

A Voice from the Sea: The Oyster Toadfish

by Bob Bachand



Male oyster toadfish at the nest with his brood.

appropriately- named marine biologist) and a few others worked to identify the types and sources of biological noise. In 1966 Dr. Fish received the Navy's Distinguished Public Service Award for her work on bioacoustics.

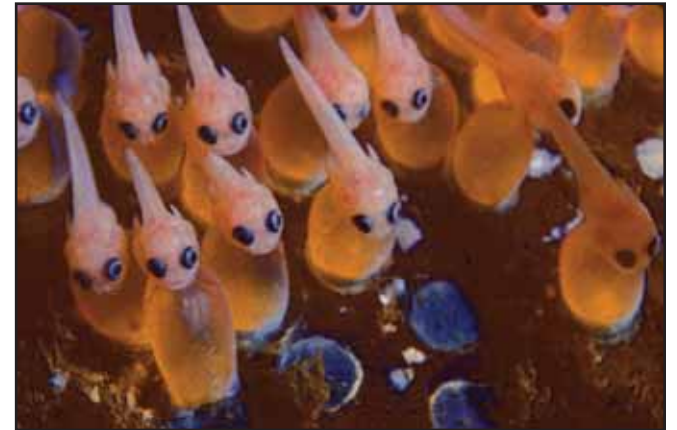
The slimy, scale-less toadfish has a flat head, large eyes, a big mouth and fleshy tags hanging from its chin. It is probably best described as "a face that only a FATHER could love," since after she lays her eggs, the female has nothing to do with her offspring. The male remains at the nest, protecting his brood until they are ready to swim off on their own.

It's definitely not the prettiest fish in the sea and it might give pause to a fisherman who lands one for the first time, but the oyster toadfish ranks as one of the noisiest of its kind in near-shore waters. It can produce sounds in excess of 100 decibels, the equivalent of a jackhammer or pneumatic drill.

During World War II, Navy sonar men often encountered a wide variety of marine animal-produced sounds that interfered with the detection of enemy submarines. For centuries it had been known that whales, certain fish and other marine creatures produced underwater noise, but little effort had been made in studying them. Driven by the Navy's needs to improve its underwater listening devices and avoid attacking whales and a host of other sea creatures, Marie P. Fish, PhD (an

SCUBA diver entering the coastal waters at this time can be greeted with a cacophony of boat-whistles that creates the impression of being in the middle of a chorus of frogs with sore throats. The sounds can be heard easily

on the surface by a swimmer or sometimes even through the hull of an anchored boat. This can go on day and night, interrupted by long periods of silence. If a nesting male is approached by another male or an uninvited female, the intruder is usually greeted by a grunt. The fish grunts when handled out of water, and it can live for a long time if left lying on the shore. Both sexes can produce a grunt. The sounds are produced when the toadfish squeezes its heart-shaped swim bladder using muscles that form the lateral wall of the organ. Drum fishes and croakers also produce sound by vibrating or squeezing their swim bladder.



Oyster toadfish newly-hatched youngsters still attached to their eggs.

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