

***Phoca largha*** (Pallas, 1811)

PHOC Phoca 2

SST

FAO Names: En - Larga seal; Fr - Veau marin du Pacifique; Sp - Foca largha .

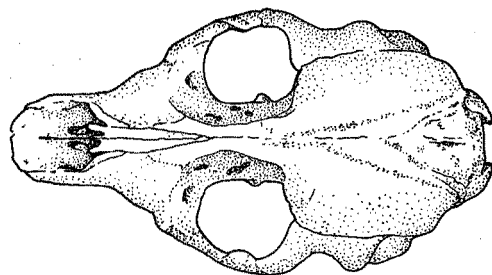


Fig. 523 *Phoca largha*

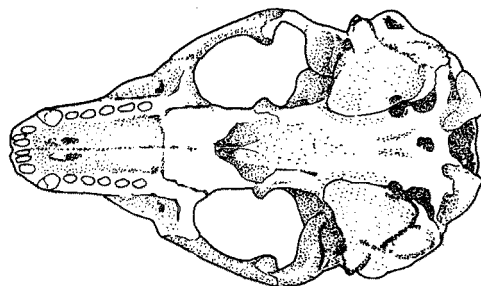
**Distinctive Characteristics:** Until recently, Larga seals were considered a subspecies of the harbour seal. Studies revealed morphological, biochemical, and behavioural differences sufficient to warrant its reclassification as a full species. Larga seals are smaller than harbour seals, but are nearly identical in build and proportions (see p. 258).

Coloration is generally pale, silver-grey above and below, with a darker mantle dominated by dark oval spots of fairly uniform size (1 to 2 cm) and generally oriented parallel to the long axis of the body. There may be light rings around some spots, or large irregular spots or blotches. Spotting tends to be of fairly even distribution and darkness overall. In harbour seals, spots are more faded and sparse on the underside. The face and muzzle are darker than in the harbour seal. Pups are born with a long, woolly, whitish lanugo, which is shed 2 to 4 weeks after birth.

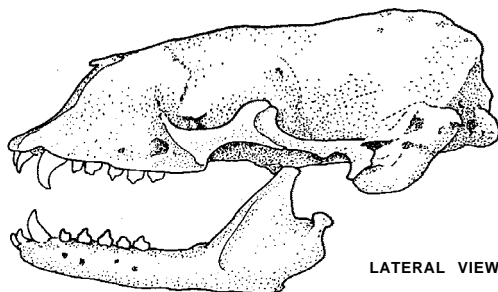
The dental formula of adults is  $I\ 3/2, C1/1, PC\ 5/5$ .



DORSAL VIEW



VENTRAL VIEW



LATERAL VIEW

Fig. 524 Skull

**Can be confused with:** In addition to harbour seals (p. 258), 2 other phocids (ringed [p. 262] and ribbon [p. 270] seals) share the the Larga seal's range. Details of pelage markings and coloration, particularly the presence or absence of large numbers of rings (ringed seals), or conspicuous light and dark bands (ribbon seals) are sufficient to distinguish among them.. Further, ringed seals are generally solitary beside breathing holes, while Larga and ribbon seals are most often found along fractures in larger floes. Of these species, only the ribbon seal moves on ice or land by slashing motion; the others inch along.

**Size:** Adult males are up to 1.7 m and females to 1.6 m long. Adults weigh 82 to 123 kg. At birth, Larga seals are 77 to 92 cm long and weigh 7 to 12 kg.

**Geographical Distribution:** Larga seals are widespread in the Sea of Okhotsk, and Yellow, Japan, and Bering seas. They inhabit the southern edges of the pack ice from winter to early summer and coastal areas, including river mouths, in late summer and autumn. They breed exclusively, and haul out regularly, on ice, but do come ashore on beaches and sand-bars.

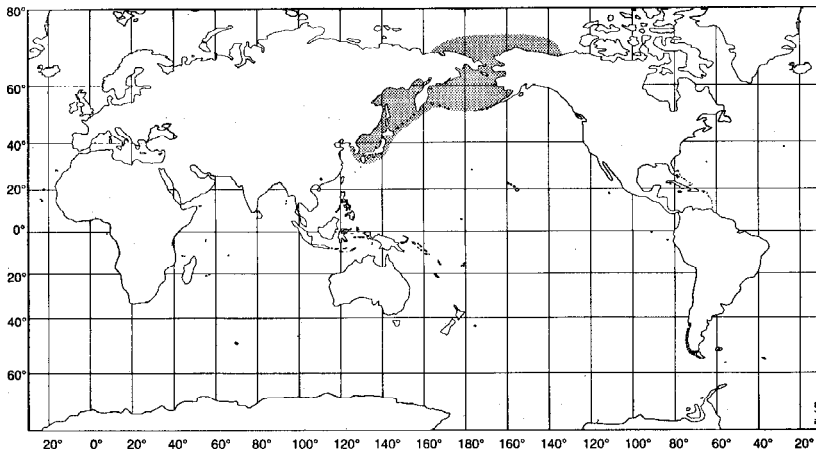


Fig. 525

**Biology and Behaviour:** Larga seals are annually monogamous and territorial. Breeding takes place on pack ice from January to mid-April. Pupping peaks from mid to late March.

Adults can dive to at least 300 m, and they feed on a wide variety of organisms: composition of diet varies with the age of the seal. Newly weaned pups feed on small crustaceans, advance to schooling fishes, larger crustaceans, and octopuses, and finally graduate to bottom dwelling fish and cephalopods.

**Exploitation:** Small commercial and subsistence harvests of Larga seals have been active throughout this century, and continue to this day. An unknown number are incidentally caught in drift and gill net fishing operations every year.

**IUCN Status:** Insufficiently known.

***Phoca hispida*** (Schreber, 1775)

PHOC Phoca 3

SER

FAO Names: En - Ringed seal; Fr - Phoque annelé ou marbré; Sp - Foca marbreada.

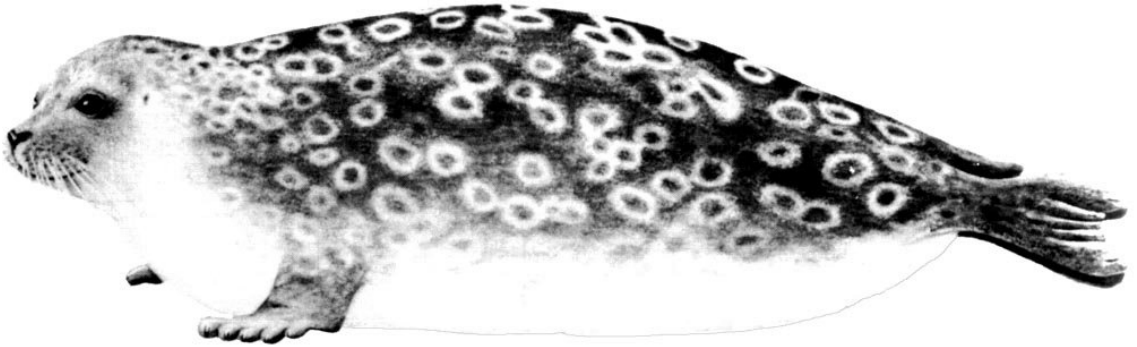


Fig. 526 *Phoca hispida*

**Distinctive Characteristics:** Ringed seals resemble harbour and Larga seals, but are decidedly plumper (axillary girth may reach 80% of length). They also have a smaller, somewhat rounded head, and a conspicuously short and thick neck. The muzzle is short, slightly broader than thick, and blunt. The vibrissae are light-coloured and beaded. The eyes are relatively large and conspicuous. More than in other northern phocids, the size of the head and muzzle and close-set, forward-facing, eyes impart a cat-like appearance. The foreflippers are relatively small and slightly pointed, as described for the harbour seal.

Coloration is the most distinctive feature. Ringed seals are conspicuously marked with spots that, especially on the back and sides, are circled with rings of lighter colour. The spots are the same colour as, or slightly darker than, the background colour of the coat. The rings are light grey to off-white. Seals can be so heavily marked that many spots and rings fuse. Despite individual and regional variation in both species, ringed seals are usually more profusely covered with ringed spots than are harbour seals. There are generally no, or very few, spots on the undersides, a feature that distinguishes ringed seals from both harbour and Larga seals. The background coloration is variable, but normally medium to dark grey above and light grey to silver below. Pups are born with a woolly thick whitish lanugo. Fur of the succeeding coat is finer and slightly longer than that of adults, and is dark grey above, merging to silver below. There may be a few scattered dark spots on the undersides of these juveniles, and few, if any, rings on the back. At this stage, they are known as "silver jars".

The dental formula is I 3/2, C 1/1, PC 5/5.

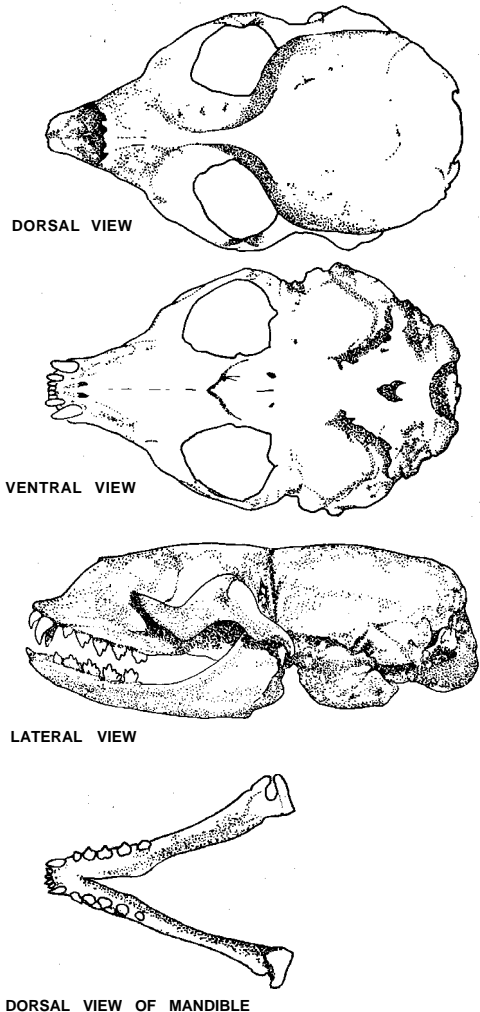


Fig. 527 Skull

**Can be confused with:** Ringed seals share their extensive range with 7 other phocids. They are not likely to be confused with bearded, harp, hooded, or ribbon seals, but care may be required to positively distinguish them from other seals with rings, spots or spot-like markings (harbour [p. 258], Larga [p. 260], juvenile harp [p. 268], and grey [p.272] seals). Differentiation requires attention to the size, coarseness, distribution (both above and below), and abundance of such markings. Also, note head and muzzle size, body length, and plumpness and length of the neck in relation to the body length.

**Size:** Adults are up to about 1.65 m in length. Weight is 50 to 110 kg. Pups average about 60 to 65 cm and 4 to 5 kg at birth.

**Geographical Distribution:** Ringed seals have a circumpolar distribution throughout the Arctic basin, Hudson Bay and Strait, and the Bering and Baltic seas. There are 5 recognized subspecies: *P. h. hispida*, in the Arctic basin; *P. h. ochotensis*, in the Seas of Okhotsk and Japan; *P. h. saimensis*, in Lake Saimaa; *P. h. lagodensis*, in Lake Ladoga; and *P. h. botnica*, in the Baltic Sea. The distribution of ringed seals is strongly correlated with pack and land-fast ice, and areas covered at least seasonally by ice.

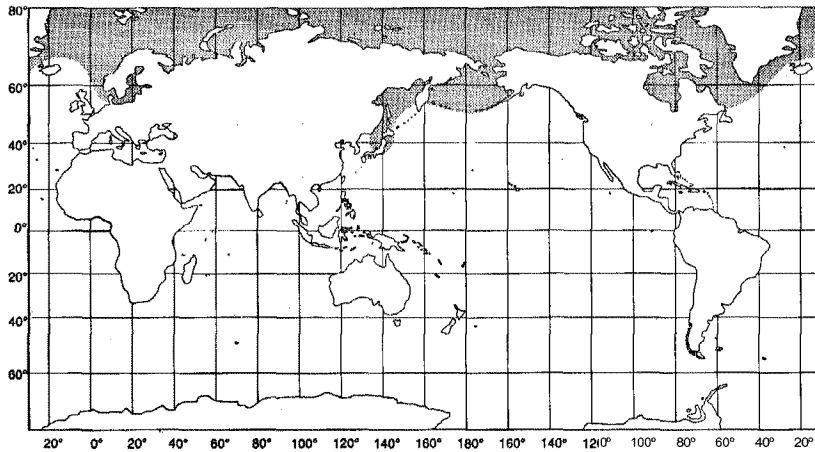


Fig. 528

**Biology and Behaviour:** Nearly all ringed seals breed on the fast ice, where females excavate lairs in pressure ridges and other snow-covered features. These allow access to the water, but are hidden from polar bears. Pupping generally occurs in March-April, earlier in the Baltic Sea. Males are thought to be territorial, and possibly annually monogamous.

Many adults remain in the same localized areas year-round. Out of water, ringed seals are generally wary, regularly scanning for predators, such as polar bears and humans.

Ringed seals consume a wide variety of small prey, including many species of fishes and planktonic crustaceans, taken throughout the water column. They forage either singly or in small groups.

**Exploitation:** Ringed seals have been a mainstay in the diet of native Arctic peoples. The seals are consumed by people and fed to sled dogs, and their skins are used for clothing. Subsistence hunting continues today, and accounts for an unknown, but probably significant number of seals every year. Commercial sealing primarily for pelts has been wide-spread. Pollution in some localities, such as the Baltic Sea, is of great concern and may be the reason for local population declines. The status of the current worldwide population is variable, depending on location, with numbers in some areas increasing and decreasing in others.

**IUCN Status:** Insufficiently known; endangered (*P. h. saimensis* only); vulnerable (*P. h. botnica* and *P. h. lagodensis* only).

***Phoca sibirica*** (Gmelin, 1788)

PHOC Phoca 4

SBK

FAO Names: En - Baikal seal; Fr - Phoque du lac Baikal; Sp - Foca de Baikal.

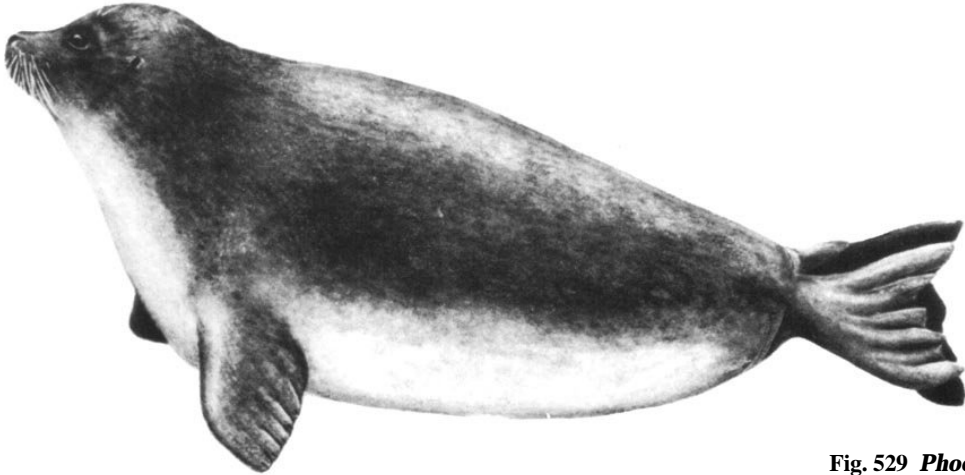
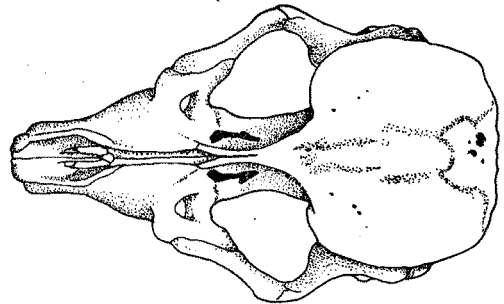


Fig. 529 *Phoca sibirica*

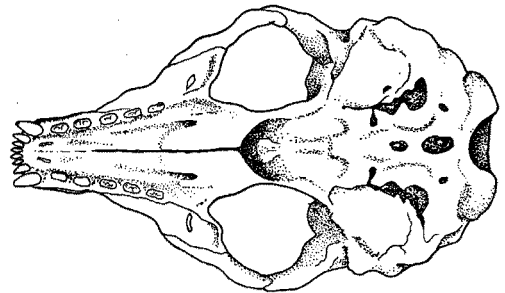
**Distinctive Characteristics:** The Baikal seal is essentially a population of ringed seals that evolved in reproductive isolation. Baikal seals are very similar to ringed seals (p. 262), except for a few aspects of their flippers and coloration. Their foreflippers and claws are decidedly larger and stronger than those of ringed or Caspian (p. 266) seals.

Baikal seals have very few, if any, of the characteristic rings found on ringed seals and are normally darker above and below than either ringed or Caspian seals. Baikal seal pups are born in a whitish lanugo that is shed at 4 to 6 weeks.

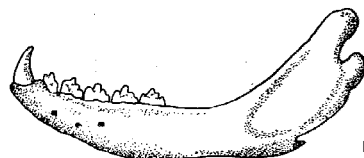
The dental formula is I 3/2, C 1/1, PC 5/5



DORSAL VIEW



VENTRAL VIEW



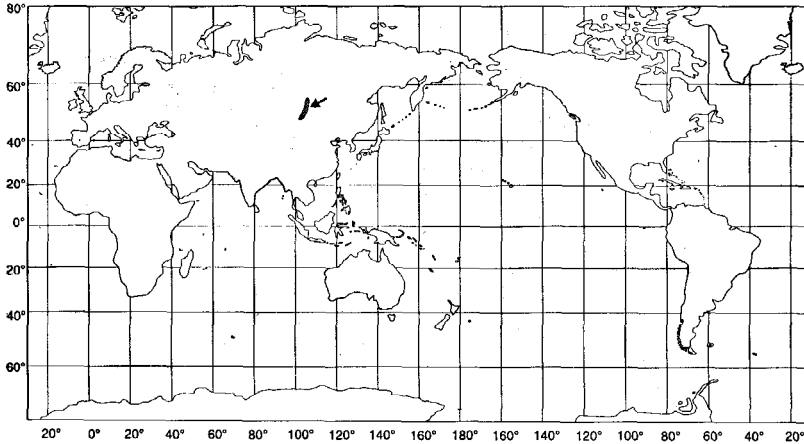
MANDIBLE

Fig. 530 Skull

**Can be confused with:** There should be no confusion: the Baikal seal does not share its range with any other pinniped species.

**Size:** Measurements of Baikal seals have been taken as curvilinear lengths, which yield longer measurements than the standard lengths used for other species. Adult Baikal seals have been reported to reach approximately 1.4 m and 80 to 90 kg. Newborn pups are 64 to 66 cm in length and 4 to 4.2 kg in weight.

**Geographical Distribution:** Baikal seals are entirely confined to Lake Baikal and its feeder streams in eastern Russia.



**Fig. 531**

**Biology and Behaviour:** Baikal seals are similar to ringed seals in most respects. They maintain breathing and access holes in ice (the number varying by age and sex, to 11 in adult males) and use snow-covered lairs on the lake ice. Some seals share haul-out holes, but most animals are solitary. Pupping occurs from mid-February to the end of March. Newly weaned pups emerge from the lairs in April.

Baikal seals experimentally equipped with tracking instruments generally dived for 10 to 20 minutes, to depths of 50 to 200 m; the deepest dives were to 300 m. Their diet consists primarily of many varieties of freshwater fishes.

**Exploitation:** Baikal seals have been hunted since prehistoric times, and there has been a long history of commercial exploitation that continues to the present for meat and skins, with carcass remains going to feed domestic animals. There are government quotas, but poaching is common. Seals hauled out are frequently disturbed by human activities, and there was a recent outbreak of a virus causing symptoms like canine distemper.

**IUCN Status:** Insufficiently known.

***Phoca caspica*** (Gmelin, 1788)

PHOC Phoca 5

SAC

FAO Names: En - Caspian seal; Fr - Phoque de la Mer Caspienne; Sp - Foca del Caspio.

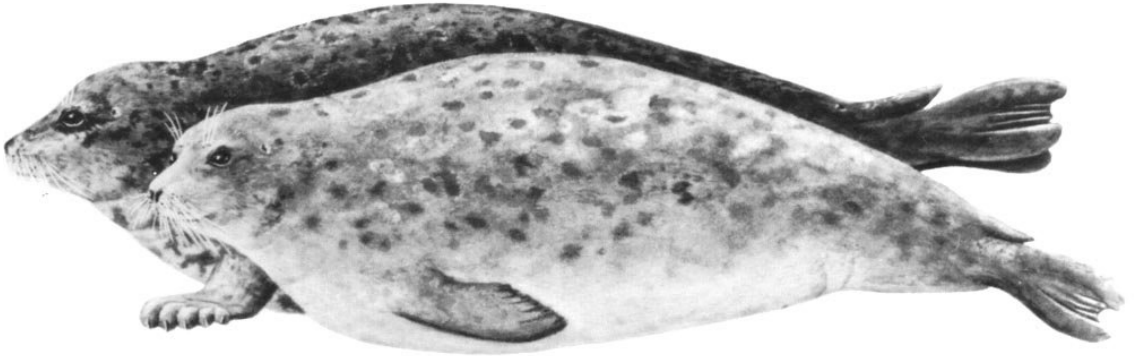
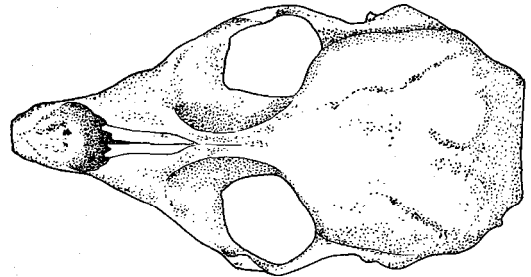


Fig. 532 *Phoca caspica*

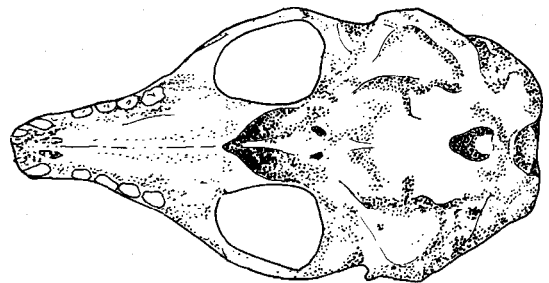
**Distinctive Characteristics:** The Caspian seal, like the Baikal seal, is essentially a population of the ringed seal (p. 262) that has evolved in isolation. The chief differences between Caspian seals and ringed seals are in pelage colour and markings.

Caspian seals are greyish yellow to dark grey above, grading to a paler shade below. There are numerous brown to black spots on the back in both sexes. However, these spots are darker and more abundant on the male. There are often no rings; when they do occur, they are much sparser than on ringed seals. The pup's whitish lanugo is moulted at about 3 weeks for a short dark pelage.

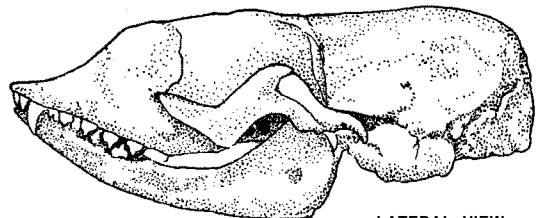
The dental formula is I 3/2, R 1/1, PC 6/5.



DORSAL VIEW



VENTRAL VIEW



LATERAL VIEW  
WITH MANDIBLE

Fig. 533 Skull

**Can be confused with:** No other pinniped occurs in the Caspian Sea region, and this species occurs nowhere else in the world.

**Size:** Adult males and females reach maximum lengths of 1.5 and 1.4 m, respectively, and weigh around 86 kg. Pups are 64 to 79 cm and about 5 kg at birth.

**Geographical Distribution:** Caspian seals are entirely confined to the saline waters of the Caspian Sea and its feeder rivers, which are bordered by several of the states of the new Russian Commonwealth and Iran. Seasonal movements in the Caspian Sea are prompted by ice formation. Seals occupy the north-eastern quadrant in autumn, but in spring and summer they move south into the deeper and cooler regions of the Caspian Sea.

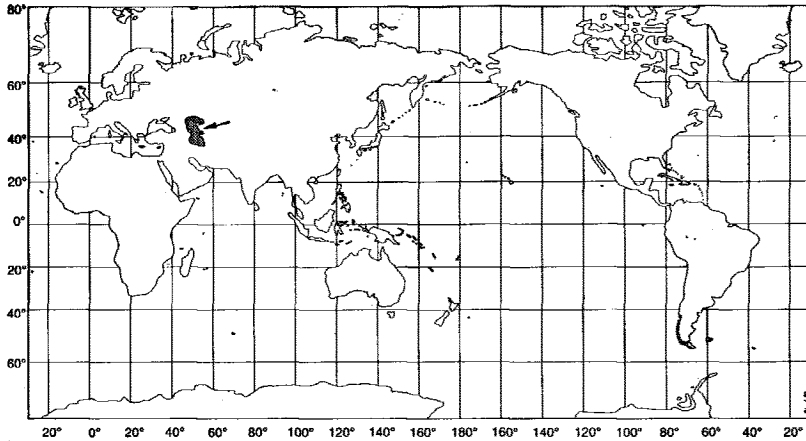


Fig. 534

**Biology and Behaviour:** The pupping season lasts from late January to early February. Unlike the ringed seal or Baikal seal, Caspian seal pups are born out on the open ice. Mating occurs from late February to mid-March. There is little information on behaviour of this little-known seal.

Caspian seals take a variety of fishes and small crustaceans; the diet varies seasonally.

**Exploitation:** Caspian seals have undoubtedly been hunted since prehistoric times. A large scale commercial harvest since the 19th Century continues to this day under government regulated quotas.

**IUCN Status:** Vulnerable.



***Phoca groenlandica*** (Erxleben, 1777)

PHOC Phoca 6

SEH

FAO Names: En - Harp seal; Fr - Phoque du Groenland; Sp - Foca de Groenlandia.



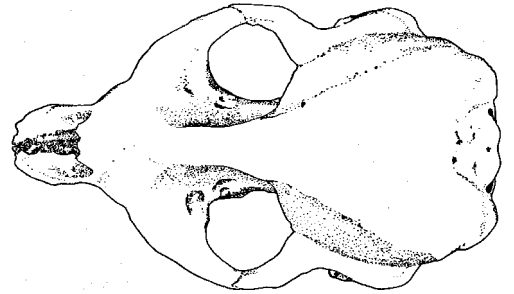
Fig. 535 *Phoca groenlandica*

**Distinctive Characteristics:** The harp seal's head appears somewhat long, wide, and flattened. The long muzzle tapers slightly, and in adults, can appear upturned. The eyes are close-set and there is a slight dip to the forehead. The flippers are relatively small. The foreflippers are slightly pointed and angular, with a short row of digit endings. The claws are strong and dark.

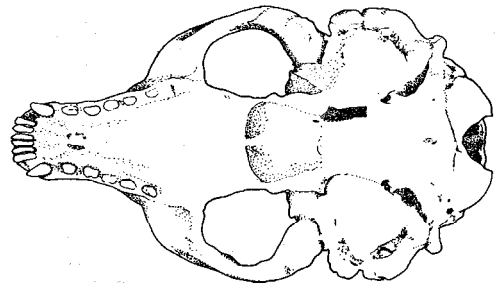
The ontogeny of pelage patterns (reflected in the names of the various age classes) is the species' most distinctive feature. The newborn's pure white coat (which can be stained yellowish for the first few days by amniotic fluid) persists for about 12 days (thus the name "whitecoats"), then it develops a greyish coat ("greycoats"). At about 21 days, the hair begins to fall out in patches ("ragged-jackets"), giving way to a medium grey subadult coat that is scattered with black blotches ("beaters"). At 13 to 14 months of age, "beaters" moult again: the pelage remains the same ("bedlamers") until the adult pattern begins to appear at the onset of sexual maturity (earlier in males than in females).

The adult pattern is complex and varied. The base colour is silvery white. Two black bands of variable width, joined over the shoulders, extend posteriorly as crescents and sweep down the sides to the area of the pelvis, forming the "harp." Seen from above, the pattern resembles a large irregular "V." Black marks may also occur at the insertions of the hind-flippers. The head is hooded in black, with a ragged edge on the neck and throat. Many adults retain from a few to many spots; and have incompletely formed harp patterns on their backs ("spotted harps"). A small percentage of seals never develop the harp, retain spots, may have some dark streaks, and are dark grey overall ("sooty harps").

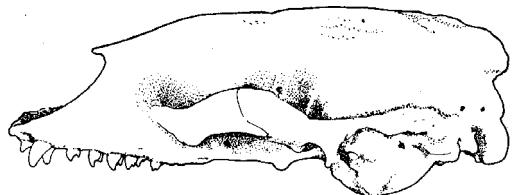
The dental formula is I 3/2, C 1/1, PC 5/5.



DORSAL VIEW



VENTRAL VIEW



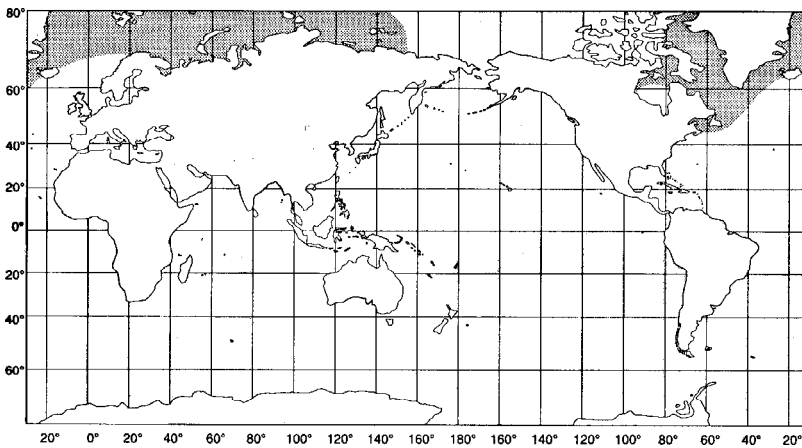
LATERAL VIEW

Fig. 536 Skull

**Can be confused with:** Harp seals in adult pelage are unlikely to be confused with any other animal. The silvery white body, emblazoned with a conspicuous black harp pattern and hood, is unique. However, the 'bedlamer' and 'spotted harp' patterns are more generic, and pose some difficulties. To distinguish harp seals from the 5 other phocids that share their range (harbour [p. 258], ringed [p. 262], gray [p. 272], bearded [p. 274], and hooded [p. 276] seals), note overall body size; size and shape of the head, muzzle, and nose; details of pelage markings (e.g., spots, rings, or blotches); and base colour (uniform or contrasting from top to bottom).

**Size:** Adult males are up to 1.9 m in length and average 135 kg in weight, females up to 1.8 m and 120 kg. Pups are born at about 85 cm and almost 10 kg.

**Geographical Distribution:** Harp seals are widespread in the the Arctic and North Atlantic oceans and adjacent areas from Hudson Bay and Baffin Island east to Cape Chelyuskin, in northern Russia. The most famous of the 3 population centres is the "Front," near the Magdalen Islands and waters off northeastern Newfoundland and southern Labrador. Harp seals live chiefly in pack ice, but can be found away from it in summer.



**Fig. 537**

**Biology and Behaviour :** Harp seals congregate to whelp (pup) on pack ice, where they form huge concentrations. Pups are born from late February to mid-March. Mating occurs in the water from mid to late March.

Harp seals are migratory, breeding at the southern edge of the pack ice in late winter, moulting nearby in spring, and following the ice north in summer to the high Arctic. They are very active in the water and sometimes travel in tight groups that are quite large and noisy.

Harp seals feed on a variety of crustaceans and open-water fishes during migration, and switch to several varieties of bottom dwelling fishes in summer on the northern grounds.

**Exploitation:** Harp seals have been hunted since the earliest times by people inhabiting arctic and subarctic areas. They have been the object of commercial harvesting, principally on the whelping grounds, for fur and oil, dating back to the late 18th Century. In particular, harp seal pups have been clubbed in large numbers for their white coats. This controversial industry continues today on a greatly reduced scale under international quotas.

**IUCN Status:** Insufficiently known.