

## SEA LION DESCRIPTION

**Description:** The California sea lion is probably the most commonly seen [pinniped](#) along our coast. It has distinct external ears, large eyes, and elongated front flippers. Its hind flippers can be turned forward under its body, allowing it to walk on land. In the water California sea lions swim with powerful strokes of the front flippers. The smaller hind flippers help in steering. The male's fur is usually dark brown, nearly black when wet, and the female's is often light brown or tan; there is no undercoat. The male has a thick neck, and the mature male has a protruding forehead formed by a bony crest on the skull roof. The California sea lion vocalizes with a continual honking bark that is familiar to most people who have seen animal acts in zoos or marine parks—this species is widely used in trained animal shows.

**Size:** California sea lions show an extreme degree of sexual dimorphism, with males much larger than females. A male sea lion may measure up to 2.4 meters (8 feet) and weigh 270 kg (600 lbs); a female may measure up to 1.8 meters (6 feet) and weigh 90 kg (200 lbs.)

**Habitat:** California sea lions inhabit rocky and sandy beaches of coastal islands and mainland shorelines. On land, they gather in large groups called colonies. In water, California sea lions form smaller groups called rafts.

Sea lions are adapted for movement on land as well as in the water. Winglike front flippers have bone structure similar to that in our arms and hands. Swimming with these flippers propels the sea lion forward, while the hind flippers steer. Both sets of flippers enable a sea lion to walk on land.

Male California sea lions establish breeding territories on the beach from May to July along the coasts of Southern California and Baja California. These breeding places, called rookeries, are noisy places! Males bark incessantly when defending their established territories.

Towards the end of the breeding season, both adult and immature males start moving north from the west coast of Baja California and the Channel Island rookeries. This migration peaks in September along central and northern California.

Sea lions' loud roars help explain why they are named after lions that live on land. Male sea lions of some species even grow a thick mane around their neck.

**Reproduction:** Females are ready to breed at three years, males at five. Only mature dominant males acquire females. The breeding season takes place between May and July. During the breeding season, dominant bulls gather harems of several cows, which they protect by barking at or moving aggressively towards intruding males. Occasionally, the bulls engage in combat. After a year-long gestation period, a single pup is born. The pups grow rapidly and will begin to gather in groups. They are weaned after several months, but may continue to nurse for up to a year. Pups are born with their eyes open and can vocalize. They appear to be able to swim at birth, although their movements are not well coordinated. Several days after the pup's birth, the mother leaves the pup in the crowded rookery as she searches for food in the ocean. When she returns, the mother emits a loud trumpeting vocalization, which elicits a bleating response from her pup. This exchange continues until mother and pup find each other. She makes her final identification by smelling her own pup.

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Diet: California sea lions eat fish, mollusks, and crustaceans.

Predators: Orcas, great white sharks, and humans.

Conservation Status: Although the California sea lion is not considered an endangered species, it is included in the protection given in U.S. waters by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.