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Sunflower Sea Star

The sunflower sea star, *Pycnopodia heliathoides*, grows to over 60 cm (2 ft) in diameter, making it the largest sea star on the Pacific coast of North America. While sea stars are generally slow and lethargic, the sunflower star is a relative speedster and can move at speeds of more than 50 cm (20 inches) per minute by means of approximately 15,000 sucker-tipped tube feet. The sunflower star is a voracious predator. Its favorite foods are sea urchins and scallops, but it will eat almost any animal it comes across, including clams, mussels, snails, crabs, sea cucumbers, chitons, other sea stars, and the remains of dead fishes. During the squid spawning season in Monterey Bay, California, sunflower stars gorge themselves on exhausted, dying squid. They are unable to pass the squids' leathery, indigestible "pen" through their digestive system and instead extrude it through the skin on the upper body surface. The sunflower star provokes dramatic escape responses in many species of potential prey. Some normally inactive sea cucumbers, for example, will literally "gallop" away when they sense a sunflower star, and scallops swim away by rapidly clapping their shells.

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