



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

Harp Seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*)

Description

Harp seals are ‘true seals’ which are characterized by lack of an external ear flap and short forelimbs (unlike sea lions). They have a robust body with a small head and flat, narrow snout. Adults are light gray with a black face and a distinctive black saddle on the back which resembles a harp. Newborn pups are called “whitecoats” for their long, white, lanugo coat.

Habitat and Distribution

Harp seals are distributed in the pack ice of the North Atlantic from Newfoundland to northern Russia. There are three recognized breeding populations. Harp seals are highly migratory and may travel up to 1,600 miles!

Sounds

Harp seal pups produce individually distinctive tonal calls as well as pulsed and mixed calls. A wide variety of underwater sounds are produced by adults during the breeding season for social communication.

Feeding

In the summer, harp seals feed on polar and arctic cod along the ice edge. While migrating in the summer and fall, they feed on capelin, herring, and krill.

Threats

Harp seals have been hunted by humans for centuries. They are also threatened by ship strikes, entanglement in fishing gear, power plant entrapment, oil spills, harassment, and shooting. Loss of sea ice is also a potential threat to their habitat.

Fun Fact

Although harp seals live in the Arctic, they are born with no protective fat. As pups, their white coats absorb sunlight and their fur traps heat, keeping the pups warm.



Family:	Phocidae
Population:	~ 8 million
Status:	Least Concern
Length:	5 – 6 feet
Weight:	290 – 310 lbs