



# EUROPEAN EELS

Awe inspiring long distance swimmers and kindred wild spirits. By **Susanne Masters**

**S**eeing a fish out of water makes it hard to realise it is a fish. Walking the dog early enough for dew to be fresh on the grass around Lake Virginia Water, I saw a huge snake slide across the path. Too big to be one of our native snakes and with a ridge along its back, I realised it was an eel. For eels on a mission a short stretch of damp grass can be a pathway.

Although I often saw eels while sitting on a riverbank looking into the water, it was years before I met an eel in its element. Duck diving down and swimming along a riverbed is how I came face to face with an eel winding its way through the waterweeds.

In autumn, the Sargasso Sea's siren call draws maturing European Eels (*Anguilla anguilla*) from Europe back to their birthplace. As eels begin their journey downstream their body turns from yellow to silver and their eyes become bigger. They won't return to the rivers and lakes they lived in. Their purpose is to reach the spawning grounds of free-floating Sargassum seaweed and mate.

Swimming thousands of miles down rivers and across the Atlantic Ocean to



Illustration by Alice Goodridge

I CAME FACE TO FACE WITH AN EEL WINDING ITS WAY THROUGH THE WATERWEEDS

the Sargasso Sea is one of the reasons that European Eels are critically endangered and threatened with extinction. Dams, weirs and sluices obstructing rivers make it difficult for eels to travel from sea to freshwater where they spend years maturing, and hinder them when they seek to return to the Sargasso Sea. Another problem for European Eel populations is that changing ocean temperatures may be shifting the currents the freshly hatched eels ride from the Sargasso Sea to Europe.

## PIE AND MASH

The River Thames used to be so full of juvenile eels, called elvers, swimming upstream in spring that they were considered food for poor people, and fuelled the pie and mash shops of East London. Consumption is another factor contributing to the decline of

European Eels. Global demand for their delicious flesh gave 600,000 smuggled elvers intercepted at Heathrow airport this February a market value of £1.2 million. Every eel that is eaten was once wild. All farmed eels are caught from rivers as elvers and raised in captivity because no one has managed to breed European Eels successfully. Since the 1980s there has been a 95 per cent decrease in the number of elvers joining adult populations in rivers and lakes.

Truly wild with their defiance of captive breeding and long distance travels, eels can't be saved in zoos or aquariums – we have to stop eating them and keep their waterways accessible. Seeing eels winding through underwater plants in sinusoidal waves flashing silver as their flanks catch the light is a bewitching sight. I hope they will be there for the next generation of swimmers to meet.

## GO TO SEE EELS

Swimming just above plants lining the bottom of a clear running river or in a lake is the best way to meet an eel.

- River Stour, Kent
- Lough Erne, Northern Ireland
- River Thames tributaries
- River Dee, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland
- River Parrett, Dorset and Somerset

Wildlife & Swimming