



Notes on Caspian seals (*Pusa caspica*)

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In 2022, the Khazarskiy State Nature Reserve conducted dozens of expeditions to Ogurjaly (formerly Ogurchinsky), Turkmenistan's largest island, located in the southeastern Caspian Sea. Caspian seals still haul-out there. The main goal of our annual trips to the island was to monitor this endemic species, which is listed in the Red Books of all Caspian countries. The results of our surveys in 2022 and for the previous 10 years can be found in the articles ([Rustamov et al., 2021](#); [Mammedov, 2022](#)).

On April 4, 2022, we set out for a survey once again. In addition to me, the expedition was also attended by Ya. Ashirov, the Head of Security Department at the Khazarskiy State Nature Reserve, as well as employees from the Ogurjaly State Nature Sanctuary: S. Nurmammedov, the Head of this specially protected area and R. Amanmammedov, a motor mechanic.

We were moving along the island in a motorboat at low speed. Traces of seals were found only in one place—on a sand spit in the northeastern part of Ogurjaly. Probably, having heard us from afar, the animals swam further out to the sea. One individual was spotted on this spit. Being 50-60 meters away from the animal, we disembarked and began to move very slowly so as not to frighten the Caspian seal away.

It was a young seal, approximately 85-90 cm long ([Fig. 1](#)). He eyed us curiously and showed no signs of retreating into the cold Caspian water. We also watched him with interest. At first, we whispered quietly, but after a while started talking louder. One of us turned on music on his phone. The pup clearly enjoyed the calm melody. He got scared and swam away into the sea only when I decided to stroke his fur sparkling in the spring sun. This unusual mutual observation lasted almost 20-25 minutes.

It is worth noting that Caspian seals exhibit some fascinating individual and group behavioral traits when in close contact with humans. They are curious and highly intelligent. They respond positively to soft, pleasant music and, under favorable circumstances, may interact with you.

We do not know for sure whether Caspian seals can be trained, or whether attempts to breed them in captivity to preserve the gene pool of this endangered species will be successful.

In April 2014, at the request of the National Museum of Wildlife of Turkmenistan (Ashgabat Zoo), inspectors captured a white-coat Caspian seal pup on Ogurjaly Island. The zoo requested also that the pup remain at our nature reserve until the construction of a swimming pool for it was completed. For six months, the seal had been keeping in a fenced enclosure with a small pool of 3 m² and about 1 m deep ([Fig. 2, 3](#)). We regularly cleaned the pool and changed water in it. The pup was fed fresh fish—kilkas, gobies, and small herrings.



Fig. 1. A Caspian seal on Ogurjaly Island, the southeastern Caspian Sea, Turkmenistan, April 04, 2022. Credited by S.B. Mammedov.



Fig. 2. A Caspian seal pup in May 2014, the KhazarSKIY State Nature Reserve, Turkmenistan. Credited by S.B. Mammedov.



Fig. 3. A Caspian seal pup in September 2014., the KhazarSKIY State Nature Reserve, Turkmenistan. Credited by S.B. Mammedov.

Unfortunately, a photograph of the white-coat Caspian seal pup caught in 2014 was not found. Instead, I attached images of moulting white-coat pups, sent to me by fishermen (Fig. 4). The animals were photographed on the northern spit of the Cheleken Peninsula, on March 08, 2023, and March 18, 2024.



Fig. 4. Moulting white-coat Caspian seal pups, March 18, 2024 (a, b); a fisherman with a moulting white-coat pup, March 08, 2023 (c). The northern spit of the Cheleken Peninsula, the Caspian Sea, Turkmenistan. Credited by S.B. Mammedov.

References

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