

POLAR BEAR PREDATION ON BELUKHA WHALES IN THE BERING AND
CHUKCHI SEAS

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Two incidents of polar bear predation on belukha whales that occurred off the coast of western Alaska in April 1984 are described. A single subadult belukha was killed at a small lead in the Chukchi Sea, probably by a female bear with three cubs, and at least 40 whales were killed at an ice entrapment by one or more bears in the northern Bering Sea. A review of such occurrences off Alaska, Canada, and Eurasia indicates that belukhas are normal prey of polar bears. Bear predation may occur when whales are entrapped by ice or while unrestrained whales are passing through leads or surfacing at holes in deteriorating ice sheets. Bear predation probably has little effect on belukha populations, although it may be of occasional significance at entrapments when many whales are killed that eventually would have been released. Belukhas are large in comparison to other potential prey and may be of some local importance in polar bear diets.

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