

LAPTEV WALRUSES

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Some authors believe that regarding walrusen inhabiting the Laptev Sea (fig. 1) as an independent subspecies (Forsberg et al. 1976) is erroneous (e.g., Fay 1981, 1982, 1985; after Burn et al. 1995). True enough, the level of discreteness of the Laptev population is not completely understood. At the same time, there is well-defined hiatus in the distribution of the Atlantic and Laptev walrusen (fig. 2), which gives grounds to treat the status of those populations separately.

WINTER DISTRIBUTION

Data available on the habitats of the Laptev walrus in winter are scanty. Chapsky (Starostin 1940), on the basis of interview data, reports that in the winter 1938 during the drift of the ice-breaker Lenin in the central Laptev Sea many walrusen were sighted. The sightings of single walrusen or small groups of walrusen in the open Laptev Sea had been also observed by Chapsky's interviewees. In the May 1991 and in the April 1994 when polar bears were being marked, we sighted single and groups of 2-3 walrusen at the edge of a polynia beyond the shore ice, extending along the northeastern coast of the Taimyr Peninsula.

According to data obtained by Aerial Reconnaissance of Sea Ice (ARSI) in winter (November-June) walrusen were sighted beyond the shore ice zone within the Laptev Sea, but their largest number was recorded in the northern, eastern and western parts of the sea and north of the Novosibirsk Islands in the regions of recurrent beyond the shore ice polynias (fig. 3). In the northern Laptev Sea (north of the 100 m isobath) walrusen occurred only rarely (Горбунов и Соколов 1990). An exception was the situation in the April 1988, when ARSI was conducted, in addition to observer hydrologists, biologists were involved, who monitored polar bears and marine mammals. During flights in the northwestern Laptev Sea, walrusen were also most frequently sighted in the water area where depths considerably exceeded the 100-m isobath.

SUMMER DISTRIBUTION

There are by far more data available on the distribution of walrusen in the Laptev Sea for summer and early fall compared with winter, when observations are prevented by the polar night and harsh weather (fig. 4). Amundsen (1929) in the course of his drift in the Maud ship in the mid-September 1919 observed large stocks of walrusen off the Faddey Islands. During the subsequent years a body of data on the Laptev walrus gradually accumulated. Those data essentially concerned the distribution, abundance and dates entry into and departure from the of haul outs. A number of researchers (Ильинский 1960, Поном 1966) stressed that ice conditions are the most important factor for the distribution of the Laptev walrus.

A specific feature of the Laptev Sea is a wide distribution of the shore ice, which is formed both off the mainland shore and around the island, including the islands Begichev, Peter, Andreev, Faddey, the Krasnoyarskaya Pravda Archipelago and the Novosibirsk Islands. From October to late June, those regions where walrusen feed in summer and in fall become inaccessible to them. Also inaccessible are regions where shore ice occasionally remains for several years. That explains why