

Leopard Seal FAQ's

Hydrurga leptonyx



DISTRIBUTION

Cold temperate to polar latitudes of the southern hemisphere

ECOSYSTEM/HABITAT

Nest on the ice surface; feed at the ice edge

FEEDING HABITS

Aggressive predator

CONSERVATION STATUS

Least Concern

TAXONOMY

Order Pinnipedia (seals, sea lions, and relatives), Family Phocidae (true seals)

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Leopard seals are true seals and get their name from the spots that cover their fur. This species is well known as one of the top predators at the Antarctic ice edge. Though it is not the largest seal in its range (the southern elephant seal is much larger), the leopard Seal's willingness to attack large prey has given it a

reputation of being a very aggressive hunter and excellent swimmer. On the ice surface, leopard seals spend their time resting or caring for their young and typically do not attempt to capture prey when out of the water.

Though leopard seals obtain all of their food resources from the water, they must come ashore to pup and to care for their young. Unlike other species of Antarctic seals, which mate on land or on the ice surface, leopard seals mate in the water. The males apparently do not visit the pupping areas and do not participate in parental care. Pupping and nursing both take place on the ice surface, rather than on ice-free shores.

Leopard seals are perhaps most well known for their predation on Antarctic penguins. They wait at the ice edge for penguins to enter the water to feed and then aggressively chase them for a quick meal. Young penguins, especially those entering the water for the first time, are particularly vulnerable to predation by leopard seals. Though penguins do make up a large part of their diet during some seasons, the Leopard Seal's diet is more heterogeneous than one might expect. They are known to eat fish, squid, krill, and juveniles of other seal species, in addition to penguins. **Killer whales** are the only species known to eat leopard seals.

Like most Antarctic species, the remote nature of the leopard seal's home range keeps human interactions to a minimum. Though they are known for their aggressive behavior, they only very rarely aim that aggression towards humans. There are currently no strong human threats to this seal, and scientists generally consider it to be a species of least concern. However, potential impacts of expanding Southern Ocean fisheries and ongoing climate change on the populations of leopard seals are not well known, so it is important to continue to study and monitor this and other Antarctic seals.

<https://oceana.org/marine-life/marine-mammals/leopard-seal>