

Publication:

Marine Mammal Milestones

By DARLING CETACEANS, Vol 4 Issue 4

October, 2007

Hawaiian Monk Seal

Famous for surfing, Diamond Head and Pearl Harbor, the Pacific island chain is also home to the Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*), Hawaii's only pinniped.

The Hawaiian name is Ilio-holo-i-ka-uau, which means "dog that runs in rough waters". The name monk seal can be traced to its habit of monk-like solitude. It may also refer to the loose skin around the neck that resembles the hood of a monk's robe.

It is in the family of Phocida, meaning that it is a true seal (no external ears and swims by using its hind flippers for propulsion and front flippers for stabilization).

The Hawaiian monk seal is mostly found in the northwestern Hawaiian islands, from Honolulu to the uninhabited Kure Atoll, a range of approximately 1,200 miles. There are some small breeding populations living on Hawaii's other main islands.

These mammals have large eyes, prominent snouts, streamline shapes, and four swimming flippers. Mature adults are dull brown in color.

Pups are born with a woolly black coat that is shed through molting at the end of the nursing period. It is replaced with a juvenile coat that is silvery gray on the back and sides and white on the belly, throat, and chest. Under exposure to the sun and sea it turns to the mature dull brown color. The monk seal molts its coat yearly, this not only includes the old hair but also the outer layer of skin.

Their diet includes fish, octopus, squid, and lobsters. They eat their food head first to avoid problems with fins and legs getting caught in their throat. They are occasionally observed eating birds and other seals.

A male can be 7 feet (2.3m) in length and a female can be up to 7 1/2 feet. A male weighs about 400 pounds with female weighing up to 600 pounds when she is pregnant. A pup is about 3 feet in length and 36 pounds (16 kg) when born. By the time the pup is weaned they can weigh up to 200 pounds (91 kg). Like other tropical seals, pups of this species can be born year round. The pup is nursed for 35 to 40 days, during this time the pup gets swimming lessons from mom. Mom can drop up to 200 pounds during this time while fasting to raise her child. Once the pup is weaned, it may drop weight until its foraging skills have been perfected.

These seals inhabit reefs, shallow lagoons, open ocean, and beaches. They commonly haul out on sandy beaches, but do not have special adaptations to deal with the warm climate in which they live; instead they remain inactive during the heat of the day in a spot with shade or damp sand.

Hawaiian monk seals are not believed to have seasonal migrations, but have traveled over 700 miles (1,127 km) at sea for several months in search of food.

Threats to Hawaiian monk seals include: sharks; entanglement in fishing nets and long lines; disease; commercial hunting; and human expansion. These seals do not have any land predators.