

Walrus

The Tooth-Walkers of the Arctic

The sight, sound and not the least the smell of a large group of walrus, are quite impressive. As the number of walrus and walrus haul-outs are increasing in some areas of the Arctic, so is the chance to see them. Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is a great experience. To avoid any disturbance when around walrus, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

Descendants of sea-lion like animals, walrus are believed to have evolved millions of years ago and are the only living pinniped with external tusks.

They live circumpolar and are divided into two subspecies; the Pacific walrus and the Atlantic walrus. The Pacific populations counts approx. 200,000 animals while the Atlantic population, which includes East Greenland, Svalbard and Franz Josef Land, has between 20,000 and 30,000 animals.

Males can weigh up to 1500 kg, while females can weigh up to 900 kg. Walrus cows give birth to calves which are approx. 1.3 meters long and weigh around 85 kg. The calves stay with their mother for 2-3 years.

This large brown sea mammal is recognized by its characteristic tusks, which on large males can grow to more than 1 meter in length with each weighing as much as 5 kg. Both walrus bulls and cows use their tusks to pull themselves out of the water and because of this, they have been called “tooth walkers”. The tusks also used for fighting, dominance and display.

Walrus prefer shallow shelf regions and can eat tube worms, soft corals, tunicates, sea cucumbers and various mollusks, including and often preferably, clams. Walrus find clams by sticking their sensitive vibrissae into the sediment on the sea bottom. They remove the sediment by waving their front flippers and then suck the clams into their mouth. Walrus may also feed on seals and sea birds.

Walrus are very social and haul out in large groups of animals, often very close to or even on top of each other. They are most often observed in groups, also in the water.

Polar bears and killer whales may take walrus, especially calves, but in doing so they need to be very careful as walrus are good at protecting themselves.

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Guidelines

National and local regulations may include other provisions, which may be more stringent and require a further distance from walrus. Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.

Walruses are sensitive to boats and human presence, especially females with calves. Noises, smells and sights can elicit a fright response or other reactions. Watch for behavior that indicates that the animals may be disturbed when a group approaches. Their reaction can differ considerably depending upon factors such as sun and wind, if the walruses are on land or ice floes, the sex and age of animals in the group, how long they have been lying out of the water - and most of all - the behavior of the visitors.

Cows and calves

Females with calves require special consideration when viewing walrus. Maintain at least 150 meters distance from mothers with calves when they are on ice, in the water, or hauled out on land. If animals show signs of disturbance, increase the distance immediately. Disturbance of groups on land can result in stampedes, posing a significant risk to calves.

Walrus on land

- Inform visitors about the approaching procedure before landing and tell them to always follow the signals from the leading guide.
- Landings must be made at a minimum distance of 300 meters from the haul-out site. Make sure that the wind direction is from the walruses to the group of visitors.
- Divide into smaller groups (< 50). Do not walk up to the animals from different directions – the visitors should approach from only one side of a walrus group.
- Walk slowly towards the animals, make stops and watch reactions to your presence.
- Avoid making a half circle around the animals. The visiting group should stay together to reduce the impact of their presence.
- Never go closer than 30 meters (150 m from cows with calves) irrespective of how undisturbed the walruses might seem.
- Always maintain minimum and non-disturbance distances. Be especially mindful of walruses returning to land from the water; if walruses approach the land from the water, quietly and slowly retreat to preserve the appropriate distance.
- Never get between the animals and the sea - walk ‘inland’ of them.
- Avoid sudden appearances on the horizons which create silhouettes that are visible to the animals. Low approaches are always best, staying below the horizon.
- Keep commentary, conversation and engine noise to a minimum.
- Let their behavior decide how close you go. If they show any sign of disturbance, retreat quietly and slowly.
- If approaching walruses on land or on ice from a small boat, the same non-disturbance considerations apply. Be extra cautious with attention to noise disturbance (sound carries further over water), remaining downwind and avoiding changes in speed and direction.
- Greenland: Keep at least 400m from any walruses on land. This applies to distance from the sea as well as distance on land.
- Svalbard: Keep at least 150m away from walrus haul out sites when operating any motor vessel. Do not exceed 5 knots when passing by walrus haul out sites within 300m.
- Canada: Keep at least 300m from walruses on shore.

Walrus on ice

- Walruses spend a lot of time on the ice and the same careful approach methods should apply as when they are encountered ashore. Be especially sensitive to females with calves.
- Greenland: Keep at least 75 meters from walruses on ice.
- Canada: Keep at east 200m distance to walruses on ice (1 June - 31 October)

Swimming walrus

- Do not go close to swimming walrus. Walruses are very powerful swimmers, and might attack the Zodiac using their tusks, if they feel threatened.
- Keep low speed in waters with walrus.
- Draw back if walrus approach.
- Never swim, kayak or dive in walrus waters, it is dangerous.
- Actively prevent yourself being surrounded by walrus in the sea. Make sure you are always outside the periphery of a group of walruses.
- Greenland: Keep a minimum distance of 75m from swimming walruses.
- Canada: Keep a minimum distance of 100m from swimming walruses.