

# Field Museum News

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## NEW HABITAT GROUP SHOWS SEALS AT "UNCLE SAM'S FUR FARM" IN ALASKA

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Probably most women who wear beautiful and expensive sealskin coats have rather hazy ideas of the animal which produces them. They may think of sealskin as a very rare and unusual commodity coming from a distant and probably foreign country, perhaps from somewhere near the North Pole. Few suspect that sealskin is to a large extent an American product grown on Uncle Sam's own fur farm in Alaska.

ever lands anywhere else. The American government, therefore, has made the islands a special reservation where the seals can be controlled almost like domestic animals. In fact, they have an advantage over domestic animals for they feed themselves without cost, living on small fishes and other marine life. Laws and regulations have been made regarding their care, and only the surplus not needed for breeding is taken for fur. Thus it is quite logical to speak of the Pribilof Islands as "Uncle Sam's Fur Farm."

group is undoubtedly the largest fur seal exhibit in any museum of the world, as well as being one of the largest groups of any kind of animal in this institution. In addition to the seals, the group contains twenty-four birds representing five species.

Reproduced in the exhibit is a scene representing the barren rocks of the Pribilofs where these animals establish their rookeries. The seals are mounted in life-like attitudes showing them just as they were studied "on location" by Staff Taxidermist C. J.



"Home Life" of the Fur Seal

Forty animals—"bulls," "cows," and "pups"—are shown in this new group in the Hall of Marine Mammals (Hall N). The seals were collected on the Pribilof Islands by Staff Taxidermist C. J. Albrecht who, together with Staff Artist Arthur G. Rueckert, prepared the exhibit. Some 2,000,000 seals come to these islands each summer to breed.

There are many kinds of seals, but those that produce the highly prized fur all belong to one species and live in the north Pacific Ocean. Most of their time is spent on the high seas away from shore, but every summer they gather in immense numbers to rear their young on land, concentrating on a few small islands. There are three distinct herds, two relatively small ones belonging to Japan and Russia, and one very large one belonging to the United States. The summer home of the American herd is on the two small Pribilof Islands, which are only ten or twelve miles in length, and situated far out in the middle of Bering Sea west of the Alaskan mainland. The instinct of the seals to return to the same place year after year is so strong that it has never been violated and not one

The "home life" of the fur seal is illustrated in a new habitat group placed on exhibition last month in Field Museum's Hall of Marine Mammals (Hall N). The group shows how sealskin coats were intended to be worn—by the seals themselves. And, by the way, more than 2,000,000 seals now have them, that being the size of the present-day herd, whereas only 10,000 women per year are able to obtain real seal coats under the conservation measures in force. The annual permitted kill is 60,000 fur seals, and the average number of skins required for each woman's coat is six.

Containing forty animals, including huge "bulls" as the mature males are called, the much smaller "cows" as the females are known, and young seals called "pups," the

Albrecht, who in 1937 conducted a special expedition to collect them. Since that time, Mr. Albrecht has been engaged in preparation of the group. The background was painted by Staff Artist Arthur G. Rueckert. Mr. Albrecht was enabled to visit the Pribilofs and collect the seals under permits granted by the United States Department of the Interior. He obtained fresh specimens without firing a shot or lifting a harpoon, by selecting what he needed from among the carcasses of those slain through the severe strife that exists among the large bulls during the breeding season. Mr. Albrecht then made necessary plaster casts for taxidermic work, skinned the seals on the spot, and preserved the pelts for mounting.

If their fur was the only interesting thing



about fur seals, their story would be a short one. But they have many very peculiar and interesting habits. Most of these are involved in three general characteristics: that of being exceedingly gregarious and gathering in tremendous herds; that of being migratory, making a long regular journey every year; and that of being polygamous to an extremely high degree.

Their gregariousness is evident all their lives, but especially on their breeding grounds where they crowd together by tens of thousands in practically solid masses on the beaches, forming the most stupendous exhibition of mammalian life in the whole world. There is no concealment, and the observer, looking out over the vast mass of great lumbering beasts, feels as if he might have been transported back into some prehistoric age. In early days the American herd was estimated at approximately two million seals. Later there was much wasteful and unregulated killing until, in 1911, the number had dwindled to scarcely more than two hundred thousand. Since then, by means of international treaties protecting the seals on the high seas and good administration on land, the herd has steadily increased until now it again contains about two million animals, and it is steadily increasing. Today there is no waste—even the remainder of the carcasses, after the skin has been removed, furnishes by-products such as penetrating oil, and “seal-meal” used to feed the fish in trout hatcheries.

#### SEALS MIGRATE TO FAR SEAS

The entire herd spends the summer on the Pribilof Islands, arriving in the spring and departing in the fall on a long migration thousands of miles to the south to spend the winter at sea in the latitude of southern California and Mexico. This is the most remarkable example of migration among mammals, and has all the mystery and fascination of bird migration. The seals go out of Bering Sea past the Aleutian Islands, and then strike south across the broad Pacific, plowing their course against wind, waves, and current with the unswerving directness of a ship guided by compass.

The male fur-seal is four or five times as large as the female, and weighs several hundred pounds. He is called a bull probably on account of his loud bellowing voice, as his size, and his shaggy silver-tipped coat, give him more resemblance to a short-legged waddling grizzly bear. On the breeding grounds his disposition is ferocious, blustering, and domineering. The female, or cow seal, on the other hand, is quite the reverse—small and slender, with a mild and gentle disposition and a manner sometimes almost coy and confiding.

Early in the spring the old bulls come to the islands and station themselves at intervals along the boulder-strewn beaches. For some days or weeks the solitary bulls wait. When the females come, a little later, they

gather in groups quite appropriately called “harems,” each of which is presided over by an old bull. These harems vary in size from four or five to forty or fifty and, sometimes, even seventy-five or one hundred females to one male. The average number is about forty. The bulls guard these harems most jealously and are kept busy day and night. They do not fight to get the cows, for these come to them voluntarily, but they certainly fight to keep them, and sometimes it is a struggle to the death. The bull who gets the most cows is not necessarily the best looking or strongest, but more likely the one that has the most favorable position on the beach as the cows come in. Therefore, it is the female who does the choosing among seals; but if she doesn't like her choice she is obliged to put up with it nevertheless, for if she tries to leave, the bull is instantly after her and likely to “treat her rough.” The harems, when full, present a wonderful sight. Each big burly bull, thick-necked, shaggy, and defiantly dignified, sits surrounded by a company of sleek, soft-coated and liquid-eyed females, swaying their graceful bodies sinuously from side to side, slowly closing their eyes and dozing, or playfully snapping at each other. If a nearby bull sneaks in with the idea of segregating some of the cows for himself, this peaceful scene changes and a fight is on, but possession seems to be “nine points” in most cases.

A bull dares not leave his harem unguarded for it would immediately be appropriated by another, so he is obliged to remain in his place without food and practically without rest for the long period of six to nine weeks during which more cows continue to come in, young seals are born, and domestic affairs go on. His long-continued strength and vigor without food is unparalleled among mammals. At the beginning of the season, he is in magnificent physical condition, full-bodied, thick-necked, quick-moving, arrogant, and vigorous. Little by little he becomes thinner and thinner until, at the end, he is scarcely more than a shadow of his former self. He then retires to sleep continuously for several days, after which he goes to sea to feed and recuperate.

#### THE “PUPS” ARE PLAYFUL

Each of the cows has one young, and one only—twins are unknown. Although its sire is called a “bull” and its mother a “cow,” the young fur-seal is called a “pup.” It is only necessary to see one to appreciate the appropriateness of the name. The pup's hair is short, crinkly, and glossy black, quite different from the rich warm brown of older seals. Its face is wrinkled and its expression most serious, so, altogether, it suggests the young canine very decidedly. After the early part of the season, every seal rookery includes a very large number of pups. They are everywhere from the waterfront to the caves and crevices at the extreme rear of the rookery. Like the young of most mam-

mals, they have cute ways, running from the ludicrous to the pathetic. They remain on land some five or six weeks, nourished by their mother's milk and growing rapidly. Then they begin to take to the water to swim, and when the herd goes south in the fall they shift for themselves. At this time they are killed in large numbers by a voracious, toothed whale known as the killer. These killers have been seen to dash into a school of small seals and literally cut them to pieces, tossing them into the air, and rushing about in a frenzy.

#### FUR COATS COME FROM “BACHELORS”

A very important class of fur seals includes the young males from two to six years of age, called “bachelor seals.” They are celibates by force rather than from choice, for they are rigidly excluded from the breeding grounds by the ferocious old bulls. True to their gregarious instinct, the bachelors gather on land adjacent to the breeding grounds and play.

It is from these adolescent seals that our sealskin comes. About as many males as females are born but, on account of the polygamous habit, a large percentage of the males are unnecessary for breeding purposes. Therefore, these superfluous males are taken for their skins, and, since females are always preserved, this has no effect on the growth and continuance of the herd. Thus it is possible to manage the seals much as a stockbreeder does a herd of cattle or sheep.

Since the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, some 4,000,000 fur seals have been killed on the Pribilof Islands for their skins. From these the government has received a revenue of nearly \$15,000,000 in addition to the very large profits obtained by the private companies to whom for forty years the sealing privilege was leased.

#### KILLING IS STRICTLY SUPERVISED

The seals are killed in a humane manner, under supervision of government agents, by experienced “natives” (Eskimos, Indians, Scandinavians, and other inhabitants of the islands) who have grown up in the sealing business. The bachelor seals are naturally segregated in separate areas, and when they are desired for killing, the sealers simply run between them and the water. On being thus cut off from their retreat, they start up, huddle together, and then may be guided in any desired direction. Because they proceed more slowly, they are easier to manage than any domestic animal.

Removing the skin is a simple process accomplished by experienced hands in a few minutes. After cooling, the skins are taken to what is called the “salthouse,” and here each is rolled in coarse salt and laid away. A week later, they are resalted, spread flat with folded edges, and packed in solid masses between thin layers of salt. In this condition they keep well indefinitely and are thus transferred to ships and sent to market in the United States and elsewhere.





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