

**Sightings of Galápagos sea lions (*Zalophus californianus wollebaeki*)  
on the coasts of Colombia and Ecuador**

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The distribution of the Galápagos sea lion (*Zalophus californianus wollebaeki*) is generally depicted as an isolated population restricted to the Galápagos Islands (e.g., Reeves *et al.* 1992; Jefferson *et al.* 1993). It probably descended from the California sea lion (*Z. c. californianus*) of the eastern North Pacific during the late Pleistocene, when that population may have extended further south than today due to incursions of cold water reaching as far south as South America (Repenning *et al.* 1979, Bonner 1984). Warming of the ocean after this period isolated the population and allowed the development of the subspecies, alongside the Galápagos fur seal (*Arctocephalus galapagoensis*), in an equatorial environment with intense upwelling (Bonner 1984).

Since the 1980s there have been a few observations of Galápagos sea lions off the coast of Ecuador (summarized by Palacios 1996), more than 1,000 km east of the Galápagos Islands. A sighting was also reported from Isla del Coco, Costa Rica (Acevedo-Gutiérrez 1994), 754 km northeast of the Galápagos Islands.

Here we report five sightings from Isla Gorgona, Colombia, and three new sightings from central Ecuador (Table 1). These localities are between 1,120 km (coast of Ecuador) and 1,420 km (Isla Gorgona) from the Galápagos Islands [centered at 00°32' S, 90°31' W (Snell *et al.* 1995)], where the Galápagos sea lion has its population nucleus. The California sea lion has its present southernmost breeding rookery at Isla Los Islotes (24°35' N, 110°23' W), in the Gulf of California, México (Zavala-González 1990), about 3,500 km from the center of the Galápagos Islands. Los Islotes are 4,200 km from Isla Gorgona and 4,390 km from the coast of Ecuador.

The presence of Galápagos sea lions on Isla de La Plata, a small island just 30 km off the coast of Ecuador, was first reported by Nowak (1986), whose observations suggested that a small breeding colony existed there. Subsequent visits to the island in 1991 (H.L. Snell, pers. comm.), 1993 (Curry 1993), 1995 and 1996 [Fundación Ecuatoriana para el Estudio de Mamíferos Marinos (FEMM), unpublished data], reported only seeing a few individuals. The three Galápagos sea lion juveniles found in Ecuador and the immature male/adult female at Isla Gorgona (see Table 1) were animals that could have traveled there from Isla de La Plata, and originated from the Galápagos Islands (Isla Gorgona is about 570 km northeast of Isla de La Plata).

TABLE 1. – Galápagos sea lions (*Zalophus californianus wollebaeki*) sighted on Isla Gorgona, Colombia, and on the coast of Ecuador between 1983 and 1995.

Date	Locality	Observations
18/11/1983 <sup>1</sup>	Isla Gorgona (02°58'N, 78°11'W), Colombia	Female or immature male; observed for two days
21/12/1983 <sup>2</sup>	Isla Gorgona, Colombia	Female or immature male; observed for two days
18/4/1984 <sup>3</sup>	Isla Gorgona, Colombia	Female or immature male; observed for two days
22/9/1987 <sup>4</sup>	Isla Gorgona, Colombia	Immature male; held captive for several weeks
latter part of 1988 <sup>5</sup>	Isla Gorgona, Colombia	Female or immature male
22/5/1991 <sup>6</sup>	Salinas (02°12'S, 80°58'W), Ecuador	Juvenile (114-cm female); seen for two days in the area
26/8/1991 <sup>6</sup>	Punta de Piedra (02°26'S, 79°52'W), Ecuador	Juvenile (118-cm female); returned to sea after three days
1/7/1995 <sup>6</sup>	Salinas, Ecuador	Female or immature male

## Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> Files Fundación Yubarta; photos by L. Barbosa.
- <sup>2</sup> Files Fundación Yubarta; photos by H. von Prahll.
- <sup>3</sup> Files Fundación Yubarta; photos by B.E. Cruz.
- <sup>4</sup> Files Fundación Yubarta.
- <sup>5</sup> Subject of postcard; photo by P. Rouillard.
- <sup>6</sup> Files Fundación Ecuatoriana para el Estudio de Mamíferos Marinos (FEMM).

Long-range movements of many species of pinnipeds outside their normal range of distribution, especially by young individuals, are a usual occurrence (Reeves *et al.* 1992). It is possible that the appearance of Galápagos sea lions on the coasts of Ecuador and Colombia (and on Isla del Coco) could be a regular phenomenon that might have gone unnoticed due to the infrequent presence of qualified observers.

The sightings presented here, along with the recent sighting from Isla del Coco (Acevedo-Gutiérrez 1994), indicate that Galápagos sea lions are capable of long-range movements within the eastern tropical Pacific. Similarly, California sea lions have been recorded in México as far south as Acapulco (Gallo-R. and Ortega-O. 1986) and near the border with Guatemala (Gallo-Reynoso and Solorzano-Velasco 1991). Reeves *et al.* (1992) suggested that the latter record could belong to either subspecies. Thus, we leave open the possibility that individual Galápagos and California sea lions may occasionally reach each other's range.

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