

SECTION: Biology, Utilization and Conservation of Northern Marine Mammals

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TITLE: Biology of the ribbon seal, Histriophoca fasciata, in the Bering Sea.

ABSTRACT

The ribbon seal is of medium size when compared with other phocids of Bering Sea. Markings and the color pattern of adults are distinctive, including four light bands on a uniform background of dark brown to black (males) or grey (females). Functional aspects of the striking degree of sexual dimorphism are as yet unknown. Two other distinctive pelage stages occur and are correlated with age. Eye diameter is greater than in other Bering Sea phocids. All indications are that this seal is pelagic during the ice-free months and associated with the southern edge of seasonal sea ice during the periods of birth, nursing, breeding, and molt. Satisfactory age determination can be made on the basis of either growth ridges on the claws or cementum layers on the canine teeth. At birth, pups are approximately 80.5 cm long and weigh 8.4 kg. Average weight of newly weaned pups was 21.3 kg. Proportional growth was as follows: weaned pups, 61 percent of the average adult length; one year, 70.4 percent; two years, 86.6 percent; three years, 92.4 percent; six years, 98 percent. The largest and oldest seal examined was a 23-year-old female, 148.2 kg and 179.7 cm long. Sexual maturity occurred in some two-year-old females (38 percent); this increased to 50 percent in three-year-olds and nearly 100 percent in four-year-olds. In males, sexual maturity was attained in 22 percent of the three-year-olds, 75 percent of the four-year-olds, and 90 percent of the five-year-olds. Breeding occurs principally during late April and early May. The major food items utilized are pelagic and demersal fishes and cephalopods.

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