

COMMANDANT'S OFFICE
FILE COPY

U. S. Coast Guard Headquarters,
Washington, D. C.,
August 18, 1933.

THE COAST GUARD SEAL PATROL

Many duties fall to the lot of the Coast Guard and few among them have a stronger appeal to the instincts of a seaman for observations of life at sea than the charge of watching over the fur seals during their annual migration northward from the South Pacific Ocean to the rookeries on the Pribilof Islands, Bering Sea. This Seal Patrol, which extends from the coast of Washington to the Pribilof Islands, is probably the most extensive guardianship over sea life ever undertaken. It is carried on annually by the United States Coast Guard in cooperation with the United States Bureau of Fisheries.

The navigators of the North Pacific in the '80's and '90's still bear recollections of the sight of countless numbers of fur seals headed in the spring to the Pribilof Islands and the Commander Islands in the Bering Sea, and there in swarms they multiplied until the shores of these islands were literally one mass of seal flesh. Just as the buffalo disappeared from the plains of our West, so almost did the fur seals meet the same fate -- the lure of great profits from the sale of their valuable fur skins and the ease with which they could be captured attracted the hunter and the trader in such large numbers that finally the rapidly diminishing number of fur seals invoked the interest of the United States, Great Britain, Japan and Russia in measures to protect them from complete extinction.

On July 7, 1911, there was signed at Washington "The Convention for the Protection of the Fur Seals and Sea Otter between the United States and Great Britain, Russia and Japan, which became effective December 15, 1911. The Convention, in effect, made the Pribilof Islands a haven of refuge for the fur seals and made unlawful the killing, capture, or pursuit in any manner whatsoever of fur seals at sea in the waters of the North Pacific Ocean north of the 30th parallel of north latitude and including the seas of Bering, Kamchatka, Okhotsk and Japan. The only exceptions were the Indians, Aleuts or other aborigines dwelling on the American coast of these waters who carry on pelagic sealing in canoes or undecked boats propelled wholly by paddles, oars, or sails and not transported by or used in connection with other vessels, and manned by not more than five persons each, and without the use of firearms.

It is the duty of the Coast Guard cutters on Seal Patrol to see to it that the provisions of the International Convention and regulations promulgated pursuant thereto are strictly observed, and the effectiveness of the Patrol is attested by the fact that only in one or two minor instances since 1911 has anyone attempted to unlawfully kill fur seals. Those navigating the waters through which the fur seal migrate northward are aware of the law and

its heavy penalties and have a wholesome respect for the keenness of the Coast Guard boarding officer to detect any pelagic sealing activity. In the course of the Patrol, vessels are boarded and examined and all equipment and gear are carefully scrutinized to make certain that none is carried for pelagic sealing.

Pursuant to the Act of Congress approved August 24, 1912, it is the custom of the President of the United States to designate each year several Coast Guard cutters to patrol the waters of the North Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea frequented by the seal herds. During the present season of 1933 the cutters SHOSHONE, TALLAPOOSA, NORTHLAND, CHELAN, SNOHOMISH, and ITASCA and a 125-ft. patrol boat will patrol the waters in which the fur seal travel northward and around the Pribilof Islands.

The Pribilof Islands are the Mecca for the fur seals during the summer, and from all parts of the South Pacific Ocean they start their migration North during the late winter, the leaders of the herds, usually males, making their appearance off the coast of California during the early part of March. As they reach the waters near the southern boundary of the State of Washington, the Coast Guard cutter SNOHOMISH is the first cutter to take up the Patrol, guarding them from molestation from the southern boundary of Washington to Dixon Entrance. It is off this section of the American coast that the Indians are permitted to kill fur seal in the manner practised by their forefathers. The ease with which their canoes could be towed out to sea by motorboat or outboard motor proved too much of a temptation for some of them to resist several years ago, but the strong arm of the law ended this practice before it had gained any headway. The law required that, in order to make their catch, they shall use canoes and primitive methods of propulsion and capture. Armed only with spears several Indians in their small canoe will paddle about 40 miles out to sea, and a short life awaits the seal who comes within harpoon reach of one of these canoes. It is the practice for the canoes to leave shore about 5 o'clock in the morning and remain at sea about twenty-four hours. Their catch may range from two to five seals, but quite often they return empty-handed. The season's catch by the Indians dwelling along the United States and Canadian coasts is estimated at about 1,200, the disposition of the skins being handled by the Government agents on the reservations. The safety of these Indians in their frail craft far at sea, particularly during rough weather, is always a concern of the Coast Guard cutter patrolling this section of the coast, and quite frequently the cutter is called upon to assist them ashore or rescue them from imminent peril.

During the Seal Patrol the cutters may sight the fur seals singly, in groups of two or three, and then again in small herds of from one hundred to two hundred. Often they are seen sleeping upon the surface of the water. They show a marked antipathy towards approaching close to a cutter under way -- their guardian -- but if the commanding officer of the cutter let his vessel drift with the current while nearby fur seals, they show no hesitancy in coming close up to the vessel and observing the ship and crew with great curiosity. Last season the SNOHOMISH actually counted 2,635 fur seals close to the ship during the month of April, the largest herds being observed 15 to 25 miles off the Washington coast.

With the skill of an experienced navigator, which is almost uncanny, the fur seals wend their way up through the North Pacific, passing through the openings in the Aleutian Chain, and unfailingly reaching their destination on either St. Paul Island or St. George Island (the Pribilof Group). The Coast Guard cutters practically escort the fur seals to their summer homes in the Bering Sea, one cutter after another following the course of their migration, usually running from 10 to 100 miles off the coast. The Seal Patrol is so arranged and timed that the first cutter starts northward with the first major groups of fur seals, and the other cutters are dispatched at intervals thereafter, insuring an effective and constant safeguard against the poacher. And this duty of Seal Patrol does not end until the fur seals, after the breeding season on the Pribilof Islands, start their southward journey to the South Pacific, usually in August.

From the almost vanished herds of fur seals before the signing of the International Convention, there are now over a million of these animals who migrate to the Pribilof Islands annually. There are a certain number killed each year at the Pribilof Islands each year under the direction of the Bureau of Fisheries. The sale of their skins provide the United States, Canada and Japan with an appreciable return. Last year 42,500 male fur seals were killed under Government supervision, the proceeds from the sale of their skins being divided 15 percent each to Canada and Japan, and 70 percent to the United States.

Through the diligent and effective seal patrol which is maintained in the North Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea by the Coast Guard cutters and the Bureau of Fisheries, there is being preserved for future generations the fascinating sight of large herds of these intelligent and valuable fur-bearing animals making their annual "pilgrimage" to the Pribilof Islands.

U. S. Coast Guard Headquarters,
Washington, D. C.,
August 19, 1933.

THE COAST GUARD SEAL PATROL

(Taken from "LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN by Lieutenant
Commander F. J. Birkett, U. S. Coast Guard, published
in Naval Institute Proceedings, May, 1929).

The animal life of Bering Sea and the Arctic is very interesting. The fur-bearing seal is one of the most remarkable. They are the original navigators. How wonderful it is they are endowed with a sense, possibly a "sixth sense", which enables them to navigate with as much accuracy as the average ship. Each spring they migrate, tens of thousands strong, from somewhere south of the equator, up through the Pacific Ocean, then through the narrow openings between the Aleutian chain, and without fail are able to locate their first home, either St. Paul or St. George Island, in the mid portion of the Bering Sea. I say "first home" for it is on these two islands that the "pups" are born, the father and mother becoming land animals for the few months which constitute the breeding seasons. In June, about two weeks ahead of the others, the bull seals, large fellows weighing about five times as much as the females, arrive at these two islands, whichever was their birthplace. Choosing along the rocky beach strategic places, from 35 to 100 feet apart, the bulls there await their wives.

The females play up and down the beach looking over the bulls ashore, there being much turning of their heads on what seems to be a universal joint. They are careful meanwhile to remain in the water. After the female makes her decision, she waddles up the beach to her selected partner, there being meanwhile much ado with the nodding and waving of heads, especially that of the male. Once the female has made her decision, she cannot change it under penalty of death for, if she looks over the array of male seals and decides she wants to change her choice, let her beware. The first time she attempts to stray, "papa" may only nip a little hole in her pelt with his long razor like teeth, but if she again attempts it, he is liable to lose his temper and, picking her up by the nape of her neck, will throw her over his head high enough to shake all desire out of her to abandon him. At his rookery, which finally contains from two to a hundred wives, they are all virtually prisoners for weeks. The bull seal never sleeps, never gets a drink of water or a mouthful of food for about three months. After the pup arrives and posterity is assured, the mother is allowed to proceed to sea for food. She finds squid aplenty about 60 miles offshore from the islands. The pups gather together in large "pods" while mother is away, and it is marvelous to see the mother, upon her return, able without fail to pick out her own young from the thousands of other little fellows, and if anything happens to the mother, no other will adopt her offspring. This was pitifully demonstrated in the days when the seal poachers were active. As the males, except bachelors, stayed ashore during the summer, it was mainly the mothers the poachers caught at sea and thousands

of little ones starved to death, one for each mother that was taken by the poachers; The bulls are able to maintain a harem from the age of four to five years. Many battles take place in the rookeries when bachelors attempt to set up housekeeping. If they can manage to homestead on the outer sector, providing they too are formidable enough, they may succeed, but more frequently there is a unified opposition by all bulls in that region. If, when attacked by several of the big boys, the young bull (bachelor) retreats inshore and gets away fast enough, he survives, but alas for him if he follows his instinct, which is to seek the sea; for on the way to the beach the bulls will converge on the bachelor and long before he makes the water he will be torn to pieces. The result is that there are established bachelor rookeries a good distance to the side of the harems. By the thousands the young fellows stay there because they believe in safety first.

The United States Government has found that the herds multiply just as fast if about 25,000 of the three-year-old bachelors are killed off each summer; these are the pelts disposed of by the Government at the fur sales, which furs make such beautiful lady's coats. No females are killed. The manner in which the bachelors are killed is crude but effective. Several natives of the Pribilof Islands, employed by the Bureau of Fisheries, cut a hundred or so out of the herd of bachelors and drive them slowly quite a distance to the killing grounds. The seals travel slowly over the land and must not be overheated. On the killing ground they are given a blow over the head, then the throat is cut and the pelt removed. The skins are trimmed of fat, salted and shipped to St. Louis in barrels, which are taken to Seattle by Coast Guard vessels or other craft. By contract the skins are tanned and dyed in St. Louis, and later sold to the highest bidder in lots.

At the end of the breeding season the bull seal has lost half of his weight; he is exhausted and before he has strength enough to proceed to sea for food, he falls over in a heavy sleep which lasts for several days. Like the salmon, whose presence is not known "when he goes down to the sea", when the seals leave the Pribilof Islands and head south no one is sure where they go. Passing vessels have sighted them bound south, below the equator, still going. Some think they go to the Antarctic and others believe they have some feeding grounds out of the line of all travel. The seals bound south keep well out at sea. When they go north in the spring, they follow our coast, from 10 to 100 miles offshore. Native Indians of the Northwest are allowed to take the seals en route by spearing only, and must use boats under oars. Each year the natives living at Quillayute River and Neah Bay, Washington, take about 600. The Canadian Indians kill a like amount.

The walrus who lives in the Arctic is another interesting animal. He is much larger than the fur seal, being as large as a baby hippomatus and about the same color. He feeds on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, digging his clams with two large ivory tusks. His heavy teeth easily crush the shells and strangely enough, the first process by nature is the separating of shells from the meat. Whenever an Eskimo kills a walrus, he always counts on about a bushel of shucked clams for his food. The Eskimo also eats the walrus meat. He especially likes hair seal meat and fur seal meat. The fur seal liver tastes like the finest calves' liver. Young sea lion meat is delicious. Whale meat is the greatest delicacy for the Eskimo. He also is fond of ducks, which are plentiful in the Arctic.

The Eskimo likes all of his meats "ripe". They seem to have a high immunity from ptomaine poisoning, but now and then they are victims of it, for when they find a dead animal washed ashore, it is too much of a temptation to them and not infrequently results in their death. All game with the Eskimo is a community affair, a "potlatch". The old citizens are first taken care of. This custom does not extend to the whale bone, ivory and fox pelts, etc. as they become the property of the hunter. Foxes are killed by the natives with a 22 caliber high-powered rifle. The native husky dogs love to chase the fox and sometimes kill one. So keen is their love of the hunt that when on the trail, under harness as a dog team, if a fox is sighted, the Eskimo driver is almost helpless, the dogs chasing off in whatever direction the fox is seen and many a wrecked sled is the result.