

All About Wolffish

What you need to know...



Protectors of Ecosystems

While wolffish may look intimidating, they are actually shy and docile and hunt prey such as sea urchins and shellfish when not hiding away in their dens. Wolffish also play an important role as protectors of kelp beds – a sheltered marine habitat for eggs and young of many species of fish.

“Urchin Barrens” occur when sea urchins overfeed on kelp beds. Wolffish protect these areas by eating sea urchins, keeping the population low enough so that the ecosystem can thrive.

Species at Risk

Within Newfoundland and Labrador waters, there are three species of wolffish that are listed under Canada’s *Species at Risk Act (SARA)*: Atlantic (Striped), Spotted, and Northern.

Often called catfish, abundances for all three wolffish species have been declining in the past 20 years in eastern Canada due to accidental capture by fisheries targeting other species. You can help protect wolffish by carefully releasing them back into the ocean if accidentally caught when fishing.

How to Identify



Atlantic (Striped) Wolffish

SARA Status: Special Concern

Size: up to 152 cm (60 in) long and 22 kg (49 lbs) in weight!

Colour: vertical stripes on the fins and body. Colours range from yellow-brown to purple-blue. Young are yellow-brown with green fins. Flesh is firm.

Depth: nearshore to 918 m, mainly at 150 - 300 m



Spotted Wolffish

SARA Status: Threatened

Size: up to 150 cm (29 in) long and 22 kg (49 lbs) in weight!

Colour: dark spots on fins and body. Colours range from yellow-brown to grey-brown to dark brown. Juveniles are grey-brown or purple. Flesh is firm.

Depth: rarely in shallow areas, mainly at 200 - 750 m



Photo Credits: DFO

Northern Wolffish

SARA Status: Threatened

Size: up to 144 cm (57 in) long and 20 kg (44 lbs) in weight!

Colour: body has no distinct patterns on it and ranges from dark grey to brown to purplish-black at all ages. Flesh is jelly-like.

Depth: greater range than other species, mainly at 600 - 1,000 m

Threats

Incidental capture of wolffish in many fisheries is thought to be the leading cause of human induced mortality. Wolffish distributions overlap fishing grounds, making them a common bycatch in many Atlantic fisheries. Other potential threats to wolffish include habitat alteration/destruction, oil exploration, and pollution but requires further research.

Wolffish Handling and Release Guide

SAFETY FIRST!

If Wolffish are caught, it is important to handle them with caution and that they are released safely and quickly. Wolffish have large, powerful jaws with teeth for crushing shellfish. Care must be taken to ensure that serious injury from bites does not occur.



Recommendations for Safe Release

Bringing the fish onboard

- If wolffish is caught on a hook, assess the potential for releasing the fish before it comes onboard the boat. Determine if hook can be safely removed.
- Do not drop the fish on hard surfaces or hit it off the side of the vessel to release it.



Removing gear and releasing

- When handling, hold a wolffish firmly at the base of the head, avoid touching the gills.
- If the hook is visible in the mouth (not swallowed) a de-hooking tool can be used. A pair of needle-nosed pliers with long handles can be used if no de-hooking tool is present.
- Do not use any sharp objects to remove the wolffish from the hook (gaff, knife, etc.)
- Use a dip net to handle the wolffish if it is large or you do not want to handle it directly. Dip nets can also restrict movement and aid in hook removal.
- Release the wolffish and return it to the water as quickly as possible.

Upload your wolffish sighting to the APP:

Information on your sightings will contribute to research and recovery efforts!

- Download the Survey123 App from the Google Play or APP Store and scan the QR code ->
- OR through your web browser using this link: <https://arcg.is/1CHnjP>



Got any photos? You can upload them too!