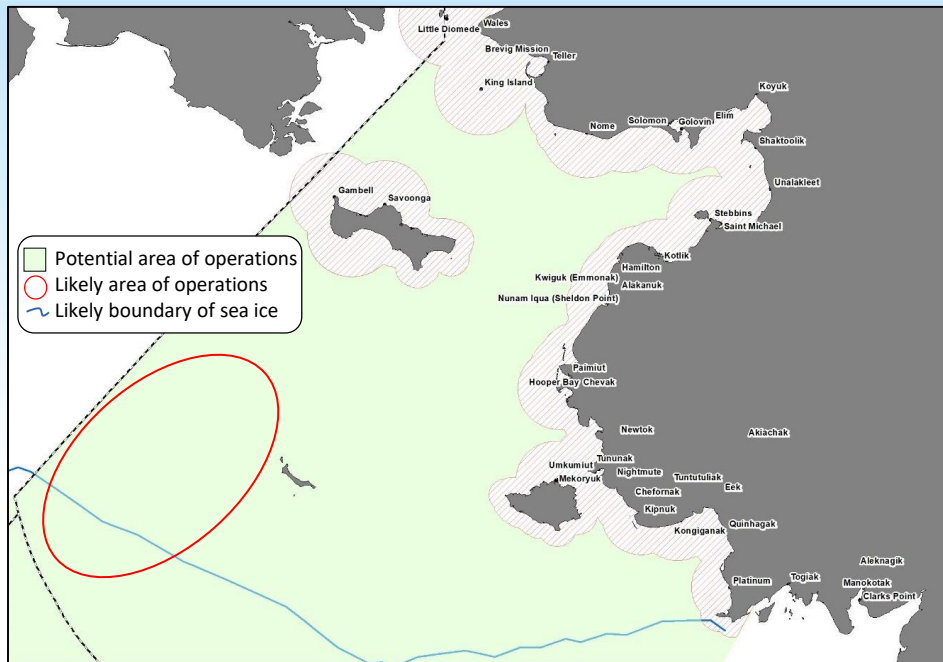




Vessel-based studies of ice-associated seals

April 15-May 26, 2024



What is the research objective?

Researchers will capture ribbon and spotted seals on the sea ice where they are hauled out using hand-held nets. Biologists will collect morphometrics, blood and other tissue samples from the seals, and attach satellite-linked data recorders (SDRs) before releasing them.

Where is the research being conducted?

The research will be based off of a chartered vessel and will operate at the southern edge of the marginal ice zone in the Alaskan waters of the Bering Sea. The location of the sea ice varies year-to-year, making it difficult to predict where the research will be conducted, but in most years operations are located west of St. Matthew Island.

Who is conducting the research?

Researchers from NOAA Fisheries' Alaska Fisheries Science Center, The Cooperative Institute for Climate, Ocean, and Ecosystem Studies, SeaWorld Orlando.

As with previous expeditions, we would like to collaborate with coastal communities of the Bering Sea to identify an Alaska Native subsistence hunter that can partner with, and join us on, the expedition.

This project is included in the annual Alaska Ice Seal Research Plan which describes research priorities for ice-associated seals in Alaska, and was developed by the Alaska Native Ice Seal Committee, Co-management Working group.

See timetable and station map on back

Schedule for 2024 Vessel-based studies of ice-associated seals project

Team travels to port of embarkation	April 12
Gear and equipment mobilization	April 13-14
Charter vessel departs for the Bering Sea marginal ice zone	April 15
Beginning of operations at sea ice edge (likely)	April 18
In-port to exchange personnel (location to be determined)	May 5
Completion of operations at sea ice edge (likely)	May 23
Arrival at port of disembarkation	May 25
Gear and equipment demobilization	May 26
Team returns home	May 27

* Tentative schedule as of December 2023.

What steps are you taking to prevent conflicts with subsistence hunting?

- The research vessel will never operate within 30 nautical miles of whaling or sealing communities or within 12 nautical miles of the coast.
- Researchers will watch for, and will avoid disturbing, whales and walrus.
- Researchers will communicate daily with local coastal communities to identify where we plan to work and to avoid conflict with hunters.

Why is the data important? How will it be used?

This project is a study of the habitat requirements and ecological relationships with sea ice, of ribbon and spotted seals in the core of their Bering Sea breeding area.

Data from the SDRs will be used to better understand the seasonal movements and diving behaviors of ice seals and to develop the haul-out correction factors needed to adjust counts from aerial abundance surveys for the proportion of seals that are not observed. Sampling data will be used to assess the current health and condition and stock structures of ice seals and to develop a baseline dataset against which these parameters can be compared in the future.

They will also provide valuable information to the Working Group for the Unusual Mortality Event (UME) for northern pinnipeds.

How do you plan to communicate research results?

The Marine Mammal Laboratory will prepare a report summarizing the preliminary results of the expedition. We will present that report to the public by participating in various local and regional outreach activities including webinars with communities and radio interviews.



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