

GWCT's Peter Thompson talking about The Eel

Some good news for a change! 2014 saw the biggest migration of young eels or elvers arrive in UK waters for more than 20 years. Even better news is that this appears not to have been a one-off, as so far this year there looks to be an even better run of elvers, with some estimates doubling the numbers over last year.

Eels are the only European fish to leave freshwater to spawn in the sea – the opposite to salmon, which travel upstream to spawn in freshwater. European eels migrate to their spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea, which is located to the south-west of Bermuda, around 4,500 miles from the UK. Eels do not begin to undertake spawning migrations until the males are between 6-12 years old and the females are 9-18 years of age. They do not feed at all on their migration to the breeding grounds.

Once the mature adult eels enter the Sargasso Sea, usually in late winter and spring, they go down to depths of between 400-700 metres to spawn and it is estimated that each female produces over 1 million eggs. The adult eels do not leave the Sargasso Sea and are thought to die after spawning.

Travelling eastwards on ocean currents, the returning young change into transparent “glass eels” as they reach the shallow waters close to the continent, eventually arriving on the Atlantic coast of Europe after a journey that can take as long as three years. The mortality rate for this epic journey is an unbelievably high 99.8%, which is why so many eggs are laid by females.

Despite these losses, huge numbers of elvers used to arrive on our shores, in particular along western river estuaries and travel upstream, many millions being caught by local people who harvested them as a delicacy. Frampton-on-Severn used to hold an annual competition to see who could consume the most “pints of elvers”. It is perhaps hard to believe today, that in those days the left over catch was spread on surrounding fields as fertiliser.



The elvers move upstream hiding under rocks and in crevices, until eventually they be found in almost any freshwater habitats, not only rivers and streams, but also lakes and larger ponds right across the country. They will spend the following years reaching sexual maturity, before eventually heading off to the Sargasso Sea once more.

During this time in freshwater they can grow into big specimens – the current UK rod caught record is 11lb 2oz, held by S Terry, Kingfisher Lake, near Ringwood, Hampshire, in 1978 and is one of the longest-standing records in UK freshwater angling.

The Jewish laws of Kashrut forbid the consumption of eels. According to the King James version of Leviticus, “Whatsoever hath no fins nor scales in the waters, that shall be an abomination unto you”, so while it is acceptable to eat fin-fish, eels – lacking fins – count as an “abomination” and should not be eaten! Not everyone thinks along these lines, however, particularly perhaps the Japanese, who nowadays consume more than 70 per cent of the global eel catch.

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In the past, eel pie and mash houses set up by the Victorians, became hugely popular amongst London workers, although there have been market stalls selling eels since the eighteenth century.

Frederick Cooke opened his first shop in Clerkenwell in 1862, promoting eels as the “poor-man’s delicacy”. He was followed by the Kellys, an Irish family that arrived relatively late to the trade but quickly became known as the best. At the peak of their business, two tons of live eels were consumed per shop! Jellied eels – cooked eels set in an aspic jelly made from eel bones – were also a firm favourite with many Londoners.

If you decide that you might take a trip to London to try and locate some jellied eel or maybe a pie, take care not to head straight for the Eel Pie Club, as its aim has nothing to do with eels, but was instead formed to preserve and continue the heritage of rhythm and blues in the area where it all began in the 1960s – on Eel Pie Island.

A trip to this place could therefore leave you with some great sounds in your head, but a severely rumbling tummy! So, instead head to Kellys – which is still going! – in Roman Road Market in Bow, E3.

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