

HARBOR SEAL PREDATION ON A WOLF-EEL

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Harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*) usually eat small fishes and invertebrates (Simenstad et al. 1979, Bigg 1981, Riedman 1990). Stomach contents of eight harbor seals from northern California contained predominantly small, bottom-dwelling species of fishes that live on rocky substrate (Jones 1981). Other past and recently collected California material indicate that prey are also often taken over sandy bottoms (J. Harvey, pers. comm.). Intensive observations of harbor seals in central California from 1959 to 1967 indicated that small items were usually consumed beneath the water's surface but larger prey items, such as octopus (*Octopus* spp.) and flatfishes (Pleuronectiformes) were sometimes brought to the surface to be subdued and consumed (J. Vandever, pers. comm.). One of us (LLR) observed and photographed a harbor seal preying upon an adult wolf-eel (*Anarrhichthys ocellatus*) which may be the longest prey item reported for the harbor seal. On 8 May 1986, at Sand Hill Cove, Point Lobos State Reserve, Monterey County, California, a sub-adult harbor seal surfaced with an adult wolf-eel estimated to be 2 m in length. The struggle continued for 6-12 seconds until the seal bit and removed the wolf-eel's head. A photograph taken at that moment (840 mm lens) showed that copious blood from the decapitated prey had suddenly colored the water red, which further indicated predation rather than scavenging. The seal ate the whitish flesh of the wolf-eel in a sheltered area of the cove, then rested on a rock next to an adult conspecific.

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