

Monster Conger Eels in Irish Waters



A Fine Catch: Fishing for Conger Eel off Dungarvan, Co. Waterford

By Declan T. Quigley

THE conger eel (*Conger conger*) is widely distributed throughout the Eastern Atlantic from Norway and Iceland to Senegal (NW Africa) including the Mediterranean and Black Seas and possibly as far south as South Africa. A similar species, the American conger (*C. oceanica*) is found from Cape Cod (Massachusetts) to South America. In Irish waters, the conger eel is found all around our coasts mostly on or near rocky ground, in piers, harbour walls and wrecks, from high water mark down to depths of at least 1,000m. The conger usually spends most of the day hidden in rocky crevices and only ventures out at night to feed on a wide variety of fishes, crustaceans and cephalopods.

Despite its cosmopolitan distribution in Irish waters, relatively little is known about the conger eel's biology, particularly in relation to growth and maturation. Indeed very few mature and/or sexually ripe congers have ever been caught in the wild. In the NE Atlantic, congers are thought

to mature when they reach 5-15 years of age. Although several spawning areas are thought to occur, European congers appear to migrate to an area between Gibraltar and the Azores where they spawn (and die) during midsummer over depths of 3,000-4,000m. An individual female can produce vast numbers of eggs. For example, Eoin Fannin *et al.* (FRC, Dublin) estimated the age (21 years) and fecundity (12.4-17.3 million ova) of an exceptionally large (119 lbs, 6 ft) maturing female conger captured by a trawler off the Wexford coast in November 1988 (*J. Fish Biology* 1990, 36: 275-276). After spawning, the *leptocephalus* larvae drift north-eastwards taking one or two years before

metamorphosis occurs in European waters.

The growth rate of congers is thought to be rapid. Eels may attain a weight of 2-3 lbs three years after metamorphosis and can weight 90 lbs after a further 5 years in captivity. Although most of the congers found in Irish waters weight between 8 and 20 lbs, there is clear evidence that the species can attain monstrous proportions. Stories of massive eels abound and some authorities on the fish believe that exceptional congers can probably grow to as much as 350 lbs. One of the heaviest authenticated specimens weighed 252 lbs (9 ft long) and was captured by a commercial trawler off the Westman Islands near Iceland. Trawlers have taken specimens

weighing up to 160 lbs in UK waters. In October 1985, a trawler 32km SE of Tuskar Rock off the Wexford coast captured a specimen weighing 115 lbs 8 ozs (6 ft 4 inches).

mally aggressive unless provoked. There are several anecdotal accounts in 19th century literature describing close encounters with some of these monsters. For example, Couch (1868) remarked how after "A fisherman had safely taken a stout conger into his boat, the fish snapped at and caught his foot within its mouth, and sprang overboard, carrying his shoe with it." The same author also warned how "A man had thrust his foot into the mouth of a conger that showed little sign of life; when suddenly the jaws grasped it, and an active revolving motion began by which he was dashed to the ground with considerable violence." More recently, a vicious attack by a 6 ft long conger eel on a Scottish diver was reported in *The Irish Times* on 2nd September, 1995. The eel apparently dragged the diver away from his companions.

Sea anglers regard the conger eel as one of the strongest and tenacious fish found around our coasts. The late Des Brennan (*The Sea Angler Afloat & Ashore*) described the eel's fighting ability as follows: "The conger fights like no other fish. It twists, writhes, revolves and shakes its head from side to side in its efforts to break the hook hold. It corkscrews its long sinuous body through the water as it backs away, rather like the pro-

soon expose any weakness." A total of 104 specimen conger eel (>40 lbs) have been recorded by the *Irish Specimen Fish Committee (ISFC)* between 1961 and 1999 (Figure 1). The vast majority (88.4%) of these specimens weighted between 40 and 50 lbs; only 12 specimens weighed >50 lbs, while none exceeded the 70 lbs mark (Table 1). Although specimens have been recorded from most maritime counties (excluding Louth, Clare, Sligo and Leitrim), the vast majority (77.8%) were captured off the S and SW coasts of Counties Waterford, Cork and Kerry (Table 2). However, despite this shewed distribution in catch, some of the largest specimens were taken in northern waters (e.g. 64 lbs, Belfast Lough; 60 lbs, Donegal Bay). While all of the specimens were captured between May and November, the vast majority were taken during the summer and autumn: June - September (Figure 2).

| County | No. | % |
|---------------|------------|------------|
| Louth | 0 | 0 |
| Dublin | 3 | 2.9 |
| Wicklow | 1 | 1.0 |
| Wexford | 3 | 2.9 |
| Waterford | 12 | 11.5 |
| Cork | 45 | 43.3 |
| Kerry | 24 | 23 |
| Clare | 0 | 0 |
| Galway | 2 | 1.9 |
| Mayo | 3 | 2.9 |
| Sligo | 0 | 0 |
| Leitrim | 0 | 0 |
| Donegal | 5 | 4.8 |
| Derry | 0 | 0 |
| Antrim | 5 | 4.8 |
| Down | 1 | 1.0 |
| Totals | 104 | 100 |

Table 2: Maritime County Distribution of Specimen Conger Eel

| Size Group (lbs) | Number | % |
|------------------|------------|------------|
| 40-45 | 72 | 69.2 |
| 45-50 | 20 | 19.2 |
| 50-55 | 8 | 7.7 |
| 55-60 | 1 | 1.0 |
| 60-65 | 3 | 2.9 |
| Totals | 104 | 100 |

Table 1: Size Frequency Distribution of Specimen Conger Eel

Large conger eels are extremely powerful, and at close quarters, a dangerous fish. However, they are not nor-

pellor of a boat in reverse, obtaining a tremendous grip and traction in the water which is murderous on tackle and will

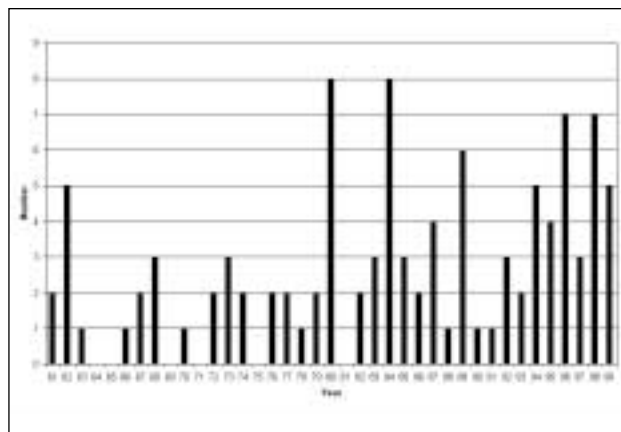


Figure 1: Annual Numbers of Specimen Conger Eel (1961-1999)

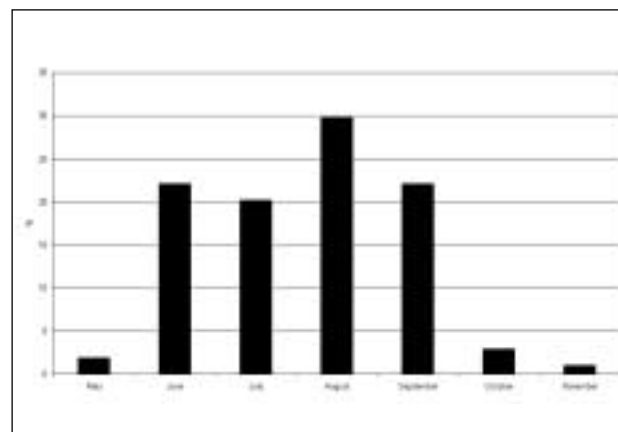


Figure 2: % Monthly Frequency Distribution of Specimen Conger Eel (1961-1999)

Although the current Irish rod and line conger eel record (72 lbs, Valentia, 1914) has stood intact for over 86 years, it is clear that there are monster eels weighing at least twice (if not three times) this size lurking out there. The UK rod and line boat caught record, weighing 133 lbs 4 ozs, was captured in 1995 on a wreck SE of Berry Head, Devon, while the shore caught record, weighing 68 lbs 8 ozs was captured in 1992 off Devil's Point, Plymouth. The Irish conger eel record is clearly there for the taking.

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