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## **Whiskered Walruses**

With wrinkled skin, blood shot eyes and two protruding front teeth; some would say the walrus has a face only its mother could love. They are partially right.

Walrus calves are born after approximately 15 months gestation. They weigh 90 to 140 pounds at birth. Remaining with their mothers for three years or longer, they have a strong bond that no one can tear. In fact, mothers will fight or even grab their calf and hide it under water to protect it from predators.

Many scientists divide the walrus in two separate species, the Pacific and Atlantic. The Pacific live in places that include St. Lawrence Island, the Northern Bering Sea, Chukchi Sea and off the Siberian coast of Russia. The Atlantic populations live in and around areas that include the Hudson Bay, Greenland, Baffin Island and Franz Josef Island.

Because of their remote location in the Arctic and the fact that two-thirds of life is spent under water, walruses are difficult to study.

For example, an animal has been recorded to have dove to a depth of 370 feet and remained submerged for 25 minutes. However, it is believed they can dive deeper and stay under longer, even through most dives usually do not last more than 10 minutes.

Amongst other behaviors; dining on mollusks, annelids and echinoderms is one way time is spent under water. The walrus will eat between 110 to 190 pounds every day. Occasionally, a walrus will include a seal in its diet. With their slow mobility, they tend not to hunt fast moving fish.

Bulls weigh around 2,650 pounds, while cows are lighter at 1,800 pounds. Blubber accounts for a fair portion of the size, expanding to 6 inches in depth during winter months.

The thick blubber and blood system are adaptations key to staying warm in the arctic. The blubber provides a layer of protection from the elements, while the blood content of the skin is reduced while swimming to keep the rest of the body in check. This causes the walrus to be pink when exiting the ocean.

On land, these large mammals lumber around, pulling their massive bodies with both front and hind flippers, as well as their tusks. In the water, the walrus seems like a different creature as it glides through the ocean using only its tail for propulsion and pectoral fins to steer. Usually only moving at 4 mph, a walrus can swim at bursts of 22 mph.

The most well-known feature of the walrus is the extended canine teeth. Both males and females have ivory tusks and they grow for the duration of life. For the bulls, tusks reach about 3 feet and in cows they reach approximately 2 feet in length.

A characteristic less known is the pharyngeal pouches located in the throat region. These two expandable pouches allow the walrus to float in an upright position, so they can rest or sleep in the turbulent sea.

Another feature is the strong, blunt head. With it, an animal can break through ice up to eight inches thick to create air pockets.

With these features, it is no wonder they have survived 15 million years.