



MarLIN

Marine Information Network

Information on the species and habitats around the coasts and sea of the British Isles

Common eel (*Anguilla anguilla*)

MarLIN – Marine Life Information Network
Marine Evidence-based Sensitivity Assessment (MarESA) Review

Penny Avant

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A report from:

The Marine Life Information Network, Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom.

Please note. This MarESA report is a dated version of the online review. Please refer to the website for the most up-to-date version [<https://www.marlin.ac.uk/species/detail/1782>]. All terms and the MarESA methodology are outlined on the website (<https://www.marlin.ac.uk>)

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A common eel in the coastal shallows of the Isles of Scilly.
 Photographer: Tabitha Pearman
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See online review for
 distribution map

Distribution data supplied by the Ocean
 Biogeographic Information System (OBIS). To
 interrogate UK data visit the NBN Atlas.

Researched by	Penny Avant	Refereed by	Admin
Authority	(Linnaeus, 1758)		
Other common names	-	Synonyms	-

Summary

🔍 Description

The common eel is long and snake-like in shape with a tough, slimy skin. The dorsal fin starts on the back some way behind the gill slits and small pectoral fins and runs the length of the body. At the tail the dorsal fin merges with the ventral fin, that runs along the underside of the body. The eel can be black, brown or dark olive green in colour above, paler and yellowish on the underside. Sexually maturing eels become silver rather than yellow.

📍 Recorded distribution in Britain and Ireland

Widely distributed around the British and Irish coast.

📍 Global distribution

Common in rivers, estuaries around the coast of northern Europe.

🏠 Habitat

The adult eel is most abundant in estuaries and low salinity pools but is also found around the coast in permanent tide pools, on the lower shore and shallow sublittoral. Being nocturnal it is inactive during the day under rocks or weed or in soft sediments.

↓ Depth range

Q Identifying features

- Slender snake-like body usually less than 1m long.
- The dorsal and ventral fins arise well behind the gill slits and pectoral fins.
- They are continuous and meet in a point at the tail.
- The lower jaw protrudes slightly from the upper jaw.
- Small, round eyes.
- Colour usually dark brown, black or olive green on the back, lighter and yellowish on the underside.
- Slimy skin with tiny scales embedded in it.

🏛️ Additional information

Anguilla anguilla has a complex life history that is poorly understood. It involves migration of mature adults from European rivers and estuaries to the Sargasso Sea in the west Atlantic for spawning, and the subsequent return of juveniles. They metamorphose twice, part of the life cycle spent in freshwater and part in estuarine or full sea water (Whitehead *et al.*, 1986). The adult eels and the returning juveniles (elvers) are commercially fished. The common eel has small eyes and its lower jaw projects from the upper, which distinguishes it from the conger eel, [Conger conger](#). In the common eel the dorsal fin arises about a head's length behind the gill slits and pectoral fins while in the conger eel the fin arises further forward, from just behind the pectoral fins.

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