

Pinnipeds of the Commander Islands (Part 2)

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2. Sea lion: *Eumetopias jubatus*, Schr.¹

Sea lions, predominantly males, live on the Commander Islands during the winter, i.e., from October to April. At the beginning of April they go away, presumably to the eastern coast of Kamchatka, where a part reproduce themselves. No females were found in the neighborhood of the Islands until 1932. In April of that year a female was killed near the Bering Islands; she had an embryo 655 mm long. In the middle of the 19th century, though, sea lions used to bear young near the Commanders.

Sometimes in summer young individuals, males, can be found, it has been reported, in an area used by *Galorhinus*, in the latter's rookeries on Copper Island. The winter rookeries of the sea lion on the Islands are located as follows: Arij (or sea lions) Island Rook; southern extremity of Bering Island; northwestern and southeastern extremities of Copper Island. In all these habitats, the sea lions occupy high cliffs or rocks, surrounded by water. The numbers on the rookeries vary, according to the fishermen, from 50 to 1,000. At the beginning of February, 1931, a hunting party from Copper Island discovered on the most southeastern extremity of the Island more than

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¹ In Russian – *sivutch*; in Aleutian – *kabakch* or *kagkchakch*. [Tr.]

1,000 individuals (this guess must be exaggerated). The sea lions were extremely vigilant and disappeared before the hunters could approach within shooting distance.

The most convenient place for sea lions is the northwestern end of Copper Island, a protected area reserved for black seals. The animals cover the entire surface of a rock with their bodies. When the boat approaches too close to the rookery, they start jumping into the water, then with a continuous growling they circle the boat and splash water on it. However, I did not notice any signs of what could be considered as offensive or at least actively defensive behavior, despite the immediate approaching of a man. Nevertheless, according to some hunters, when sea lions get angry, they will attack a man and often overturn the boat.

The main food of the sea lion consists of fish (*Cyclopterichthys ventricosus*, Hexagrammidae, and *Pleuronectes*). The stomach always contains stones, often the size of a hand, from 5–10 kg. Very few parasites, usually not more than 350 nematodes and 150 cestodes, in one case 5 pieces of Hexagrammidae were discovered.²

The sea-lion hunters use a special technique for capturing them; ambush and an ad hoc disguise by means of a raincoat drawn over the head, are the main parts of this technique. To kill the animals, they shoot them into the sea and then fish them out with special lines, called *vybroski*.

The skins are used locally for the fabrication of canoes, skis, and shoe soles. The whiskers, often half a meter in length, are sold to the Japanese who use them for cleaning opium pipes. The meat is appreciated by the natives. The size of the mature animal often exceeds three meters. The color varies from chocolate brown to light yellow.

² As in the original Russian. [Tr]

3. Common seal: *Phoca vitulina largba*, Pail.³

This species lives on the islands all through the year. The main habitat is located on the northwestern extremity of the Copper Island, in the protected area, and is formed by a small plateau called Kochki⁴, a sort of promontory of the Dalnyh Bobrovj Stolb⁵. During high seas this cliff is submerged by water, and the rookery is naturally affected too. During the summer this place is frequented only by small numbers of seals.

Much the same as sea lions, seals are bolder here than anywhere else and they follow a man, when disturbed by him, as far as beneath the Beaver Cliff, keeping a short distance away in the water. The females appear at the end of April or in May. Accordingly, the time of pregnancy should equal 11 months. As in the case of other Pinnipedia, the food consists mainly of fish, though with some specific varieties (octopus, crabs, *Phascolosoma*). Many animals have empty stomachs. I had the opportunity to observe an individual seal in pursuit of food near the rookery. It was diving, staying under the water sometimes for 5–6 minutes and, when emerging at the surface, it was swallowing the food acquired in this way. After a while, it would repeat the same procedure. I witnessed the successful capturing of seals through the techniques used by the indigenous hunters. Here is how they do it. When approaching the rookery, the hunters cover their heads with their coats, then they start to dance and to imitate the roaring of the seals. I could see that this procedure had a real impact on the young seals,

³ In Russian – *larga* or *nerpa*; in Aleutian – *khugnakh*, *ischokk* or *ischurghekh*. [Tr.]

⁴ “Cats”. [Tr]

⁵ “Long Beaver Cliff”. [Tr]

who seemed truly amused and came nearer and nearer toward the mimicking hunters, until they could be shot. Very few big seals, though, let themselves be fooled.

The size of the captured seals varied between 125 (juv.)–159 cm. Their color was predominantly straw-yellow with dark spots on the dorsal side. The industrial use of seal is similar to that of sea lion.

4. Hair seal: *Phoca hispida*.⁶

This species is encountered only in individual cases, males, and only during the summer. The food and color are the same as in the case of seals (*Phoca vitulina*). The size of two animals captured was 87 (juv.) and 116 cm.

5. *Erignathus barbatus*.⁷

6. *Histiophoca fasciata*.⁸

Very seldom found.

7. Walrus *Odobenus rosmarus obesus*.⁹

This species, once a steady visitor of the Islands, has not been captured since 1900. From time to time it was seen in several places, and it is presumed that it came with the northern currents from the Bering Sea, where it now lives.

⁶ In Russian – *akiba*. [Tr]

⁷ In Russian – *morskoj zajac*; in Aleutian – also *lach-tak*. [Tr]

⁸ In Russian – *tulenj*. [Tr]

⁹ In Russian – *morj*. [Tr]