

For Creative Minds

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Steller Sea Lions

The word "stellar" is a descriptive word (adjective) that describes something or someone as being a "star" or a great performer. The word "Steller" with an "e" is a specific species of sea lion (proper noun) named after the naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller (1700s). So, you could say that Astro is a stellar Steller sea lion!

Steller sea lions dive deeper than 1,300 feet (400 m) to find food!

Rookeries are isolated, rocky coastal areas and islands where sea lions gather to mate and where females give birth to their pups.

Prey: walleye pollack, mackerel, herring, capelin, sand lance, cod, and salmon
Predators: orca whales, humans, and some sharks

Only Native Alaskans who rely on the sea lions are allowed to hunt them. All other hunting is illegal. In addition, commercial fishermen cannot fish within three nautical miles of rookeries.



Adult males can be 11 feet (3.25 m) long and weigh up to 2,500 lb. (1120 kg). Males have long, coarse hair on their necks that looks like a male lion's mane.

The smaller females can be 9 feet (2.9 m) and usually weigh 400 to 600 lb. (181 to 272 kg) but can weigh up to 770 lb. (350 kg).

Steller sea lions' fur is a coarse and light tan to red brown when dry. When wet, it is smooth and slick and lies flat against their skin.

They have a thick layer of fat (blubber) that keeps them warm in cold water.

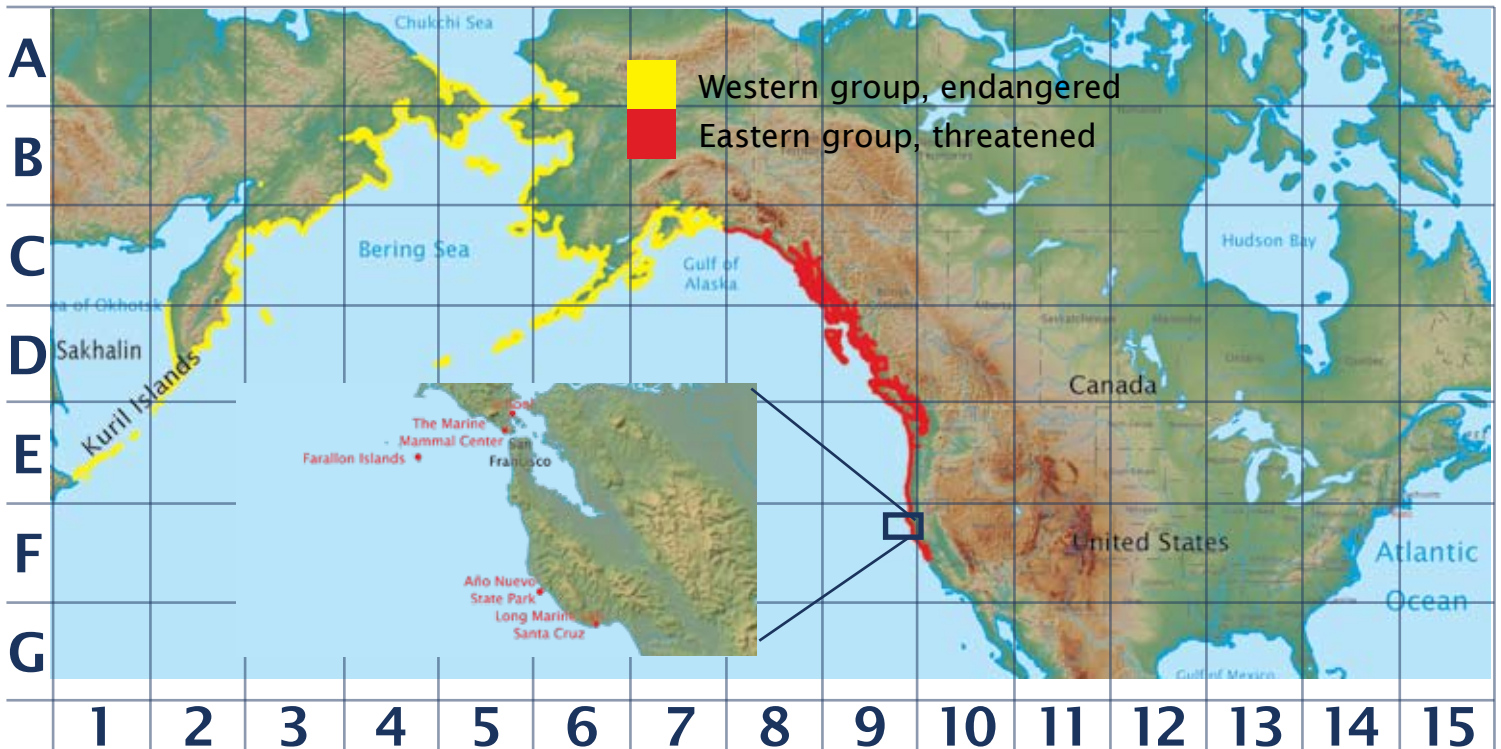
Steller Sea Lions Threatened and Endangered

There are two main groups of Steller sea lions. The Eastern group lives off the coast of California, up the Pacific Coast to 144° West Longitude in Alaska. This group is threatened, (a species in trouble). The Western group lives west of 144° West Longitude to Japan. That group is endangered (a species in danger of extinction). Scientists are not sure what has caused the Steller sea lions to decrease in numbers. Some possible reasons include:

Commercial fishing competes with the Steller sea lions for fish. Technology has made it much easier for fishermen to find schools of fish, leaving fewer fish for the sea lions.

Pollution kills all kinds of marine animals. It can poison the animals, or sometimes the animals get trapped in garbage (fishing nets or the plastic rings that go around soda cans).

Where in the World? A Map Activity



Use the map to find the various locations mentioned below, then put the events in proper chronological (by date) order. Answers are upside-down, below.

1. In April 2007, Astro was taken back to Año Nuevo State Park, but he stayed on the beach. He was then taken to the Farallon Islands.
2. Astro flew in an airplane from California to Mystic, Connecticut in February, 2008.
3. In August 2007, Astro went to the Long Marine Laboratory in Santa Cruz.
4. Astro was found orphaned at Año Nuevo State Park in June 2006.

Steller Sea Lion Life Cycle

Put the Steller sea lion life-cycle events in order to spell the scrambled word.

A

Pups are born in late May through July. They are about 3.3 feet (1 m) long, weigh 35 to 50 pounds (16-23 kg), and are black or very dark brown in color.

O

Pups molt (shed) their fur when they are about 4 or 5 months, and the new fur is lighter in color. They will then molt several times and by the end of their second year, they will have their adult color.

I

When the pups are 4 to 6 weeks old, they swim for the first time.

E

The females (cows) arrive at the rookery at the end of May or early June and look for good birthing areas. The male may end up with several females to care for. The females, who have been pregnant for a year, give birth to their pup shortly after arriving. They can get pregnant again when their pups are only a few weeks old.

S

In early May, the adult males (bulls) fight for and claim their rookery territory. They generally return to the same area to claim, and it may be several years before they can fight off an older male. Once they “have” their territory, they may hold onto it for a few years until they are too old and weak (13 to 15 years old) to fight off younger males. The fighting for territory consists of roaring, hissing, and chest-to-chest fights with open mouths that sometimes cause severe injury. The winner keeps the best areas and the losers go to smaller, not as nice areas. Males do not leave their territories or eat while waiting for the females to arrive—up to a month.

L

The mother stays with the pups for a week or two before leaving it alone while she goes off to find food. The young pups gather in groups to sleep and play together while their mothers are gone. The mothers and pups find each other by smells and sounds. A cow will not nurse a pup that is not hers. A pup nurses from its mother for at least three months, and will usually nurse until its mother has another pup.

N

Females have their first pups when they are 4 or 5 years old and live about 30 years in the wild. Males, on the other hand, only live to about 18 in the wild, probably because of all the fighting for territory.

Sea Lion or Seal? What's the Same? What's Different?

Both sea lions and seals are marine mammals, which means they are adapted to life in the ocean and rely on the ocean for their food.

Both get their oxygen from the air.

They are pinnipeds (flipper-footed), an order of marine mammals that also includes walruses. They haul themselves onto land to rest and breed.

They are both carnivores (meat-eating animals).



Steller Sea Lion

The illustration shows a Steller Sea Lion in profile, facing right. It has a long, slender body and a small, pointed ear flap. Red circles highlight the ear flap and the front flipper. The background is light blue.

Sea lions are noisier than seals.

Sea lions have long front flippers and can pull their rear flippers under them so they can “walk” on land. Seals do not “walk”—they slide around on land.



Harbor Seal

The illustration shows a Harbor Seal in profile, facing right. It has a shorter, thicker body and a larger, rounded ear flap. Red circles highlight the ear flap and the rear flipper. The background is light blue.

Seals have short front flippers with claws that they use to haul themselves out of the water onto land.

Seals swim with their rear flippers.

Sea lions have external ear flaps, seals do not.

Sea lions swim with their front flippers and use their rear flippers to steer.