

NATURALISTS' NOTES

The Song of the Sea Lions

The first dusting of snow on the mountains and the chorus of Californian sea lions at the mill log pond herald the approach of winter. *Zalophus californianus* (*Zalophus* for the forehead bump) are predominant sea lions here. Relative newcomers to our waters, they filled the niche left by their mighty cousins, the Steller or Northern sea lion, which once reigned supreme until decimated by human intervention. Erroneously seen as the main cause of depleted commercial fish stocks in the 1920's, thousands of Stellers were machine-gunned in expeditions organized by Federal Fisheries. These purges were halted when studies showed that Stellers were opportunistic feeders, consuming a wide range of fish including hake and lamprey eel, which are salmon predators. But the damage was done and the Californian sea lions moved into Stellers' habitat.

Sometimes co-habiting, the two species can be differentiated by voice and size. If it barks and sticks its bumpy forehead skyward it is a Californian. True to its name the Steller roars like a lion, is tawny coloured with a handsome mane, and is much larger than its sleeker cousin.

Between October and May the Californian males, both adult and juvenile, are in residence at the mill haul-out site while the females remain in California near the rookeries. In May the log pond falls silent when the males head south to the rookeries to vie for the coveted position of harem head. Although sexually mature at 4-5 years, they are unable to defend breeding territories until 9 years of age.

After the breeding season, the bulls and disappointed bachelors return to BC, while females remain in warmer water nursing their pups. Within 30 minutes of birth a pup walks with coordination and swims awkwardly. The mothers are very attentive to the young and are able to locate their single pup by sight, smell and vocalization. Males have been known to protect pups from marauding sharks but more often will trample them to death when defending their harem from other bulls.

Sea lions are of tremendous recreational and educational value to the public. They are among the very few large wild animals that can be viewed close at hand in their natural habitat. The Oregon Sea Lion Caves draw thousands of visitors each year, while closer to home, boat loads of visitors armed with cameras view the sea lions on Mittenatch Island.

In Powell River, a pleasant 20-minute walk along Willingdon Beach Trail leads to one of the most accessible sea lion haul-outs on the coast. This has the potential to become a valuable asset to our community. And with our reputation as an international choral centre why not add the Sea Lion Chorus to our musical repertoire?

Written by Christine Woolcott for the Malaspina Naturalists' Club. Photo of male Californian sea lions by Clyde Burton. For more information on local fauna contact the Malaspina Naturalists at 604.485.6134.