



A Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*), a subspecies of walrus, photographed at Ocean

Walrus

COMMON NAME: Walrus

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Odobenus rosmarus*

TYPE: Mammals

DIET: Carnivore

GROUP NAME: Herd

AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN THE WILD: Up to 40 years

SIZE: 7.25 to 11.5 feet

WEIGHT: Up to 1.5 tons

The mustached and long-tusked walrus is most often found near the Arctic Circle, lying on the ice with hundreds of companions. These

marine mammals are extremely sociable, prone to loudly bellowing and snorting at one another, but are aggressive during mating season. With wrinkled brown and pink hides, walruses are distinguished by their long white tusks, grizzly whiskers, flat flipper, and bodies full of blubber.

Walrus Tusks

Walruses use their iconic long tusks for a variety of reasons, each of which makes their lives in the Arctic a bit easier. They use them to haul their enormous bodies out of frigid waters, thus their “tooth-walking” label, and to break breathing holes into ice from below. Their tusks, which are found on both males and females, can extend to about three feet, and are, in fact, large canine teeth, which grow throughout their lives. Male walruses, or bulls, also employ their tusks aggressively to maintain territory and, during mating season, to protect their harems of females, or cows.

Arctic Adaptations

The walrus' other characteristic features are equally useful. As their favorite meals, particularly shellfish, are found near the dark ocean floor, walruses use their extremely sensitive whiskers, called mustacial vibrissae, as detection devices. Their blubbery bodies allow them to live comfortably in the Arctic region—walruses are capable of slowing their heartbeats in order to withstand the polar temperatures of the surrounding waters.

Atlantic and Pacific Subspecies

The two subspecies of walrus are divided geographically. Atlantic walruses inhabit coastal areas from northeastern Canada to Greenland, while Pacific walruses inhabit the northern seas off Russia and Alaska, migrating seasonally from their southern range in the Bering Sea—where they are found on the pack ice in winter—to the Chukchi Sea. Female Pacific walruses give birth to calves during the spring migration north.

Historic Overhunting

Only Native Americans are currently allowed to hunt walruses, as the species' survival was threatened by past overhunting. Their tusks, oil, skin, and meat were so sought after in the 18th and 19th centuries that the walrus was hunted to extinction in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and around Sable Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia.