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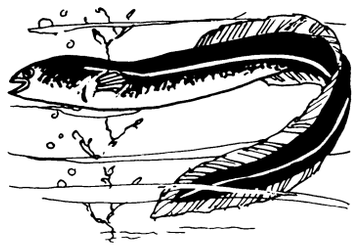
MARINE BIOLOGY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Horace Loftin



Mystery of the Eel

➤ IF YOU have a hankering to look at a deep-sea creature, you do not have to go far from home.

The common eels of American ponds and creeks are true oceanic deep-sea fish, spending a few years of their lives away from their ocean birthplace.

Although one of the best known "freshwater" fishes of Europe and America, the eel's life history remained hidden from scientists for hundreds of years. No one had ever seen a mature eel ready to spawn, nor had the eggs or young been recognized.

It remained for Dr. Johannes Schmidt, a Danish biologist and oceanographer, to unravel the mystery of the eel's first home.

It was found that small, almost transparent marine creatures long classified as a separate species were actually the larvae, or young, of the eel. These larvae were smallest in an area of the Central Atlantic, southeastward of Bermuda. Then, as the larvae were located nearer the coasts of America and Europe, they became progressively larger.

As the larvae approached the coast, they were found to change, or metamorphose, into eel-like creatures, or elvers. These became the typical eels that migrate up the rivers.

Dr. Schmidt's great contribution was in tracing these forms back to their source by plotting their size and occurrence throughout the ocean. He pin-pointed the breeding ground of the eels to the Central Atlantic region below Bermuda.

The mature eels of both Europe and America leave their inland homes at eight or more years of age, to travel thousands of miles through the ocean to the breeding area. They probably die after mating and spawning.

When the eggs hatch, the larvae begin the long swim to fresh water. For the American eel young, the journey takes about a year. The European forms take about three years to reach the coast of that continent.

In spite of the time difference in the voyages of the American and European eel larvae, both reach the coasts of their new homes in the same stage of development.

From the coasts to the streams and ponds of inland America and Europe may add several more hundreds of miles to their travels, until finally these deep-sea creatures take up residence almost in your back yard.

Science News Letter, August 4, 1956

HIGHWAY SAFETY

Sailors Study Highway Navigation

➤ THE NAVY is trying to find out why some of its sailors cannot drive.

Pilot courses set up to teach accident investigation to Navy instructors have been so successful the Navy is planning a broadened program of instruction. The lessons in traffic accident investigation will begin by the end of the summer.

The courses will be followed by full scale instruction on driving a car, including instruction in driver training, examining and licensing drivers and traffic control.

The recently completed pilot course was patterned after similar courses for civil police. Instructors were accident investigation specialists from city and state police departments, Navy safety personnel and representatives of traffic safety organizations and insurance companies.

Science News Letter, August 4, 1956