

They're strong, slimy and a little strange

What isn't there to love about an eel?



JOE FITZGERALD CHASING PISCES

The day was getting old, and the summer evening ironed the lake into a calm sheet dimpled by fish rising for insects. It had been a successful day. My spinner and worms had produced so many fighting bass I had lost count, but the action slowed as the fish switched to surface feeding.

Having no poppers or flies, I decided to take a few last casts. On one cast, there was a pull on the line that rivalled any that day.

It felt heavy, and I excitedly waited for the smallie to leap out of the water. But it didn't. Instead, the best fight of the day was an invisible tug of war that had me curious to see my quarry.

I could not identify it until it came out of the water, coiling around and around my line.

Trying to grab the writhing eel, I was coated with a thick slime that stuck like glue. It was hooked deep, and the best I could do was clip the line and let the serpent squirm back into the lake.

In the latter stages of summer days, many species are becoming active under the cover of fading light, chasing insect hatches, or revelling in cooling temperatures.

Species vary from area and water system, whether salt or fresh water. However, wherever you fish in Nova Scotia, whether a major river or tiny stream, large lake or stagnant pond, tidal flats or coastal dock, you will always be in the range of eels.

While they provoke revulsion in most people, perhaps because of their snakelike appearance, the American Eel is one of the most interesting fish, and its life cycle one of the most fascinating.

Unlike salmon, eels live most of their lives in fresh water and return to spawn in the ocean. Eels may live hundreds of miles from the ocean in isolated lakes and rivers for 20 years or more, but when they feel the urge, they make their way back,

sometimes crawling over land.

Eels are strong, and put up a great fight. This versatile fish is not adverse to human encroachment either, as I found out while fishing one evening at an extremely popular and busy lake in the heart of metro.

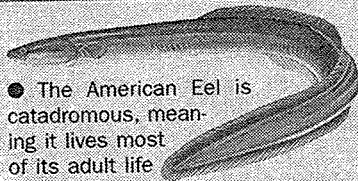
Screaming children and roaring Sea-Doos serenaded me as I baited my hook and started casting. But before I could get a bite, there was a commotion a little way down shore. A group of boys had caught a large eel.

Like a pack of mongoose surrounding a cobra, they darted in on the squirming fish. One boy leaped back, wiping his hands in disgust.

It was an amusing spectacle, and perhaps just another episode in the life of the enigmatic eel.

Joe Fitzgerald is a freelance writer living in Halifax.

THE ENIGMATIC EEL



- The American Eel is catadromous, meaning it lives most of its adult life in fresh water and returns to the ocean to spawn. Some adult eels remain in salt water around the coastline.
- All American and European eels spawn in the Sargasso Sea, an area of the Atlantic Ocean which is part of the Bermuda Triangle. It is believed eels find their way there by the increased temperature and salinity of the water in the Sargasso Sea.
- Larvae eels drift in the ocean for up to two years until migrating up rivers and streams, where they may spend up to 20 years before returning to the sea.
- Mi'kmaq people have fished eels for centuries, and call them Kat. Europe and East Asia have huge markets for eels, and farm them extensively.
- Eels are fished most effectively with bait. They are not picky, and have even been known to take wieners.



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