

What's behind the name of some fishes?

Stéphan G. Reeb
 Université de Moncton, Canada
 2007-2015

Name	Latin name	Reason	Comment
Angelsharks	Family Squatinidae	Name does not refer to their behaviour, but to their shape: flat body with huge pectoral fins looks like angel when seen from above	One (and only one) of these species is not called angelshark, but "sand devil" instead. Its ashy-grey colour makes it a dark angel.
Taillight shark	<i>Euprotomicroides zantedeschia</i>	Cloaca greatly enlarged as a luminous organ	
Blind shark	<i>Brachaelurus waddi</i>	Is actually sighted, but closes its eyes when out of water	
Happy Eddie Plain Happy Pretty Happy Happy Chappie	<i>Haploblepharus edwardsii</i> <i>Haploblepharus fuscus</i> <i>Haploblepharus pictus</i> <i>Haploblepharus</i> sp.	Curl up with tail over eyes when captured	These four sharks are also known as, respectively, puffadder, brown, dark, and eastern shysharks
Pyjama shark	<i>Poroderma africanum</i>	Stripes running the length of the body	Also called striped catshark
Cookiecutter sharks	<i>Isistius</i> spp.	Bite into skin and cut out a plug of flesh from larger fishes, leaving a crater wound	Also called cigar sharks because of their long body and small fins
Catsharks	Family Scyliorhinidae	Eyes resemble those of a cat	The largest shark family, with at least 160 species, one of which, interestingly, is called the mouse catshark (<i>Galeus murinus</i>)
Lungfishes	Families Protopteridae and Ceratodontidae	Possess lung(s)	

Sawfishes	Family Pristidae	Long, flat, blade-like snout	There are also sawsharks (family Pristiophoridae) named for the same reason
Guitarfishes	Family Rhinobatidae	Dorsoventrally flattened head gives whole body a guitar shape	Other family members are called shovelnose rays
Plownose, Spookfishes, Elephantfishes	Order Chimaeriformes (chimeras)	Hoe or paddle or trunk-shaped snout used in sensory perception	Elephantfishes is a name also used for the unrelated Mormyridae
Elephantfishes	Family Mormyridae	Many species have a long, down-curved snout	
Flagfins	Another name for the bichirs (genus Polypterus)	Dorsal finlets have vertical spine to which horizontal rays are attached, like a flagpole	
Paddlefishes	Family Poliodontidae	Very long and flattened snout, used in sensory perception, probably electroreception	The North American paddlefish is sometimes called spoonbill cat
Weatherfishes	Family Cobitidae Genus <i>Misgurnus</i>	Become restless when atmospheric pressure drops	
Catfishes	Order Siluriformes	Barbels around the mouth reminiscent of cat whiskers	
Featherbacks	Family Notopteridae	Dorsal fin looks like a feather attached to the back	Some featherbacks also called knifefish, not to be confused with the Gymnotidae
Electric knifefishes	Family Gymnotidae	Laterally compressed body with anal fin all along the bottom	Are capable of electroreception
Headstanders	Family Chilodontidae Family Anostomidae	Head down posture, even while swimming	

Salamanderfish	Family Lepidogalaxiidae (only one species: <i>Lepidogalaxias salamandroides</i>)	Unusual capacity to bend head sideways or downwards gives salamander- like appearance	
Barreleyes and spookfishes	Family Opisthoproctidae	Deep-sea fish with tubular eyes pointing upwards	
Gulpers	Family Saccopharyngidae	Deep-sea eels with huge jaws	Not to be confused with gulper sharks (Centrophoridae)
Swallowers	Family Eurypharyngidae	Again, deep sea fish with huge jaws	
Pencilfishes	Genus Nannostomus Family Lebiasinidae	Attractively colored cylindrical body	
Hatchetfishes	Family Gasteropelecidae	Hatchet-like laterally flattened body	They can leap from water and sail through the air
Marine hatchetfishes	Family Sternoptychidae	Again, hatchet-like laterally flattened body	
Dragonfishes Snaggletooths Viperfishes	Family Stomiidae	Impressive teeth; elongate body	Deep sea dwellers
Daggertooth fishes	Family Anotopteridae	Impressive teeth	
Sabertoothfishes	Family Evenmannellidae	Impressive teeth	
Fangtoothfishes	Family Anoplogastridae	Impressive teeth	
Lizardfishes	Family Synodontidae	Lizard-like head when seen from the side	
Bombay ducks	Family Harpadontidae	One species commonly sold dry in Bombay	
Greeneyes Cucumberfishes	Family Chlorophthalmidae	Eyes of greenish iridescent color; smell like cucumbers	
Lanternfishes	Family Myctophidae	Light organs on head and body	The lanternsharks (Etmopteridae) are named for the same reason.

Tripodfishes Spiderfishes	Some species of Family Ipnopidae	Lie on bottom, propped up on elongated tail fin ray and the two very long pelvic fins	
Lancetfishes	Family Alepisauridae	High sail-like dorsal fin	
Telescopefishes	Family Giganturidae	Tubular, telescopic eyes	
Pearleyes	Family Scoperlachidae	White spot on the eye	Spot may aid to gather light in the eyes of these deep sea dwellers
Barracunidas	Family Paralepididae	Superficial resemblance to barracudas	
Rattails	Family Macrouridae	Long tapering tail	Some chimeras are called ratfish for the same reason
Pearlfishes	Family Carapidae	Take refuge inside various invertebrates, including oysters	Individual that die inside pearl oysters may become entombed in mother-of-pearl
Toadfishes	Family Batrachoididae	Broad head and big eyes like toads	
Anglerfishes	Order Lophiiformes	Filaments on head lure prey near mouth	
Footballfishes	Family Himantolophidae	Oval-shaped body	An anglerfish family
Frogfishes	Family Antennariidae	Spherical body with wide mouth; eggs embedded in gelatinous mass	An anglerfish family
Seatoads	Family Chaunacidae	Balloon-shaped inflatable body with wide mouth	An anglerfish family
Batfishes	Family Ogcocephalidae	Greatly flattened body	An anglerfish family
Clingfishes	Order Gobiesociformes	Ventral sucker allows clinging to objects in strong currents	

Needlefishes	Family Belonidae	Long thin jaws and body	The largest among these flying fishes can impale sailors
Halfbeaks	Family Hemiramphidae	Lower jaw much longer than upper	
Ricefishes	Family Adrianichthyidae	Found in Japanese rice paddies	The medaka is the best known example
Silversides	Order Atheriniformes	Silvery colour	
Rainbowfishes	Family Melanotaeniidae	Colourful	
Inkfishes	Genera Radiicephalus, Lophotus, and Eumecichthys	Like squids and octopus, can eject a black fluid	
Oarfishes	Family Regalecidae	Long pelvic fins look like oars	The serpent-like <i>Regalecus glesne</i> is the longest bony fish, up to 12 m; the source of sea serpent sightings.
Jellynosefishes	Family Ateleopodidae	Gelatinous snout	
Beardfishes	Family Polymixiidae	Two barbels on chin	
Squirrelfishes Soldierfishes	Family Holocentridae	Mostly red	
Pineapplefishes	Family Monocentridae	Large yellow scales cover the body	
Flashlightfishes	Family Anomalopidae	Headlight-like luminous organ near eye	See Science 190: 74-76 (1975)
Sawbellies	Family Trachichthyidae	Large scales with spines along the belly	These fish are more commonly called roughies
Spinyfins	Family Diretmidae	Spines at base and along the finrays	
Pricklefishes	Family Stephanoberycidae	Scales have fine spines	
Pipefishes	Family Syngnathidae	Well-armored body and long snout	
Seahorses	Family Syngnathidae	Head shaped like a horse's head and neck	One of the most unusual body shapes of all fishes
Shrimpfishes or razorfishes	Family Centriscidae	Dorsal covering reminiscent of a shrimp rostrum, razor-like belly	Long body held with the head pointing down to imitate reeds

Trumpetfishes Cornetfishes	Family Aulostomidae	Long snout	
Sticklebacks	Family Gasterosteidae	Strong dorsal-fin spines	Very much used in behavioural research because they are hardy, social, and parental
Scorpionfishes	Family Scorpaenidae	Many species have venomous spines	
Turkeyfishes Firefishes Lionfishes	Family Scorpaenidae Genus Dendrochirus	Red and orange colour	Extensive (and venomous) spiny fins
Stonefishes	Family Scorpaenidae Genus Senanceia	Lie immobile on bottom	Venomous spines can cause death in humans
Waspfishes	Family Tetraogidae	Venomous spines	
Pigfishes Horsefishes	Family Congipodidae	Projecting snout with small mouth	A pig-like head is also a feature of bullhead sharks and horn sharks (family Heterodontidae)
Velvetfishes	Family Aploactidae	Velvet-like skin	
Combfishes	Family Zaniolepididae	Rough skin	Rough skin is also a feature of roughsharks (family Oxynotidae)
Filefishes Leatherjackets	Family Monacanthidae	Tiny spines on scales give body a rough texture	
Sea robins	Family Triglidae	Many species can make sounds	
Drums Croakers	Family Sciaenidae	Can make sounds	
Goatfishes	Family Mullidae	Two long chin barbels	
Slipmouths Ponyfishes	Family Leiognathidae	Very protrusible mouth	
Archerfishes	Family Toxotidae	Shoot a jet of water at insects sitting on leaves	Use a groove in the roof of their mouth to do it.

Glassfishes	Family Ambassidae	Laterally compressed transparent body	“Glass” often features in the names of semi-transparent fishes, including outside this family.
Cutlassfishes	Family Trichiuridae	Long metallic-looking body	
Surgeonfishes	Family Acanthuridae	One scalpel-like spine on each side of tail base	Don’t grasp them by the tail!
Rabbitfishes	Family Siganidae	Rabbit-like face	
Stargazers	Family Uranoscopidae	Eyes on top of head, pointing upwards when fish almost all buried in sand	The family Dactyloscopidae is known as sand stargazers for a similar reason
Sandburrowers Sanddivers Sandlances	Family Creediidae Family Trichonotidae Family Ammodytidae	Dive headfirst into sand	
Parrotfishes	Family Scaridae	Teeth fused into a hard beak	
Triplefins	Family Tripterygiidae	Dorsal fin divided into three parts	
Tripletails	Family Lobotidae	Dorsal and anal fins are as big as, and overlap, the tail fin	Juveniles float leaflike on their sides in mangroves
Triggerfishes	Family Balistidae	First dorsal fin spine locked erect by second spine; pressing on second spine releases lock	The state fish of Hawaii is the colourful Picasso triggerfish, whose Hawaiian name is humuhumunukunukuapua'a
Boxfishes Trunkfishes Cowfishes	Family Ostraciidae	Body enclosed in armored plates; some have heads reminiscent of cows	
Pufferfishes	Family Tetraodontidae	Can puff up their body by pumping water into their stomach	Some are highly toxic

Porcupinefishes	Family Diodontidae	Long spines all around the body; can inflate body, erecting the spines	
Soapfishes	Family Serranidae Subfamily Grammistinae	Skin exudes a soap-like toxin	
Foureyes	Family Anablepidae	Pupil of each eye divided in upper and lower halves	Fish lives at surface and sees both in air and in water
Sleepers	Family Eleotridae	Sluggish behaviour	For the same reason, sharks of the family Somniosidae are called sleeper sharks
Numbfishes	Various species of electric rays (Order Torpediniformes)	Parts of your body will feel numb after these fishes zap you with an electric shock.	The name of the order (to which, incidentally, the torpedo ray belongs) comes from the latin <i>torpedo</i> which means numbness
Combtooth blennies	Family Blenniidae	Sharp teeth form single row	
Poison-fanged blennies	Genus Meiacanthus	Hollow lower teeth can inject a toxin	
Nurseryfishes	Family Kurtidae	Males have a hook on their forehead on which the eggs are attached and carried until hatching.	
Alligator gar	<i>Lepisosteus spatula</i>	3-m long scaly body, 140 kg, hovers just below the surface	
Oilfish	<i>Ruvettus pretiosus</i>	Very oily flesh	Sometimes called castor-oil fish because the flesh is also purgative
Wolf herring	<i>Denticeps clupeoides</i>	A species of herring with fang-like teeth	

Paradox fish	<i>Indostomus paradoxus</i>	Uncertain taxonomy	
Leafy seadragon	<i>Phycodorus eques</i>	A seahorse with numerous leaf-like projections on its body	An amazing example of camouflage
Reedfish or Ropefish	<i>Erpetoichthys (Calamoichthys) calabaricus</i>	Long and thin body	
Glass bloodfin	<i>Prionobrama filigera</i>	Semi-transparent body; males have deep red caudal fin.	“Glass” often features in the names of semi-transparent fishes.
Lipstick leporinus	<i>Leporinus arcus</i>	Small red lips	There are also lipstick darters, lipstick gobies, and a lipstick surgeonfish
Bleeding heart tetra	<i>Hyphessobrycon erythrostigma</i>	Pink spot on flanks	
Blobfish	<i>Psychrolutes marcidus</i>	Amorphous body, gelatinous flesh, few muscles	Conserves energy at the great depths where it lives
Doctor fish	<i>Garra rufa</i>	Kept in specialized spas where they remove (feed on) the dead or diseased skin of patients with skin conditions.	
Devil's Hole pupfish	<i>Cyprinodon diabolis</i>	"Diabolis" means devil. This 1-inch long fish lives in the 93°F water of Devil's Hole, a geothermal spring in the Nevada desert.	An endangered species.
Moorish idol	<i>Zanclus cornutus</i>	Some Muslims on Indonesia's Ambon Island showed respect for this fish; Moors were also Muslims, though restricted to Africa.	

Cuckoo catfish	<i>Synodontis multipunctata</i>	Female lay eggs among those being picked up by a mouth-brooding cichlid. Young catfish grow faster and eventually eat the young cichlids in the mouth.	
Mouth almighty	<i>Glossamia aprion</i>	You've guessed it: the fish has a huge mouth. It is an Australian freshwater predator.	The following can be found in the names of various fish species: bigmouth, megamouth, largemouth, broadmouth, frogmouth, widemouth, smallmouth, narrowmouth, peamouth, gunmouth, umbrellamouth, tubemouth, anglemouth, suckermouth, flutemouth, pursemouth, squaremouth, slipmouth, chiselmouth, hogmouth, birdmouth, hardmouth, bristlemouth, and (insert-almost-any-colour-here)mouth
Mummichog	<i>Fundulus heteroclitus</i>	From a Narragansett (native Algonquin tribe from Rhodes Island) term meaning "going in crowds"	This is a strongly shoaling species common to coastal areas along the Eastern seaboard of North America.

Scats	Genus <i>Scatophagus</i>	Sometimes feed on feces of other fishes.	
-------	--------------------------	--	--