

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



January 24, 2018

This week's nature encounter will start on the other side of the world and end right in our own backyard. Recently our son Neil posted two pictures from Laos on his twitter page – eels in the pond and eels in the pot – and that got me to thinking. Do we have eels here in Iowa?

Well, the answer is yes, and fairly close by. *Anguilla rostrate*, the American eel, is North America's only eel species. Here in Iowa they live not in farm ponds but in the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers as well as the Des Moines, Iowa, and Chariton Rivers. Eel populations have been verified in the West Branch of the Des Moines River near Humboldt. Eels are not abundant here in the Hawkeye State. However, despite flood control dam projects that have restricted their migration, they do not appear to be declining in numbers nor are eels considered threatened.

American eels are long, slender, snakelike fish with small pointed heads and broad mouths filled with many sharp teeth. Their color ranges from olive brown on their backs to greenish yellow on their sides to gray or whitish underneath. Their unusual fins consist of a pair of rounded pectoral and then single and continuous dorsal, caudal, and anal fins. Mature females may weigh 10-15 pounds, grow up to 5 feet in length, and live up to 30 years in the wild.

Eels are nocturnal carnivores and prefer their prey live. Conversely, American eels are a key prey species for fish, aquatic mammals, and fish-eating birds. Eels may also be an important host species for freshwater mussels. To help avoid capture, American eels may cover their bodies in mucous. "Slippery as an eel" is not just a figure of speech.

Eels are a catadromous species. In other words, they migrate from freshwater to the sea to spawn, which is in contrast to better known anadromous species such as salmon and trout that migrate from the sea to freshwater to spawn. Each fall, all mature female eels migrate downstream to the sea where they are joined by males who have spent their lives in coastal estuaries. They meet up to spawn in the Sargasso Sea located east of the Bahamas in the North Atlantic Ocean.

Each female eel lays 5 – 20 million eggs which quickly develop into transparent leaf-like larvae that move on ocean currents towards their ancestral streams along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts from Greenland to Venezuela. As they cross the Continental Shelf on the journey back home, the larvae metamorphose into small worm-like "glass eels" before changing into elvers as they approach shore. Once inland, these young eels develop into yellow eels and finally silver eels before journeying back to the Sargasso Sea.

In the pot, eel flesh is very rich and delicious and may be pan-fried, smoked, pickled, or jellied. I'll have to take Neil's word on that. Have you sampled smoked eel?

I'll close with an Ogden Nash poem, "The Eel."

I don't mind eels
Except as meals.
And the way they feels.

