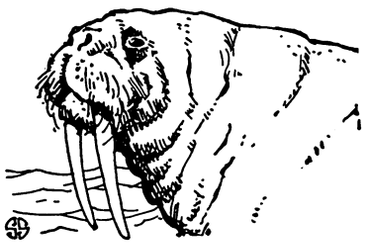
WILDLIFE

NATURE RAMBLINGS



Walrus

➤ JUST about now, enjoying such warmth as the northern sun provides at this season, baby walruses are getting their first baptism in the Arctic Ocean.

Clinging to its mother's neck with its front flippers, the baby walrus gets a free ride while its mother swims and dives in search of the clams, snails, shrimp, and starfish on which it feeds. This burden, weighing perhaps a hundred pounds, bothers the mother not at all, for she herself may weigh up to 2000 pounds. By comparison an Indian squaw with her papoose on her back is hopelessly encumbered.

The baby walrus gets none of the seafood. For many months to come, until its tusks have grown big enough for it to dig for its own clams, the young walrus will subsist on its mother's milk. It won't go off this nursery diet till its tusks are three or four inches long, when it is about two years old.

The tusks of an adult walrus, the distinguishing mark best known to laymen, are formidable-looking weapons. They may grow to more than three feet in length and weigh as much as nine pounds. During the breeding season these tools take on a more belligerent function than digging clams. They become the court of last resort where rival claims are gorily adjudicated. Broken tusks are not uncommon, testament of some embattled courtship.

Walruses are good swimmers, but they are not long-distance champions like their cousins, the seals. They like to snooze on drifting ice floes, letting the current ferry them to the next destination. If by miscalculation, while clam-digging for example, they let their ice raft drift off so far so that they can not overtake it, they will light out for the nearest land. There are recorded instances of walruses finally beaching themselves in such a state of exhaustion that they lay helpless while the Eskimos slaughtered them.

It is by such ice ferry that the southward spring migration to the Bering Sea is made. Because they are such heavy animals, sometimes too many of them will congregate on one side of an ice floe. Then the whole raft may pitch over, dumping the dozing herd unceremoniously into the drink.

Walrus hide is very thick and tough, and is much prized by the Eskimos for leather. The tusks are made into implements and tools. The animals are valued as a source of food and oil. Originally, walrus-hunting was a hard and hazardous business, requiring the hunters to work up dangerously close to get within lance or harpoon distance. Now, with the white man's rifle, the odds are heavily in favor of the Eskimo, although an animal that is only wounded must be approached with greatest caution.

Science News Letter, June 10, 1950

RADIO

Short Wave Broadcasts To Be Heard Soon

➤ HOW well short wave radio broadcasts can be heard in this country very soon will be forecast with a regularity and precision near that for weather forecasts.

The National Bureau of Standards announced that, starting June 1, their present service for short wave users would be greatly enlarged. Radio hams, the Defense and State Departments and large communications corporations such as RCA, Bell Telephone and Western Union are regular users of short waves.

The enlarged services include more frequent changing of the warning signals if necessary, daily detailed forecasts for North Atlantic radio transmission and information on long-range conditions for short wave reception. These services are available from 9:00 a.m. until one-half hour after midnight, the Bureau's Central Radio Propagation Laboratory announced.

Besides sending out this varied information, the division is interested in receiving word about auroras from persons who see displays of Northern Lights. This information helps the laboratory evaluuate how bad a radio storm is. It can be reported by telegrams addressed to: CRPL Warning Service, National Bureau of Standards, Washington.

Reports of unusual radio propagation conditions are also very useful and can be sent to the same address, the Bureau announced.

Science News Letter, June 10, 1950

WILDLIFE

Cannon-Fired Net Traps Wildfowl for Banding

➤ A HUGE net thrown by miniature cannons over a feeding flock is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's newest way to catch wild ducks, geese and other wildfowl.

Purpose of the fast-acting trap is not to put roast fowl on anybody's dinner table. Netting of any type of wildfowl for market or sport is strictly illegal in the United States.

But to study the migratory habits of the millions of birds which fly over the North American continent, wildlife experts must catch a great many in order to band their legs. The new cannon-thrown net, which does not harm its victims, is the most versatile device yet developed for this purpose, according to the Wildlife Service.

Designed and built by Herbert H. Dill and William H. Thornsberry, agents on the Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Sumner, Mo., the net-thrower is described in the JOURNAL OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT.

Three steel tubes, two and a half inches in bore, are loaded with a slow-burning, relatively-quiet propelling charge homemade from potassium chlorate and ordinary granulated sugar. Enough force is generated, when this concoction is ignited by an electrical cap, to throw an 80 by 25 foot net 10 feet into the air and 10 to 15 along the ground.

Wildfowl, enticed near the net by bait, barely have time to bat a wing before the net presses them gently back to the ground. Hundreds of birds can sometimes be caught in one throw.

The device is now being used as standard equipment on wildlife refuges in all parts of the United States, in Canada and in Alaska, J. Clark Salyer, chief of refuges in the Wildlife Service, said.

In England, similar nets are being developed using rockets as motive power. Although they have been reported as extremely successful, the Wildlife Service thinks its cannons are as good if not better.

Science News Letter, June 10, 1950