

The Amazing European Eel

Some 'Eely' Amazing Facts



- Eels are actually a type of fish
- They are **nocturnal**
- They are **carnivores** – eating **invertebrates** and smaller fish or twisting & spinning rapidly to tear larger pieces of meat with their sharp teeth
- They can live up to 85 years
- They can weigh up to 5kg
- They are **critically endangered** – in the past 40 years eel numbers arriving in Europe have declined by over 90%!
- They can grow up to 1.5m long but are usually about 80cm
- They can slither up to 400m over wet grass to get from one water **habitat** to another
- The Greek **philosopher** Aristotle thought they sprang up spontaneously from the mud
- They are **Catadromous** - migrating from fresh water down the river into the sea's salt water to spawn
(Greek: κατά kata, "down" and δρόμος dromos, "course")
- We are still learning about eels

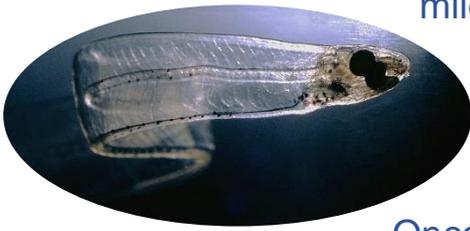


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The European Eel has an incredible life cycle

No-one has ever witnessed the entire life cycle of the European eel, but this is what scientists believe to be true...

After **spawning** in the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda, the eel's **eggs** drift eastwards towards Europe with the **Gulf Stream**, taking up to two years to cover over 4,000 miles. During this time, the eggs hatch into **transparent**, leaf-shaped **larvae**, called **leptocephalus**. Fewer than one in every 500 larvae are thought to survive the journey.



Once the larvae get closer to Europe they **metamorphose** (change) into tiny little snake-shaped eels. Still almost transparent, these tiny fish are known as **glass eels**.



Once they arrive at the river **estuaries** and move upstream into the freshwater, the tiny glass eels darken in colour as **pigmentation** takes place.



They are now known as **elvers**, they continue to **migrate** upstream and may even leave the main river and slither over wet grass to reach ponds or other **freshwater** streams.

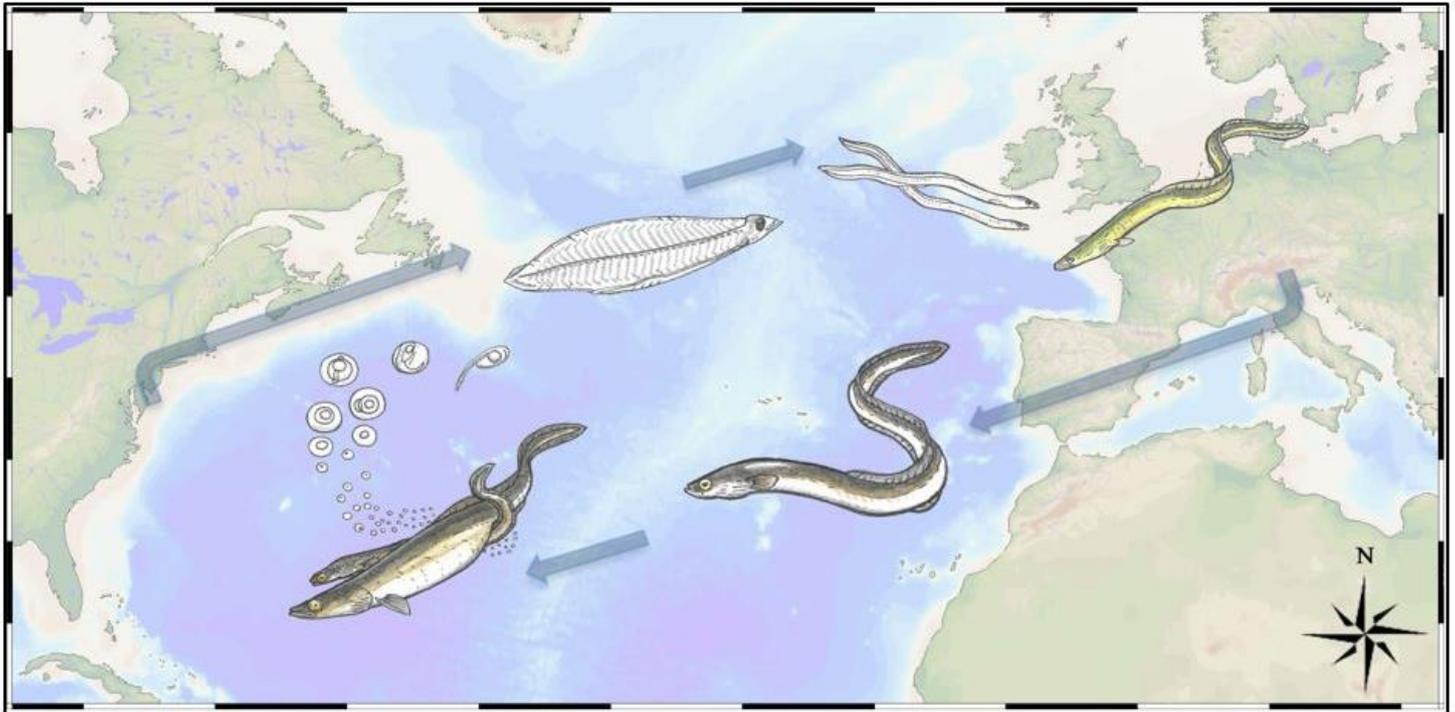
Now they begin to grow into adults known as **yellow eels** and can stay in these **habitats** for more than 20 years, feeding on frogs and other small fish as well as **invertebrates** such as worms and snails.

Once they are mature enough to **reproduce**, they turn into **silver eels** and swim back downstream to the **estuary** to begin their epic migration journey back across to the Sargasso Sea. This migration usually occurs in the autumn. It's not yet fully understood how the eels find their way, but it's possible they can sense the Earth's magnetic field.



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The Life Cycle of the European Eel



Lifecycle of the European Eel displayed in clockwise rotation beginning with spawning silver eels (left), eggs and larvae (top), glass eels (top right), yellow eel stage (right), and silver eels (bottom). Designed by Eric Otten

Watch this brilliant YouTube video created by the Zoological Society of London to find out more about the eel's life cycle
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBRnNk_uo9Y&t=73s



Draw or print out each part of the eel's incredible life cycle and then see if you can place them in the correct order to create your own eel life cycle picture.

Go back to our website for some interesting eel history information and more activities 😊