Comprehension Check

Retell
Use a chart to record details and main ideas about Weddell seals. Use the information to write a summary.

Think and Compare
1. Turn to page 5. What is the first paragraph mostly about? What details support this main idea? (Main Idea and Details)

2. What type of protection would you need to live in a cold, icy climate? (Apply)

3. Some people want to drill for oil in Antarctica. If this were allowed, how would it affect the Weddell seals? (Analyze/Synthesize)
Introduction

They have soft, golden fur and big flippers. They have bright eyes and whiskers. Sometimes they look like they’re smiling. They are Weddell seals and their pups. And they survive in a cold, icy place called Antarctica.

Antarctica is at the bottom of the world at the South Pole.

Glossary

mammal (MAM-mul) an animal that is warm-blooded, and has a backbone (page 5)

nostril (NOS-truh) an opening in the nose through which a human or animal breathes (page 8)

oxygen (OK-si-juhn) a gas that most animals need in order to live (page 12)

predator (PRED-uh-tuhr) an animal that eats other animals (page 5)

prey (PRAY) an animal that is hunted by another animal for food (page 11)

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Conclusion

Antarctica is an icy place of freezing weather, strong winds, and powerful storms. And Weddell seals have what it takes to survive in a frozen land.
Weddell Seal Pups

In September, October, and November, the female Weddell seals come out of the water to give birth to their pups. Each Weddell seal mother has only one pup.

The seals climb onto fast ice, ice that is attached to land. Unlike penguins, they do not form in a huddle. Each mother seal finds a separate place on the cold ice.

A seal mother lies beside her pup.

Scientists are still learning new things about the Weddell seals. Some scientists attach small cameras onto the seals. These don’t harm the seals or their prey in any way. But the cameras give the scientists a moving picture of the hunters at work.

Fast Fact
Scientists use underwater video cameras to find more about the foods Weddell seals eat.
A Weddell seal may need to spend a long time underwater before it finds enough food. What if you had to dive in the ocean for your food? How long could you hold your breath? A Weddell seal can stay underwater for over an hour. It does this by keeping oxygen in its body. Oxygen is a gas in the air. Most animals need oxygen to live.

A diving seal goes into deep water.

A seal pup weighs about 55 pounds (25 kilograms) at birth. In just ten days, the pup doubles its weight. At seven weeks, it doubles its weight again. How do Weddell seal pups grow this fast? Like all mammals, the pup drinks milk from its mother’s body. But seal milk is special since more than half of it is fat. This helps the baby grow quickly.

After two weeks, the mother gives her pup a swimming lesson in the cold Arctic waters. The pup shuffles to the water’s edge. Then the mother pushes her young one into the cold water. Soon the pup is swimming.

Fast Fact
The Weddell seals have fierce enemies, or predators. Two of these are the killer whale and the leopard seal.
Life Under Ice

A Weddell seal’s water home is under thick layers of ice. The ice protects seals from Antarctica’s fierce weather. During an Antarctic storm, a strong wind whips up enormous waves. Then the ice breaks apart creating open spaces on the surface.

Fast Fact
Unlike other Antarctic animals, the Weddell seal does not leave Antarctica during the winter. It doesn’t migrate to a warmer place.

A Weddell seal comes up for air.

Weddell seals have a number of different ways to hunt their prey. Sometimes they stalk large prey by swimming very quietly until they are close enough. To catch small prey, they blow air into cracks in the ice. Small fish come flying out of the cracks. They become an easy meal for the clever hunters.

Weddell seals also use light for hunting. Sunlight makes the ice shine. After diving deep, a seal may look back up through the water. When it does, it may see the shadow of a fish on the ice. If so, it will catch another meal.
Getting Food

Like all animals, the Weddell seal needs food to live. What do you think a Weddell seal eats most often? Fish! But it also feeds on squid, octopus, and small sea animals called krill. The seal stays under the water to eat and it doesn’t bother to chew its food. It just bites off big hunks of food and swallows them whole.

Fish  Squid  Seal Food  Octopus  Krill

The seals poke their heads through these spaces in the ice to breathe air. While they are under the water, they hold their breath or breathe through holes in the ice.

What helps the seals live under this cold ice? A penguin has a coat made of feathers called down but a seal’s coat is made of fur. The fur protects the seal from cold and water. A seal pup is born with light-colored fur. In its growing and junior years, the fur darkens. By the time the seal is an adult, the fur is almost black.

An older seal has darker fur than a young seal.

How Long?

- 5 ft
- 10 ft
- 15 ft
What else about the seal’s body helps it survive in the Antarctic? Two pairs of flippers help it swim swiftly and easily. It can close its nostrils when it dives into the water. It can see well underwater. And it can feel things with its whiskers.

Pretend you are standing on top of the ice in Antarctica. You might hear a seal’s echoes from across the ice. You might even hear seals calling each other from under the water. Some calls sound like buzzes, but others sound like loud chirps or whistles. Sometimes the seals make clicking sounds with their teeth. They usually do this “talking” when they are passing each other at a breathing hole. However, the seals are quiet if a killer whale or leopard seal is near. Predators like this killer whale hunt Weddell seals by listening for their calls.