

THE UNEXPECTED WALRUS

By Jeremy Berlin

Photograph by Paul Nicklen



It's smarter, more dangerous—and more musical—than you might think.

On ice floes and rocky beaches in the far North Atlantic, cinnamon brown blobs pile up in living heaps. Some weigh more than a ton. Some are longer than ten feet. Each is a rumpled portrait of buckteeth and whiskers, deep scars and bloodshot eyes. They nap, burp, squabble, and bark—"something between the mooing of a cow and the deepest baying of a mastiff," noted a 19th-century explorer.

Walrus may seem familiar from Beatles lyrics and Lewis Carroll verses, but most of us will never see a herd in the wild. And few photographers have documented this dangerous, musical, and socially sophisticated pinniped, a fin-footed kin to seals, sea lions, and sea elephants.

"I used myself as bait," says Paul Nicklen, who spent three weeks aiming his lens at Atlantic walrus with the help of Swedish diver Göran Ehlme. "I sat on the shore, and the walrus would come along. They'd get curious. But they have to hit you with their tusks to figure out what you are. And for a walrus to hit one of us can be lethal."

Indeed, their ivory tusks can be

nearly two feet long. Hooked into ice like an ax, they help a walrus clamber from the sea. They also jab rivals and fend off predators. Punctured polar bears have been found floating dead in the ocean.

The mustache is the other iconic feature. Hundreds of stiff, straw-colored whiskers bristle over walrus lips, thick as quills and sensitive as fingers. Using those vibrissae, walrus can tell the difference between objects half the size of an M&M. More practically, they can locate buried clams on the seafloor. To remove the meat, they use their mouths' vacuum-force suction—strong enough to pull the skin off a seal.

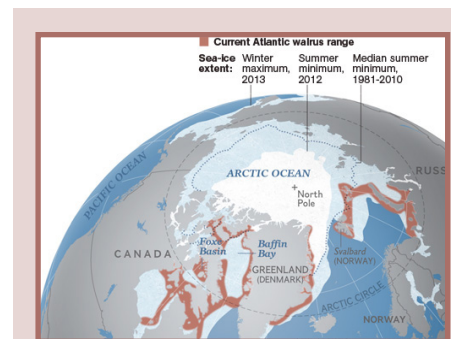
These powerful creatures are tuneful too. During the January to April mating season "adult males erupt with singing and all kinds of strange sounds, like castanets and bells and strums of guitars and tapping on drums," says Erik W. Born, senior scientist at the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources.

"The best singer is hoping his song attracts a beautiful lady walrus."

Fifteen months after he does, a hundred-plus-pound calf is born. Over the

next two years that pup will be cradled like a football by its doting mother, given piggyback rides, fattened with rich milk. If all goes well, it might live 40 years.

Ninth-century Vikings slaughtered herds for blubber and hides. Medieval Europeans carved chess sets from tusks. From the 16th century to the 20th, commercial whalers exploited walrus, reducing a range that once reached to Nova Scotia.



Atlantic walrus prefer to stay near sea ice that forms seasonally. They live in subgroups that seem to have little contact. Unlike their Pacific cousins, they don't make long annual migrations.