, its population is estimated at 100,000 (Burns 1978). During years of unusually extensive sea ice formation, ribbon seals travel greater distances south than in normal years. Inhabits sea ice during late winter, spring and early summer. Breeding and molting (late-March to July) take place on sea ice. Appears to be seasonally pelagic in the absence of sea ice during late summer and fall. Rarely hauls out on land (Burns 1969, 1970, 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Little information. Eats a variety of fish, cephalopods and crustaceans, including crabs, shrimps, mysids, cod and pollock. Feeding activity is considerably reduced during May and June (Shustov 1965, Lowry et al. 1977, 1978).

Cover: Inhabits pelagic waters, particularly along the edge of the Bering Sea continental shelf. Hauls out on relatively thick "clean" ice at the inner ice front zone, which usually occurs in offshore waters. Unusually tolerant of human activities (Burns 1981).

Reproduction: Breeding activities take place on ice floes. Females often leave their pup during daylight hours to feed at sea.

Water: No information.

Pattern: Requires sea ice for resting, breeding and molting; apparently pelagic during ice-free months.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong; circadian.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Occurs pelagically when seasonal sea ice breaks up and melts during late summer and fall. Migratory routes unknown; most seals probably remain in the Bering Sea. Distances traveled during migratory movements are dependent on yearly ice conditions. During years of unusually heavy ice formation, ribbon seals may travel further south.

Home Range: No information.

Territory: None maintained.

Reproduction: Breeds April to May. Mating system unclear; appears to be a form of polygamy. Basic reproductive

unit is mother-pup pair. Males associate with females near the time of estrus. Gestation is 11 months with a delayed implantation period of about 3.5 months (Burns 1969, 1978, 1981). Females give birth to a single pup, pup nurses for 2 to 4 weeks. Feeds to some extent throughout lactation, although some weight loss occurs during this time. Weaning is abrupt. Mating occurs at or soon after weaning. Typical life span is about 20 years, and most females pup annually by age 2 to 4 years.

Niche: Little known of predators; may be preyed on by sharks and killer whales in pelagic waters. On average, 2,000 ribbon seals are harvested annually in Alaska (Burns 1978).

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