

**THE DIET OF FUR SEALS (*ARCTOCEPHALUS TROPICALIS*
AND *A. GAZELLA*) AT MARION ISLAND**

by

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my parents, Ratshilumela Phaniel and Nyamutshagole for their love, support, encouragement and advices.

Abstract

The diet of the Subantarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus tropicalis*) and Antarctic fur seal (*A. gazella*) were investigated at Marion Island from 1996-2000. Scats were examined and the extent of possible dietary overlap determined. No significant differences existed between their diets. Twenty-one species of fish were identified from sagittal otoliths in the scats with *A. gazella* having a slightly more diverse diet than *A. tropicalis* (20 versus 18 taxa), the two predators sharing 17 out of 21 taxa. The shared prey species contributed more than 99 % of the numerical abundance (NA) of fish prey. Otoliths of the mesopelagic Myctophidae (lantern fish) were by far the most numerous (98.1 % NA) hard prey components identified in the scats of the fur seals, with up to eight different prey species making up an individual scat. Fish from other families were rarely taken by *A. tropicalis* and *A. gazella*.

The *A. gazella* diet is comprised mainly of fish, crustaceans and cephalopods while fish and cephalopods were the only two taxa identified in the diet of *A. tropicalis*. Three myctophid species namely *Electrona carlsbergi*, *Gymnoscopelus fraseri* and *G. piabilis* accounted for 60 % NA of prey items in the diets. Minor differences in their diets were that *Champscephalus gunnari* was utilised by *A. tropicalis* only while *Lepidonotothen larseni*, *Paranotothenia gracillis* and *P. magellanica* were eaten by *A. gazella*.

There were distinct seasonal variations in the utilization of some prey species. The utilization of *E. carlsbergi*, *E. subaspera*, *G. bolini* and *G. fraseri* by both *A. tropicalis* and *A. gazella* were higher in winter than in the early and late summer. During the winter season, *A. tropicalis* predominantly fed on *E. subaspera* (7.45 %), *G. fraseri* (22.17 %) and *G. piabilis* (26.56 %) whereas there was a 50 % decrease in the consumption of *G. piabilis* (23.39 %) by *A. gazella*,

with a concomitant increase in other major prey species. *Krefftichthys anderssoni* seemed were utilized more in summer by *A. tropicalis* and *A. gazella* (NA of 26.38 % and 14.88 % respectively).

The two fur seals fed on fish of more or less the same size over a wide size range. The length and the mass of fish consumed were similar, the fur seals feeding on both small species (*K. anderssoni* and *P. bolini*) as well as larger prey species (*G. nicholsi*, *G. piabilis* and *P. choriodon*). *Arctocephalus gazella* in particular preyed on large species such as *D. eleginoides*. All prey species appearing in the diet of *A. tropicalis* and *A. gazella* except *E. antarctica*, *G. fraseri*, *G. nicholsi*, *K. anderssoni*, and *P. choriodon* yielded non significant differences in size. *Arctocephalus gazella* ate significantly larger *E. antarctica* and *P. choriodon* while *A. tropicalis* took larger sized *G. fraseri*, *G. nicholsi* and *K. anderssoni*.

The total biomass of fish consumed by *A. tropicalis* and *A. gazella* were 1.9×10^5 t and 1.1×10^4 t respectively. Much less squid was consumed with *A. gazella* consuming a far larger amount (459.78 t) than *A. tropicalis* (367.79 t).

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Table of Contents	Page
ABSTRACT-----	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS-----	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS -----	IV
LIST OF TABLES -----	IX
LIST OF FIGURES -----	XIII
CHAPTER 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION -----	1
1.1. Introduction -----	1
1.1.1. DESCRIPTION OF THE SPECIES UNDER STUDY -----	1
1.1.2. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION -----	3
1.1.3. EXPLOITATION -----	3
1.2. The fur seal populations of Marion Island -----	6
1.2.1. POPULATION SIZES AND TRENDS -----	6
1.2.2. HABITAT PREFERENCES AND SEASONAL HAULOUT PATTERNS-----	6
1.2.3. PELAGIC MOVEMENT OF THE FUR SEALS -----	7
1.3. Rationale and objectives of the study -----	8

CHAPTER 2. STUDY AREA -----	10
2.1. GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION -----	10
2.2. TOPOGRAPHICAL FEATURES -----	11
2.3. CLIMATE -----	11
CHAPTER 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS -----	13
3.1. Collection and preparation of data -----	13
3.1.1. COLLECTIONS -----	15
3.1.2. SORTING -----	16
3.1.3. MEASURING AND IDENTIFICATION -----	16
3.2. Statistical analysis -----	17
CHAPTER 4: THE DIET OF THE ANTARCTIC FUR SEAL (<i>ARCTOCEPHALUS GAZELLA</i>) AT MARION ISLAND -----	19
4.1. Introduction -----	19
4.2. Results -----	21
4.2.1. OTOLITHS RECOVERED -----	22
4.2.2. DIET COMPOSITION -----	23
4.2.3. SEASONAL VARIATION -----	25
4.2.4. INTER-ANNUAL VARIATION -----	30
4.2.6. FISH MASSES -----	31
4.3. Discussion -----	36
4.3.1. DIET COMPOSITION -----	36
4.3.2. SEASONAL VARIATION -----	38

4.3.3 INTER-ANNUAL DIFFERENCES -----	39
4.3.4 FISH SIZE AND MASS CLASSES CONSUMED -----	40
4.3.5. PREDATION ON PENGUINS -----	41
CHAPTER 5: THE DIET OF THE SUBANTARCTIC FUR SEAL (<i>ARCTOCEPHALUS TROPICALIS</i>) AT MARION ISLAND -----	42
5.1. Introduction -----	42
5.2. Results -----	44
5.2.1. OTOLITHS RECOVERED -----	45
5.2.2. DIET COMPOSITION -----	46
5.2.3. SEASONAL VARIATION -----	48
5.2.4. INTER-ANNUAL VARIATION -----	49
5.2.5. SIZE CLASSES OF FISH CONSUMED -----	50
5.2.6. FISH MASSES -----	55
5.3. Discussion -----	59
5.3.1. DIET COMPOSITION -----	59
5.3.2. SEASONAL VARIATIONS -----	62
5.3.3. INTER-ANNUAL DIFFERENCES -----	63
5.3.4. FISH SIZE AND MASS CLASSES CONSUMED -----	63
5.3.5. PREDATION ON PENGUINS -----	64

CHAPTER 6: COMPARISON OF THE DIET OF ANTARCTIC FUR SEALS
(*ARCTOCEPHALUS GAZELLA*) AND SUBANTARCTIC FUR SEALS (*A. TROPICALIS*) AT
MARION ISLAND----- 65

6.1. Introduction ----- 65

6.3. Results ----- 67

6.3.1. DIET COMPOSITION ----- 67

6.3.2. INTERSPECIFIC COMPARISONS ----- 69

6.3.3. TEMPORAL DIFFERENCES IN DIET ----- 70

6.3.3.1. Monthly variations----- 70

6.3.3.2. Inter-seasonal variations----- 73

6.3.3.4. Inter-annual variations ----- 80

6.3.4. PREY SIZE AND MASS ----- 82

6.4. Discussion ----- 93

6.4.1. DIET COMPOSITION ----- 95

6.4.2. INTERSPECIFIC DIFFERENCES ----- 96

6.4.3. SEASONAL CHANGES----- 98

6.4.4. SIZE AND MASS OF PREY SPECIES----- 99

CHAPTER 7: ESTIMATION OF PREY BIOMASS ----- 101

7.1. Introduction ----- 101

7.2. Methods ----- 102

7.2.1. POPULATION STRUCTURE AND SIZE----- 102

7.2.2. DAILY ENERGY REQUIREMENTS ----- 103

7.2.3. CALORIFIC VALUE----- 104

7.2.4. DIETARY COMPOSITION ----- 105

7.3. Results	105
7.3.1. ENERGY REQUIREMENTS AND FOOD CONSUMPTION	105
7.3.2. ESTIMATED BIOMASS	106
7.4. Discussion	108
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY	111
8.1. CONCLUSIONS	111
8.2. SUMMARY	113
8.3. FUTURE STUDIES	115
REFERENCES	117

List of Tables

Table 1.1. Estimated sizes and trends of Antarctic fur seal (<i>Arctocephalus gazella</i>) populations.....	4.
Table 1.2. Estimated sizes and trends of subantarctic fur seal (<i>Arctocephalus tropicalis</i>) populations	5.
Table 4.1: Number of <i>A. gazella</i> scats collected at the Water tunnel Stream breeding colony on Marion Island by month and year.....	21.
Table 4.2: Percentage numerical abundance (%NA) and frequency of occurrence (FO) of prey species appearing in scat samples of <i>A. gazella</i>	22.
Table 4.3: Frequency of occurrence (FO) and numerical abundance (NA) of fish species identified from otoliths (n = 7390) found in the scats (n = 249) sampled from <i>A. gazella</i> at Marion Island.....	25.
Table 4.4: Mean numerical abundance (NA) of major fish prey species identified in the scats of <i>A. gazella</i> averaged on a monthly basis over a 5 year period (sample size represented in Table 4.3).....	27.
Table 4.5: Numerical abundances (NA) of prey species obtained from the scats of <i>A. gazella</i> averaged per year.....	32.

Table 4.6: Summary of standard lengths and mass of fish consumed by <i>A. gazella</i> at Marion Island.....	35.
Table 5.1: Number of <i>A. tropicalis</i> scats collected at the Cape Davis breeding colony on Marion Island by month and year.....	44.
Table 5.2: Percentage numerical abundance (%NA) and frequency of occurrence (FO) of prey species appearing in scat samples of <i>A. tropicalis</i>	45.
Table 5.3: Frequency of occurrence (FO) and numerical abundance (NA) of fish species identified from otoliths (n = 6910) found in the scats (n = 209) sampled from <i>A. tropicalis</i> at Marion Island.....	47.
Table 5.4: Mean numerical abundance (NA) of major fish prey species identified in the scats of <i>A. tropicalis</i> averaged on a monthly basis over a 5 year period (sample size represented in Table 5.3).....	51.
Table 5.5: Numerical abundances (NA) of prey species obtained from the scats of <i>A. tropicalis</i> averaged per year.	54.
Table 5.6: Summary of standard lengths and masses of fish species consumed by <i>A. tropicalis</i> at Marion Island.....	58.

Table 6.1: Number of scats collected from <i>Arctocephalus gazella</i> (A.g) and <i>A. tropicalis</i> (A.t) at Marion Island.....	68.
Table 6.2: Percentage numerical abundance (%NA) and frequency of occurrence (FO) of prey species appearing in scat samples of <i>A. gazella</i> and <i>A. tropicalis</i> at Marion Island.....	69.
Table 6.3: Frequency of occurrence (FO) and numerical abundance (NA) of fish species identified in the scats sampled from both fur seals species at Marion Island.....	71.
Table 6.4: Mean numerical abundances (NA) of major prey species identified in the scats of <i>A. tropicalis</i> on a monthly basis at Marion Island.....	74.
Table 6.5: Mean numerical abundance (NA) of prey species identified in the scats of <i>A. gazella</i> species on a monthly basis at Marion Island.....	74.
Table 6.6: Seasonal trend in percentage numerical abundances (% NA) of the major prey species in the diet of both <i>A. tropicalis</i> and <i>A. gazella</i> at Marion Island.....	76.
Table 6.7: Proportional annual variations of major prey species taken by both fur seals species at Marion Island.....	81.
Table 6.8: Overall percentage numerical abundances of prey species taken annually by both fur seals species at Marion Island.....	81.

Table 6.9: Summary of standard length and mass of fish consumed by *A. gazella* and *A. tropicalis* resident on Marion Island.....89.

Table 6.10: Simple classification ANOVA showing the significance of observed differences in the sizes of fish eaten by *A. tropicalis* and *A. gazella*.....91.

Table 6.11: Simple classification ANOVA showing the significance of observed differences in the masses of fish (g) eaten by *A. tropicalis* and *A. gazella*.....92.

Table 7.1: Annual energy requirements (KJ) and prey consumption (g) of various age/sex classes of sympatric population of *A. gazella* and *A. tropicalis* breeding at Marion Island.....106.

Table 7.2: Estimated annual biomass (in metric tons) of prey items consumed by various sex-age classes of *A. gazella* and *A. tropicalis* breeding at Marion Island.....107.

List of Figures

Fig 1.1: <i>Arctocephalus tropicalis</i> bull at Marion Island.....	2.
Fig 1.2: <i>Arctocephalus gazella</i> bull at Marion Island.....	2.
Fig 1.3: Distribution of breeding haulout sites for <i>Arctocephalus tropicalis</i> (squares), <i>A. gazella</i> (triangles) and sites at which the two species breed sympatrically (circles). The mean positions of the A.P.F (...), the winter pack ice limit (_ _) and the summer pack ice limit (_ _) are indicated.....	11.
Fig 1.4. Distribution of <i>Arctocephalus tropicalis</i> (outside circle) and <i>A. gazella</i> (inside circle) pup production during the 1993/1994 breeding season at Marion Island. The size of the filled circle is proportional to the number of pups counted at each site.....	13.
Fig 4.1: Seasonal variation of prey species eaten by <i>A. gazella</i>	28.
Fig 4.2: Mean numerical abundance of prey species eaten by <i>A. gazella</i>	29.
Fig 4.3: Reconstituted size classes of fish species eaten by <i>A. gazella</i>	33.
Fig 4.4: Reconstituted size classes of fish species eaten by <i>A. gazella</i>	33.
Fig 5.1: Seasonal variation of prey species eaten by <i>A. tropicalis</i>	52.

Fig 5.2: Mean numerical abundance of prey species eaten by *A. tropicalis*.....53.

Fig 5.3: Reconstituted size classes of fish species eaten by *A. tropicalis*.....56.

Fig 5.4: Reconstituted mass of fish species eaten by *A. tropicalis*57.

Fig 6.1: Temporal changes in the numerical abundance of the most common fish genera taken by *A. gazella* and *A. tropicalis* at Marion Island.....72.

Fig 6.2: Mean numerical abundance of prey species eaten by *A. tropicalis*.....77.

Fig 6.3: Mean numerical abundance of prey species eaten by *A. gazella*.....77.

Fig 6.4: Seasonal variation of prey species eaten by *A. gazella* and *A. tropicalis* at Marion Island.....78.

Fig 6.5: Annual variation of prey species (% NA) eaten by both fur seals species combined at Marion Island.....82.

Fig 6. 6: Reconstituted fish sizes of fish prey eaten by both fur seals species.....84.

Fig 6.7: Reconstituted masses of fish prey eaten by both fur seals species.....87.