



JIM GREENFIELD

BUTTERFISH OR GUNNEL

Pholis gunnellus

DESCRIPTION: The butterfish has a long eel-like body that is flattened from side to side. Picking up one of these fish is extremely difficult, since their mucus-covered skins make them very slippery, hence the common name. It has only one dorsal fin running the whole length of the body, made up of short spines. The anal fin is about half the length of the dorsal. Most butterfish are a rather nondescript brown colour, with irregular darker vertical bars or a mottled pattern. However, this species is easily recognised by the distinct row of white-ringed black spots along the base of the dorsal fin. There are usually about 12 of these but the number varies from 9-15. Small, raised black spots on the skin of some individuals are the cysts of a parasitic worm. Like the related Yarrell's blenny, the butterfish has a dark stripe running from below each eye to the corners of the mouth. Both these blennies belong to a group called the Arctic blennies (families Stichaeidae and Pholidae).

SIZE: The butterfish can reach 25cm (forearm length) but is very slow growing and it is the smaller fish that are more often seen.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT: This is a common fish all round the coast of Britain and Ireland. It lives mostly on rocky shores and can be found hiding under rocks, amongst seaweeds and in rock pools. With its thin, slippery body it is able to slip into very small crevices if danger threatens. It also lives in deeper water down to about 100m and the diver will see it lying quietly hidden among seaweeds or animal growths on the rocks and in kelp holdfasts. It can sometimes also be found on sand and mud, hiding in empty shells or between loose pebbles.

BIOLOGY: Around Britain the female butterfish lays her eggs in January and February. She deposits sticky clumps of several hundred eggs between stones, in empty shells such as oysters, or in the holes made in the rocks by boring molluscs. She may also curl her body around the clump to compact it into a small ball about the size of a Brazil nut. The eggs are guarded by the female or sometimes alternately by the male and female until the eggs hatch about a month later. The young fish drift in the plankton for some time before settling down to a life on the seabed. They grow very slowly, between 1-3cm a year, and are thought to live for about 10 years. The butterfish feeds on small, slowly-moving animals such as worms, molluscs and small crustaceans. In turn it forms an abundant food supply for other fish and seabirds, as well as fishing bait for small children. How important an item of diet this abundant little fish is to other inshore species is not known.

BEHAVIOUR: When approached, the butterfish will often remain still, perhaps relying on the row of white-rimmed 'eyes' along its back to frighten predators. However, its smooth body and minute pelvic fins allow it to wriggle rapidly down between the rocks if necessary.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Eels and some blennies have a similar body shape, but the row of spots is unmistakable.

KEY IDENTIFICATION FEATURES:

1. Conspicuous spots along the base of the dorsal fin.
2. Eel-like body.
3. One long dorsal fin.
4. Black stripe through eye.

