

# Arctic Ice Hits Near-Record Low, Threatening Wildlife

by Richard Harris

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Morning Edition



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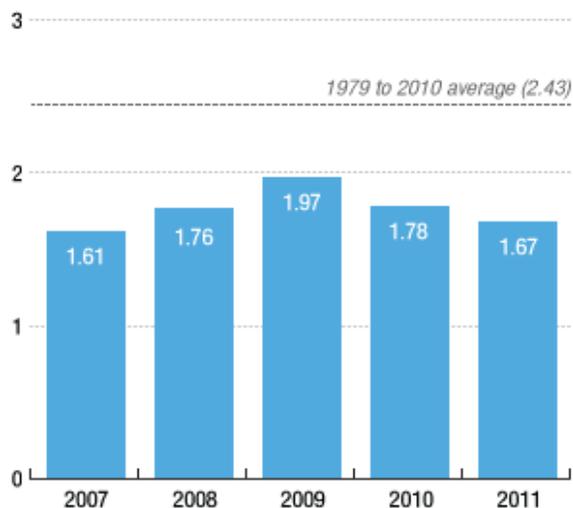
Ice on the Arctic Ocean has melted to its second-lowest level on record. Above, ice in a fjord in Greenland.

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Ice on the Arctic Ocean has melted to its second-lowest level on record, according to researchers in Colorado who track this trend. The summertime melt coincides with a dramatic warming over the past decade, and it's already affecting wildlife in the Arctic Ocean.

## On Thin Ice

This year, the amount of Arctic sea ice hit its second-lowest levels since record-keeping began in 1979. The chart below shows the amount of Arctic ice, in millions of square miles, since 2007.



Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center

Credit: Nelson Hsu/NPR

The Arctic ice comes and goes with the seasons; typically about half of the wintertime ice melts away by mid-September. After that low point, the ice regrows. In 2007, the amount of ice left in September hit a dramatic low.

Mark Serreze, who heads the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Colorado, says this year's low is not far off that 2007 record.

"What it's telling us is that the long-term decline in Arctic sea ice is continuing, and even appears to be accelerating at this point," he says.

Serreze says what's notable about this year is how different the weather was, compared with the record-low year in 2007.

"In 2007, one of the big reasons we got to a record low is because we essentially had a near-perfect weather pattern that pumped a lot of warm air into the Arctic," Serreze says.

Unusually cloud-free skies hastened the melting, and wind patterns made the ice prone to disappear. Serreze says this year's melt was nearly as bad, but without the extreme weather.

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- Mark Serreze, National Snow and Ice Data Center

"That's telling us that sea ice is really in trouble," he says. "The ice is so thin now that it just can't take a hit in summer anymore."

That's setting up a vicious cycle. There's no question that the Arctic Ocean will freeze up again over the fall and winter, but there's less and less really thick ice building back up year to year.

"Come next spring, we're just going to have a lot of thin ice that formed over the autumn and winter. That's the stuff that melts out easily the next summer," Serreze says. "So there's a feedback at work here, and that feedback is getting stronger with time."



## **INTERACTIVE**

### The Arctic's Diminishing Sea Ice

Serreze says the Arctic could be ice-free in the summer by about 2030, though that is hard to predict; other scientists say it could be mid-century before that dramatic point is reached.

Why does this matter? Ice that's floating on the sea surface doesn't raise the sea level when it melts. But researchers suspect it will alter the weather that reaches us far to the south. It's already affecting Arctic wildlife.

Thousands of walrus that usually float around on sea ice and dive down to feed on the ocean floor abandoned those floes when the only ice left off the coast of Alaska was over water that was too deep.

"After the sea ice ran out, a lot of the walrus came to the shore of northwest Alaska and began hauling out there," says Chad Jay, a research ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Alaska. He says it's harder on the walrus to feed from shore, because they have to swim farther to get back to their food supply. It's also more hazardous for them to be up on the rocks instead of on ice, he says.

"When they're hauled out in these large aggregations on the shore, if there's a disturbance or something that causes walrus to flee into the water quickly, then quickly the calves get run over and die as a result," Jay says.

He's now trying to figure out how the walrus will adapt as the sea ice continues to melt away