

Life on the ICE

This ice-cold home may not look too cozy. But for a baby harp seal, ice is nice!

BY HANNAH SCHARDT

B-r-r-r. Chunks of ice surrounded by a slushy sea. Does that sound like a good home for a newborn? Well, it gets the “seal of approval” from this little *harp seal* pup. That’s because the pup has a warm fur coat to keep him snug. And he has a watchful mom close by that feeds him whenever he’s hungry—which is most of the time!

Harp seals live in the North Atlantic Ocean (see map), where it’s always pretty cold. Fortunately, an adult harp seal is built for keeping warm, even in icy water. It has a fur coat and a thick layer of fat, or *blubber*. But this newborn pup doesn’t have blubber yet. So he stays on the ice, surrounded by hundreds of other babies, while Mom takes care of his every need. Pretty nice! But the ice life lasts only a few weeks, so this pup had better get busy.

■ where harp seals live

● where harp seal pups are born



Sealed with a kiss! Mom Harp Seal had snuck away for a quick swim and a snack. But at right, she resurfaces to sniff out her newborn. Soon she'll be back to nursing.

If anyone—even another baby—gets too close, Mom will say, “Get back!” with a raised front flipper (far right).

JOB ONE: EAT

When this baby harp seal was born, he weighed a little more than 20 pounds. That may sound big for a baby, but a newborn harp seal, called a *yellowcoat*, is actually pretty skinny for its size.

Right away, the little yellowcoat got down to the business of packing on the pounds. Good



thing Mom's milk is made for the job. Harp seal milk is almost half fat—10 times fattier than cow milk!

After just two or three days, the pup's yellowish fur turned snowy white. The pup is now known as a *whitecoat*. Mom still sticks around most of the time, feeding her

growing baby every three hours. And it shows: While nursing, the baby harp seal gains about five pounds a day! Soon, the scrawny newborn turns into a roly-poly pup.

Whenever Mom is around, the baby harp seal's main job is to eat (left). But when Mom's away on a swim, it's nap time! (right)

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GOING SOLO

The free meal ticket doesn't last long. After only 12 days of nursing, the pup has fattened up enough to live on his own. Mom swims off to find a mate, leaving her baby alone on the ice.

Without Mom nearby, the pup spends most of his time lying still to save energy. During the next few weeks, he won't eat anything and will lose some of his baby blubber. And that fuzzy, white fur will fall out, leaving a darker, sleeker coat in its place.

The pup also starts to hang out close to the edge of the ice, getting used to the feeling of the water. At this point, the little seal is known as a *beater* because of the way he smacks the water with his flippers for swim practice!

Finally, the pup is ready to jump in for a swim. He slips off the ice and into the chilly water in search of solid food such as shrimp or small fish. Now that's a real seal meal! 🦈

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The fat, fuzzy pups above are still with their moms, but they are almost old enough to be left on their own. Once the pups store up enough blubber, their moms leave for good.

The pup at left is shedding its fuzzy, white baby fur, revealing the sleek, spotted coat underneath. Soon, the pup will jump in and practice swimming (right), getting ready for a new life in the icy ocean.

