

Ocean Oddities

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Common recreational fish species caught along the New Jersey coast include striped bass, summer flounder, black sea bass and bluefish. If you've been out on the water enough times, whether scuba diving on a reef or when bottom fishing, you may have hauled in a peculiar fish and thought, "What the heck is that?"

Here we explore a diversity of interesting and sometimes overlooked fishes that swim, slither and crawl around our ocean. Each of these featured creatures developed their appearances for specific evolutionary reasons including protection from predators or to make them more effective predators themselves. Some of these make good to excellent table fare like the striped sea robin, gray triggerfish and conger eel.

Take some time to appreciate these often-encountered, oddball ocean dwellers for the role they play in our marine ecosystem and the potential spot on your dinner plate that some can fill.

Ocean pout, eel pout, mutton fish

Macrozoarces americanus

Maximum Size: ~3 feet long and up to 12 pounds in weight

The ocean pout is a benthic (bottom dwelling) fish in our "slithering" category. While preferring to reside in hard structure such as natural and artificial reefs, the ocean pout can also be found on sand ridges and lumps where it uses its strong paddle-like tail to bury itself.

Resembling an eel, but not related to true eels, the ocean pout has an underslung mouth with thick, fleshy lips that it uses to suck up prey from the ocean floor. Preferred prey reflects its bottom-dwelling lifestyle: green crabs, Jonah crabs, sea urchins, and scallops make up a significant portion of the ocean pout's diet. One favorite, the sand dollar, is responsible for the bright green teeth revealed when removing the hook from a freshly caught ocean pout.

Given their habits and prey overlap with popular recreational species such as summer flounder and tautog, it is not uncommon to catch an ocean pout. The National Marine Fisheries Services does not allow the harvest of ocean pout. If caught, they must immediately be returned to the water.



Ocean pout (NOAA)

Conger eel, American conger, dog eel

Conger oceanicus

Maximum Size: 6 feet long and up to 80+ pounds

Another benthic fish in our "slithering" category is the conger eel. Resembling an American eel, this species prefers hard structure and makes its home in the nooks and crannies of reefs, rockpiles and jetties. A voracious nocturnal predator, the conger eel will eat just about any prey that can fit in its mouth — and some that don't. Adults feed primarily on other fishes and squid, but shrimp, crabs and carrion will be readily devoured if available.

Due to the conger eel's diet and preferred habitat, they are often encountered as bycatch when targeting other structure-associated species such as summer flounder, tautog, black sea bass and cod. Unlike the ocean pout, conger eels may be harvested with no limitations. This presents anglers with an opportunity to fill their cooler with a commonly disregarded fish that makes good table fare. The flesh is white and firm and can be prepared in a variety of ways including fried, grilled, broiled or in a fish stew. If you are brave enough to add this slimy creature to your menu, take note to avoid using the tail end as it can be extremely boney.



Conger eel (NOAA)

Monkfish, goosefish, American anglerfish

Lophius americanus

Maximum size: 4+ feet long and 50+ pounds

The monkfish is certainly among the oddest fish to swim the New Jersey coast and possibly the entire Atlantic Ocean. Sometimes described as a swimming stomach with a tail, the head on this fish makes up nearly half its total length. This species can expand its mouth wide enough to devour fish nearly the size of the monkfish itself. Combined with its mottled brown coloration with fleshy lobes and frills covering its body, the monkfish epitomizes that concept of an ocean oddity.

This benthic ambush predator prefers the fine-grained sediments of the continental shelf where it buries into the sand for concealment, revealing only a modified spine on its head used like a fishing lure to attract prey. Any curious fish that inspects the lure is devoured whole in the blink of an eye by the tooth-filled giant mouth.

Unlike the conger eel, it is no secret that monkfish tastes better than they look. Often referred to as the poor man's lobster, a keeper monkfish is frequently the highlight of an angler's day because of the delicious meal that awaits.



Monkfish (NOAA)

Striped sea robin

Prionotus evolans

Maximum Size: 18 inches long and 2+ pounds

An angler experienced in bottom fishing with chunk or strip bait has most likely encountered the striped sea robin as bycatch when fishing for fluke or black sea bass. Another benthic ambush predator, these notorious bait-stealers have a hard, boney head covered in spines that makes unhooking them a prickly affair. This fish gets the “robin” name from its huge spread out pectoral fins that look like a pair of wings as it walks along the seafloor. That’s correct, sea robins “walk” along the seafloor using modified pelvic fins like fingers to feel around in the sediment for prey. Preferred prey includes small crabs, shrimps, mollusks and polychaete worms.

Adding to its unusual appearance, the striped sea robin has the ability to grunt, voicing its displeasure at being caught. The sound is generated when the fish vibrates muscles against its drum-like, air-filled swim bladder. Although considered a nuisance, those in the know are aware that striped sea robins make very good table fare. With a sharp knife and a pair of gloves to protect against the spines, a brave angler can be rewarded with firm white meat that takes well to most styles of cooking.



Striped sea robin (NOAA)

Northern stargazer

Astroscopus guttatus

Maximum Size: 24+ inches long and 13+ pounds

Another common bait-stealer, and benthic ambush predator, encountered when bottom fishing for species like black sea bass, scup and summer flounder is the northern stargazer. With a closely set pair of protruding bug-eyes placed atop its large head, and frilly lips resembling an out-of-date facial hair style, the northern stargazer certainly earns the label of an *ocean oddity*.

This stout bottom-dweller relies on the element of surprise when catching its prey. Using its short, strong tail, the northern stargazer is typically found buried in the sand up to its eyes waiting for small crabs, shrimp, squid and fish that it snaps up in a flash.

This odd fish also has a shocking secret: between its eyes are a set of modified muscles that can generate an electric shock, surprising an unwary angler attempting to remove a hook. While not strong enough to harm a person, it’s certainly not a reaction one expects to experience while unhooking a fish.



Northern stargazer (NOAA)

Gray triggerfish

Balistes capriscus

Maximum Size: 28+ inches long and 13 pounds

Not all ugly and oddball fish live a benthic lifestyle, as the gray triggerfish proves. This late-summer visitor to the Jersey shore is commonplace in south Atlantic states, but only an occasional bycatch in our waters.

Diamond shaped in profile, the gray triggerfish is laterally compressed with eyes set on either side of its flat head. Like many species mentioned previously, the gray triggerfish’s oddball looks are physical adaptations that match its feeding habits and habitat preferences. At the tip of its snout is a pair of thick, fleshy lips and large, buck teeth used to grab and crush a variety of hard-bodied prey such as crabs, shrimp, urchins, sand dollars and mussels.

Atop its head are two specialized dorsal spines that give the gray triggerfish its name. These two locking spines are used for anchoring the triggerfish among rock and reef crevices and as defense against predators. Anglers should be aware of these sharp spines when handling these fish. The trick to unlocking the spines is to press down on the smaller second spine which serves as the “trigger” to unlock the larger front spine.

Triggerfish are often caught as bycatch when fishing for tautog, black sea bass and summer flounder and provide a delicious addition to the angler’s haul for the day. Their sandpaper-like skin makes them a challenge to fillet. Use gloves and continually sharpen your knife for a safe and effective process.



Gray triggerfish (NMFS)

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These species represent only a portion of the oddball, ugly and downright bizarre fishes that an angler may encounter when targeting popular species in New Jersey. Though it may be shocking to pull one of these over the rail or onto the beach, look beyond their appearance and you may come to appreciate these unique creatures.

At a time when many stocks of popular sportfish are assessed as overfished or depleted, spreading the harvest around to less commonly targeted species can play a part to help more popular species recover. So, the next time you haul in a fish that makes you think, “What the heck is that?” take a picture and do some research. You might learn something new about a cool — and possibly tasty — fish! 

