



# California Sea Lion

*Zalophus californianus*

## Classification *What groups*

*does this organism belong to based on characteristics shared with other organisms?*

Class: Mammalia (all mammals)  
Order: Carnivora (carnivores)  
Family: Otariidae (fur seals and sea lions)  
Genus: *Zalophus* (Pacific sea lions)  
Species: *californianus* (California sea lions)



## Distribution *Where in the*

*world does this species live?*

California sea lions are found along the west coast of North America from British Columbia to Baja California and in the Galapagos Islands, the Sea of Cortez and the Gulf of Alaska.

## Habitat *What kinds of areas does this species live in?*

They live along the coast and off-shore islands. They have been found up to 75 miles out in the ocean. They may also travel up rivers that feed into the ocean.

## Physical Description *How would this animal's body shape and size be described?*

- On average, California sea lions are 5-7 feet long.
- Males can grow to weigh over 800 pounds (390 kg). Females are significantly smaller growing to only around 220 pounds (100 kg)
- California sea lions have a torpedo-shaped body with short dark brown to light brown fur.
- By the age of five, males develop a distinct bump, called the sagittal crest, on the top of their heads and lighter brown to tan fur giving the appearance of a mane.
- Sea lions look quite different than seals. Sea lions are solid in color and are quite mobile on land, using their larger front flippers to maneuver.

## Diet *What does this species eat?*

*In their historic range:* Fish, octopus, squid, crab, clams and lobsters

*At the zoo:* Capelin, herring and mackerel supplemented with vitamins and minerals



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## Predators *What eats this species?*

Sharks and orcas

## Social Organization *How does this animal interact with others of its species?*

California sea lions are highly social animals gathering in large groups called “colonies”. They often rest closely packed together on land or float together in the water. During breeding season, adult males called bulls, battle for dominance and establish territories. Each male attracts a group of up to 20 females to breed with. Before giving birth, females gather at a rookery, a beach or rocky outcropping.

## Life Cycle *How does this species mate, raise young, grow and develop?*

After a gestation of 9 to 11 months, females give birth to a single pup born fully furred with eyes open. Newborn pups are able to move around within 30 minutes after birth. The mother sea lion stays with the pup for up to 6 days before venturing back into the ocean to feed. Sea lion mothers feed for 2 to 5 days then return to nurse. This cycle is continued for almost a year until the pups are weaned. Pups can digest fish at 3 months old, but continue to nurse. Under their mother’s protection, the pups will begin to venture into deeper water to feed. They leave their mother after about a year. Sea lions live from 12 to 30 years in the wild.

## Adaptations *What physical and behavioral characteristics enable this animal to survive and thrive?*

- Sea lions have small **external ear flaps** and can hear as well as humans on land. In the water, their hearing is exceptional – they can hear higher frequency sounds than humans.
- California sea lions are marine mammals with limbs that are modified as **flippers**. When swimming, sea lions are propelled by their large front flippers while the rear flippers act like rudders that help steer. Flippers enable sea lions to swim long distances and dive deep to find food. Sea lions are also adapted for movement on land. They can rotate their rear flippers forward for improved mobility on land.
- Sea lions have **streamlined bodies** that enable them to swim at speeds of 25 to 30 miles per hour. When submerged for long periods (5-10 minutes), a sea lion will decrease its heart beat to reduce the amount of oxygen needed.

## Collection Connection

- Six California sea lions live at Denver Zoo. Three of these animals were rescued by The Pacific Marine Mammal Center in Laguna Beach, California. When they were not able to be rereleased successfully, Nick, Maverick and Duke came to live at Denver Zoo.
  - **Nick** is the largest sea lion. He was born June 14, 2007. Because he was rescued, he came to the Zoo when he was less than a year old. He has the loudest bark and you can often hear him when visiting the Zoo.
  - **Duke** was born around June 15, 2014. Denver Zoo is not sure of his birthday because he was rescued. He is always very focused when training with staff.
  - **Maverick** was also born around June 15, 2014. Maverick loves to learn and has an orange tag attached to one of his flippers.



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- **Luci** is the oldest sea lion. She was born June 17, 2001. She participates well in training.
- **Ady** was born June 13, 2015. Ady and Gunnison are Luci and Nick's offspring. She is energetic and spends a lot of time near her dad, Nick.
- **Gunnison** is the youngest, born June 11, 2015. He spends a lot of time with Duke.

## Conservation Status *Is this animal at risk for extinction and why?*

*IUCN Status: Least Concern*

In the United States, California sea lions are protected by the Marine Mammal Act of 1972. The populations of this species have been increasing steadily since 1975. As a marine species, sea lions are especially sensitive to climate change and pollution.

## Resources and Where to Learn More

Marine Mammal Center <http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/education/marine-mammal-information/pinnipeds/california-sea-lion/>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/california-sea-lion>