

Artist unknown

A SLIPPERY ONE

By
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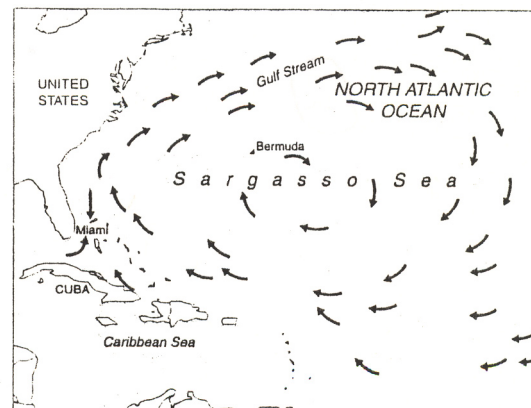
Eels are indeed slippery creatures, as many a freshwater fisherman has found when trying to remove one from a hook. While eels seldom, if ever, take an artificial lure, they are quick to accept most natural baits. The American eel, *Anguilla rostrata*, has a big range, from Greenland south to Venezuela. But in spite of being a common fish, they are a mystery, too.

For centuries, no one had ever seen an eel with eggs, yet eels appeared everywhere in freshwater, even in lakes which were previously dry and cut off from rivers or streams. This gave rise to all sorts of myths about where eels came from. Not until the 20th century did scientists learn that eels begin their lives, and presumably spawn, in the Sargasso Sea, an area of clear, seaweed-filled water in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean.

Within this vast, two million square mile area, eels start their lives as long, flat leaf-like larvae called leptocephali. They drift in the circular currents of the Sargasso Sea for about a year before changing into 2-to 3-inch long “glass eels.” At this stage, they move toward land and begin to travel up freshwater streams and rivers, gradually darkening and changing color into yellow eels. Eels may travel hundreds or even over a thousand miles up rivers, and to everyone’s mystery, appear in landlocked lakes and ponds.

Eels will spend five to 25 years in the yellow eel stage, feeding, growing and storing fat. One of the mysteries of eel biology is that in the yellow eel stage some areas of the U.S. have mostly male eels and other areas mostly female eels. In general, males seem to be found nearer river mouths, bays and estuaries, and females further upstream in inland, totally freshwater areas. The current theory is that eels can change sexes, becoming males in crowded areas where competition for food is strong and females in areas of low population and low food competition.

The Mysterious Seaweed Sea



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At a certain size, depending on location, the eels quit feeding and change again into “silver eels” and begin their long migration downstream and back to the Sargasso Sea to spawn and start the cycle again. On average, female eels are more than 16 inches long before they begin the spawning migration and males are under 16 inches. By looking for eel eggs and newly hatched larvae, scientists have identified the approximate area where eels must spawn, although no one has ever been able to capture an adult eel there.

A fair-sized commercial fishery for American eels exists on the Atlantic Coast, especially in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina. Most of these eels are exported live to Europe and Asia. Yellow, and especially silver stage eels, are high-fat and make a wonderful smoked product. In spite of several attempts to start a commercial eel fishery in Louisiana, none has yet succeeded.

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