

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



Ocean Sunfish

Mola mola

lasc greine

A rare but unforgettable visitor to Irish waters, this disc-shaped fish is the heaviest bony fish in the world. An adult can weigh up to 2000kg and be as tall as it is long, giving this laterally flattened fish a characteristic appearance. This species is unlikely to be confused with any other in Irish waters.

Natives of tropical and temperate waters, these organisms exist primarily on a diet of jellyfish. They must constantly swim in search of more prey in order to develop and maintain their great bulk. This can lead to some specimens being seen off Ireland in July, August and September. Usually these individuals are on the smaller side, under 1m in length, but one truly spectacular specimen off the coast of Kerry in 2003 was over 3m long.

Climate change may have resulted in increased sightings over the past decades, as higher marine temperatures and the consequential jellyfish blooms encourage them into Irish waters. Along with the leatherback turtle they are a major predator of jellyfish and use their beak-like mouths to bite these zooplankton into edible chunks. They will also feed on small fish, molluscs and crustaceans.

Despite their peculiar shape sunfish are now understood to be extremely active organisms. In the open ocean one can swim as rapidly as salmon. They are capable of diving to 200m and spend much of their lives at depth. While they do not have a swim bladder much of their body is lined with neutrally buoyant tissue, which allows them to descend with ease in the water column. They can breach the surface of the sea by about 3m, usually in an attempt to rid themselves of parasites.

Their frequent descents into such cold, deep water results in horizontal basking behaviour, where they return to the warm ocean surface and lie on their side. This exposes their broadest surface area to the sun and allows them to 'thermally recharge' after long feeding expeditions. In addition it allows seabirds to land on them and pick away the many parasitic organisms clinging to their skin. While it may seem that a sunfish in this position is injured or dead, it is natural for them and they can reorient themselves at any time. *M. mola* seem quite calm while sunbathing and may bump against fishing boats if so carried by the current.

Sunfish lay eggs in great numbers, sometimes up to 300 million in one season. The newly hatched sunfish are approximately 2mm long and protect themselves by means of a great number of spikes, which vanish as they age. They increase in size many millions of times before reaching their adult state. While docile, the sheer size of adults acts as a deterrent for many predators, although they may still clash with hungry sea lions, orca and other large predators. They are often accidentally captured in drift gillnets.