

INSIGHTS ON MARINE MAMMALS AND SEA BIRDS OCCURRENCE IN THE ROSS SEA, ANTARCTICA

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The Southern Ocean holds about 20% of the worlds' seals and whales, represented by 15 species of cetaceans and six species of pinnipeds. Similarly, the area holds around 60 bird species, represented by 6 orders and 11 families. However, few studies have been focused on assessing occurrence patterns of marine fauna on board research vessels in Antarctica. In order to evaluate the occurrence of marine mammals and birds in the Ross Sea, the Marine Mammal Monitoring Program at the Colombian Antarctic Program in cooperation with Italian Antarctic Program, conducted a marine fauna monitoring survey during the transit from New Zealand to the Ross sea, and in the Ross Sea during the 2019-2020 austral summer (January-February, 2020). The survey was conducted on board the Italian vessel Laura Bassi, during 35 days, traveling approximately 9,260km, with a total of 226 hours and 11 minutes of visual effort. During this survey, there were 80 sightings, in which five cetacean species and four pinniped species were reported. Additionally, there were 146 bird sightings of 15 different species, represented by three orders and five families. Our preliminary findings suggest that minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata/bonaerensis*), the crabeater seal (*Lobodon carcinophagus*), and the Weddell seal (*Leptonychotes weddellii*) are the three most common marine mammal species in the Ross Sea. Similarly, the snow petrel (*Pagodroma nivea*), brown skua (*Stercorarius antarcticus*), and the Southern giant petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*) are the most common bird species in this Antarctic area. However, it is necessary to implement a long-term monitoring program in order to effectively understand the distributional patterns of marine fauna along the Ross Sea.