

Creatures of the kelp Forest

Questions & Answers

CALIFORNIA SHEEPHEAD

Why do sheepheads not mind eating hard-shelled creatures?

A sheephead can live over fifty years. They can grow up to three feet long, but they grow slow. At one year old they will be five inches, then they will reach eighteen inches by the time they are twenty. Most sheephead change from female to male at about eight years old. Males have sharp, dog-like teeth and powerful jaws that can smash the shells of barnacles, mussels, clams, and sea urchins. Animals that eat sheepheads are harbor seals, sea lions and Brandt's cormorants.

PURPLE SEA URCHIN

What is the relationship between sea urchins, kelp, and sea otters?

Purple sea urchins have round bodies and long spines that range from light purple to deep reddish-purple in color. It takes several months for juvenile sea urchins to form, and during this time their spines are green. The spines are used for protection, moving across the ocean floor, and for capturing food. Sea urchins eat decaying matter, sponges, and mussels but their favorite food is kelp. In turn, the urchins are preyed upon by crabs, birds, and fish but especially people and sea otters.

BRITTLE STAR

How does a brittle star keep from being eaten by fish?

Brittle stars can be found by the millions in some places on the seafloor. They bury themselves up to their arms on the ocean bottom. The waving arms sticking out of the sand look like worms. Sometimes a hungry fish will pull an arm, but instead of pulling the brittle star out of the sand, the arm will break off and a new arm will grow in its place.

BLACK SURFPERCH

Why are surfperch important to sea lions?

The black surfperch swims in schools. They use kelp and docks as shelter when raising their young. The female surfperch is larger than the male, and she will carry the young for almost a year. Several other kinds of fish, sea birds, and sea lions prey on surfperch. The other threat to the surfperch's existence is run-off of agricultural poisons.

SEA OTTER

How do sea otters help the fish that depend upon the kelp forest?

Sea otters sleep wrapped up in kelp so they won't float away. They eat sea urchins and other animals that graze on kelp. After the otter has caught their prey, they lie on their back with a stone on their chest and bang the animal against it to break open the hard shell. You might think sea otters are related to sea lions, but the otter is actually in the weasel family. Unlike sea lions, otters don't have blubber to keep them warm. Instead they have very thick fur that captures air between the hairs and natural oils that repel water. So sea otters never actually get wet. Because their fur is so important to them, they spend five to six hours a day grooming.

MORAY EEL

What does a moray eel use its nostrils for?

Moray eels breathe through their skins. They have snake-like bodies with thick skin and no scales. A layer of mucus covers their bodies to protect it from germs and parasites. Their beautiful color patterns help camouflage them, and because they almost always have their mouths open those are camouflaged too. Moray eels are night hunters with poor eyesight so they rely on their keen sense of smell to locate prey.

TOPSMELT

How do topsmelt benefit each other and how do they benefit another animal?

Topsmelt got their name because they stay close to the ocean surface. They swim in schools in order to confuse predators. Female topsmelt lay their eggs in vegetated areas so long threads on the eggs will have something to attach to and not be swept away in the current. Sometimes Topsmelt are found near gray whales because the fish eats lice that infect the whale's skin.

SPINY LOBSTER

Why do lobsters not have to go to the store to buy new shell when they out grow the old ones?

Spiny lobsters don't have large claws like some lobsters. But they do have legs, and they really do walk on their legs. When a lobster leaves behind its shell, it will grow a new one. A female can carry up to 70, 000 eggs for seventy days until the young are born. While she is protecting the eggs she is said to be in "berry."

GARIBALDI

Why is the male garibaldi a better parent than the female?

The bright orange garibaldi is the official California state marine fish. It is the male garibaldi that chooses the nest and keeps it clean in order to attract a female. During the spawning season the male darts around the nest making clicking sounds. After a female is lured to the nest and lays her eggs the male watches over the eggs for about two weeks until they are hatched. During this time the male is very aggressive and will defend the nest.

OPALEYE

What are two ways the opaleye is protected in their younger life?

Opaleyes have gray green bodies and beautiful opal blue eyes—this is where they get their name. Younger opaleyes have blue backs and silver bellies. Females lay their eggs sometime from April to June, and the eggs are laid in deeper water to keep them safe. When the eggs hatch the young make their way to the shore and stay in tide pools until they reach about three inches, then they make their way out to sea. Adults can grow to be two feet long.

BAT RAY

How does a bat ray use its wings?

Bat rays have a flat body with a large head and eyes, and smooth skin. Their tail is as long as their body width, and they have a venomous barb-like spine at the base of their tail. Instead of swimming like most fish, bat rays swim by flapping their bat-like wings. These rays flap their wings along the ocean floor to uncover worms and clams to eat. Their strong, flat teeth are good for crunching the hard shells of clams and shrimp.

SENIORITA

Why do other fish like to have senioritas hanging around?

Senioritas eat during the day. Their main food source is parasites off other fish. This is how the seniorita got its reputation as a cleaner. It will clean many different fish species, and the fish enjoy the seniorita picking off parasites and dead scales from their bodies. When dusk comes the seniorita dives headfirst into the sea floor, and there it will sleep with only its head sticking out until just before daybreak.