

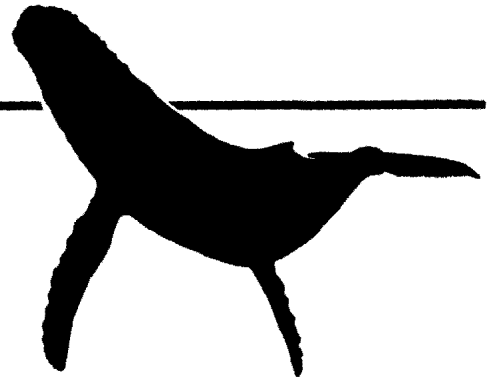
SEAL EATING BY WALRUSES IN THE BERING SEA

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Walruses (Odobenus rosmarus) feed primarily on benthic invertebrates, but they are known to eat seals occasionally. We gathered information on seal-eating walruses through examination of walrus stomach contents and seal carcasses found on the sea ice, and through conversations with Eskimo hunters. The stomachs of 1 of 107 walruses examined in 1975 and 4 of 53 walruses examined in 1979 contained seal remains. A walrus was seen carrying a seal carcass in May 1978, and carcasses of 2 seal pups were found on the sea ice in April 1979. Our observations suggest that this carnivory is the result of direct predation rather than scavenging. Walruses may capture seals using their tusks, tear off strips of skin and blubber by grasping an edge with their mouth, and remove muscle and organs by means of oral suction. Most seal eaters are subadult and adult males. Most seals eaten are young pups of ice-inhabiting species. The incidence of seal eating was higher in the 1970's than in the previous 2 decades, probably due to the increases size of the Pacific walrus population. The very high incidence in 1979 was probably due to the unusually small amount of pack ice in the northern Bering Sea, which resulted in a much greater than usual juxtaposition of seals and walruses.

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