



FAST FACTS

Common name: Harp seal

Scientific name: *Phoca groenlandica*

Average weight: 130 kg for males, females slightly smaller.

Average length: 1.5 to 2 metres.

Did you know?

The name "harp seal" comes from the large harp-shaped ring on the seal's back.

PHYSIOLOGY

Harp seals are light grey in colour, with large harp-shaped rings on their backs. The rings are less distinctive in females, whose back is mostly black, but they can range in colour from dark brown to black. The harp seal's face is black, but not its head. Its pups are born with a fluffy white coat, which gives the pups the nickname "whitecoats," but it's shed after three week's time.

HABITAT/BEHAVIOUR

Harp seals are found in waters of the Arctic and far north Atlantic Ocean. They are sociable animals that enjoy the company of other seals.

A harp seal's main diet consists of small fish and crustaceans. The seals have been known to dive 180 to 280 metres and can remain submerged for up to 15 minutes. Their lifespan averages 30 years.

Females can birth one pup each year. Mothers recognize their pups by scent and reject every pup but their own. Harp seal mothers let their young nurse for about two weeks and then the pups are left to fend for themselves. Their mother's milk, however, is rich in butterfat and they usually weigh 40 to 45 kilograms when weaned.

RANGE

A harp seal's life revolves around the pack ice, and its spring migration can take it as far as 2,500 kilometres west to summer feeding grounds. The seals migrate to Labrador and Greenland for the winter and return through Lancaster Sound to western regions in the spring. Some go west to the Hudson Strait and Hudson Bay.

There are three populations of the harp seal, based on where they breed: the White Sea, the west ice and the Northwest Atlantic gulf and front. The Northwest Atlantic population is the largest and most studied of the three. The latest Department of Fisheries and Oceans survey, done in 1999, estimates its population to be at 5.2 million seals.

All three populations of harp seal are hunted each year, and there is much controversy surrounding the activity. Seal hunters are not allowed to hunt pups anymore but, as soon as the pups' white, fluffy coats are gone, they're fair game.