

Tiny and Cute — Pacific Spiny Lumpsucker

Cyclopteridae, the family name of the Pacific Spiny Lumpsucker, seems to say it all. “Cyclope” refers to the one-eyed monster of Greek Mythology, or in the case of this frightening creature, more than one. As fine representations of the human penchant for scary beings, Cyclops were not reputed to be benevolent, happy gods. Odysseus met one (and escaped), Apollo killed one, and, in a somewhat more positive light, some protective city walls built of rounded stones were said to be made by a Cyclopes. Known for a wide range of culinary appetites, most art depicts the Cyclops as the caricature of a monster, definitely the stuff of nightmares.

Thus, when you see the name applied to the lumpsuckers, you assume that the reference is to the bulbous eye. There are two eyes, but when viewed from the side the over-sized appendage stands out, rather like a cyclops. But in this case the name is derived from a different, less visible, extensively altered structure.

The pelvic fins, normally small and situated on each side on the body, have been modified into a single rounded structure on the underside of the fish. Tiny and effective, the fin is positioned for a different purpose, that of holding on, clamping down on a protruding rock or piece of seaweed and staying immobile, if only for a short time. And if you are a lightweight, at most three inches in length, as is the



Pacific Spiny Lumpsucker (*Eumicrotremus orbis*)

Pacific Spiny Lumpsucker, resting will be brief. Soon the sucker-like fin will let go as you begin a random walk through the water. To a human observer, this little drunken flash of a tiny fish is adorable; to the fish it is life and death. What predator would see and pursue the bouncy speck?

Only one-to-three inches in length, with an absolute maximum of five inches, the Pacific Spiny Lumpsucker (*Eumicrotremus orbis*) is a member of the same order as the sculpins (the Scorpaeniformes), one of the largest groups of ray-finned fish. Its family name, Cyclopteridae, refers to the modified pelvic beneath the body that is used to hold the lumpsucker in place as it flits along the substrate, searching for small invertebrates that are hopefully slower and tinier than they are. Stopping quickly and latching on in what otherwise appears as random motion, the lumpsucker may be nearly invisible to predators when immobile. With a variety of habitats that range from eelgrass beds to rocky areas populated with kelp and other algae, they can swim downwards to a depth of 480 feet (146 meters), but are also found near the shoreline, or around docks. The ability to attach to plants growing above the sea floor has a life-saving aspect by offering a platform out of the reach of crawling predators such as bottom-dwelling crabs.

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Willing to take food from the hand of a diver, these strange little fish are globe-shaped, with a head that blends so well with the body that the eyes appear to decorate a sphere rather than a well-defined head. But at the front of this rounded form is a wide mouth, pronounced lips, and of course along the side, those large, protruding eyes. Sometimes spotted with yellow to orange colors, the tiny, brownish-colored fish is also distinguished by tubercles, rounded disks that give the body a very three-dimensional appearance. Lumpsuckers lack scales, have transparent pectoral fins, and, of course, the sucker disk underneath the body that readily attaches to rock or weed.

From July to October this lumpfish spawns in shallow warm water, where the female laying large orange eggs pressed into holes. Fertilization is external, but the male stays with the eggs, defending them from predators also perfectly willing to chomp on a one-inch fish as a snack. The male aerates the eggs by waving its fins, promoting viability. In his parental role, the male leads a solitary life, in common with other lumpsuckers.

Being too tiny to attract attention from human anglers, size may be an asset for the Pacific Spiny Lumpsucker. Far to the east of its North Pacific home, a 20-inch relative, the simply name Lumpsucker (*Cyclopterus lumpus*) is taken commercially, not for its meat but rather for its roe, considered an inexpensive caviar that apparently is given added appeal with a dye job before marketing. Females may weigh eleven pounds (five kilograms), and males less; size alone works against this desirable fish. Taken by the thousands of tons, particularly by Iceland and Norway fisheries, the Lumpsucker is also served up in dishes, typically salted or smoked.

Meanwhile, the little Pacific Spiny Lumpsucker goes its way, like most of its relatives small and unnoticed. Camouflaged, bumpy, bouncing around without a gas bladder to help, it is one of the smallest members of a very ancient order of bony fishes. For most people an encounter may be possible only at an aquarium where apparently the lumpsucker accepts food with aplomb, much as it will when approaching a human diver in the vast waters of its native home.