



CRABEATER SEAL
Lobodon carcinophaga





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Order : *Carnivora* — Family : *Phocidae*

GEOGRAPHIC RANGE :

The species is restricted to the Antarctic continent. During the southern summer, it is mainly found in Graham's Land and the Ross Sea.

HABITAT :

Crabeater seals live almost exclusively on the Antarctic pack ice, up to 79°S. They often haul-out on drifting sea ice.

DIET :

Despite their name, Crabeater Seals feed primarily on krill, which accounts for over 90% of their diet. Their upper and lower teeth interlock to form a sieve to strain krill from the seawater. The remainder of their diet is made up of fish, cephalopods and invertebrates.

BEHAVIOR :

Crabeater seals are known for their ability to move rapidly on ice, with sinuous serpentine motions of the back, aided by the flippers. On-land speed can range from 19 to 26 km/h, while average underwater speed is 12 km/h. Recent research has revealed that Crabeater Seals can dive up to 500 m and stay submerged for 24 minutes, although most feeding dives occur within the top 20-30 m, and are shorter in duration (4-5 minutes). They are the only species of Antarctic phocid that is gregarious: large groups of up to 1,000 seals have been observed hauled out together. Crabeater Seals have been known to occasionally wander far inland and die of exhaustion. The high mortality in the first year (possibly reaching 80%) is mostly attributed to Leopard Seal predation. Most survivors have injuries and scars from Leopard Seal attacks.

REPRODUCTION :

The breeding season runs from October to December. The mean age of sexual maturity in females varies from 3 to 6 years. Females haul-out singly on an ice floe where they give birth to a single calf. They are joined by a male shortly after. Adult males attend female-pup pairs and stay with the female until her oestrous begins one to two weeks after the pup is weaned. Gestation lasts about 9 months. Neonates are thought to be at least 1.1 m and 36 kg. They grow fast and gain about 4 kg per day during the first weeks, until they reach almost 110 kg. Females fast during lactation and lose up to 50% of their weight. Pups are weaned after about 2-5 weeks, and keep growing until the age of 2. When they have their pups, females aggressively ward off other Crabeater Seals, Leopard Seals and humans.

- Size : 2.2-3.6 m
- Weight : 180-410 kg



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L. QUINN

THREATS :

The species is categorized as "Least concern" (IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, December 2014). Crabeater Seals are considered to be one of the most abundant seal species. There is a large uncertainty regarding the actual population size of the species (estimated size 15-40 million animals).