

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

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CALIFORNIA SEA-LION

*Zalophus californianus*

Family: OTARIIDAE  
M170

Order: CARNIVORA

Class: MAMMALIA

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The most abundant pinniped in California waters; over 50,000 are found on California islands and along entire mainland coast (Bonnell et al. 1978, Le Boeuf et al. 1983). Commercially hunted nearly to extinction in the late-1800's, population in California has increased dramatically since 1930's. At sea, found in pelagic and nearshore waters to surf zone. On land, rest and breed in groups of various sizes; on California islands, often found in large rookeries containing thousands of animals. Haul out on offshore rocks, sloping rock outcroppings, sandy and cobblestone beaches, jetties, and buoys. Sometimes travel up rivers and bays. Breed May to August in concentrated rookeries on Channel Islands and in Mexico. Males migrate northwards after breeding season, while females and pups generally remain near breeding rookeries. Females rarely give birth north of San Miguel Island.

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Feed opportunistically on fish and cephalopods, including Pacific whiting, rockfish, anchovy, hake, flat-fish, small sharks, squid, and octopus (Keyes 1968, Morejohn 1977, Antonelis et al. 1981). Frequently forage in groups, which may increase in size with increasing size of prey schools (Fiscus and Baines 1966). Capable of dives to 250 m (820 ft) under experimental conditions (Ridgway 1972). Typical dives last 3-7 min; dives of 20 min have been recorded.

**Cover:** In the water, often observed in small groups swimming rapidly, "porpoising," surfing waves, or resting on surface with flippers extended. On land, occur in small groups and dense rookeries during breeding and non-breeding seasons.

**Reproduction:** Females give birth and nurse on land, entering water alone, or with pup, for thermoregulatory purposes, and alone during feeding trips. Mating takes place in the water and on land on all substrates (Peterson and Bartholomew 1967, Heath 1981).

**Water:** Freshwater requirements are met through metabolic processes and food (Pilson 1970, Harrison and Kooyman 1968).

**Pattern:** Prefer haul-out and breeding sites with nearby food supply, and easy access to water where human disturbance is minimal. Large groups may be frightened into the water by the appearance of a person.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, circadian activity pattern.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Annual migratory movements of males occur: southward to breeding rookeries in Channel Islands and Mexico in spring, and northward in late summer

following breeding season. Año Nuevo Island and the Farallon Islands provide major haul-out grounds for males throughout the year (Orr and Poulter 1965, Le Boeuf and Bonnell 1980). Little is known of female migratory movements, although they appear to remain near breeding rookeries (Peterson and Bartholomew 1967, Odell 1981).

Home Range: No information found.

Territory: Adult males maintain terrestrial and aquatic territories in breeding season. Territorial boundaries, often fluid and unstable, nearly always extend to water and often into deep water (Heath 1981).

Reproduction: Breed May to August. Highly polygynous, adult males establish and defend territories. Preferred territories contain highest number of females, and controlled by largest breeding bulls. Males maintain territories for 2-6 wk. Most apparently fast during this time (Odell 1981). Females give birth to a pup 1-2 days after arrival, come into estrus and mate about 2 wk following parturition. Gestation probably 11 mo, and implantation appears delayed (Odell 1972). Mothers begin to leave the pup at 4 days of age, making progressively longer feeding trips at sea. Lactation lasts for several mo; mother-pup bond may persist for a yr or longer (Peterson and Bartholomew 1967).

Niche: Preyed on by great white sharks, but apparently less frequently than California phocids (Le Boeuf et al. 1982). Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) also prey on sea lions. Accumulation of nitrogen compounds from large rookeries enriches nearby waters. A variety of diseases occur including leptospirosis and SMSV, which is similar to swine virus in domestic animals (Mate 1978, Odell 1981).

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Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.