

Puzzling Event: Fish with fangs washing up along Oregon Coast

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A puzzling event is occurring along Oregon's Coast.

Several lancetfish have washed ashore on Oregon's beaches over the past few weeks from Nehalem south to Bandon, and no one is sure why they are washing ashore, according to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD).

"These deep-sea fish live in tropical and subtropical waters and can migrate as far north as the Bering Sea to feed," OPRD stated on the agency's social media page.

From the Twilight Zone

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries provides details about this aquatic animal, stating on the NOAA website that the "lancetfish really are creatures from the Twilight Zone."

Lancetfish look like they swam out of prehistoric time." The NOAA website site reads.

The fish features include gaping fanged jaws, enormous eyes, a sail-like fin, and long, and a slithery body. Lancetfish are scaleless fish, with smooth skin and pores along the lateral line. Their dinosaur-worthy scientific genus name, *Alepisaurus*, means "scaleless lizard."

Growing to more than 7-feet long, lancetfish are one of the largest deep-sea fish, according to NOAA Fisheries. These fish swim to depths more than a mile below the sea surface.

“Lancetfish live mainly in tropical and subtropical waters, but they migrate as far north as subarctic areas like Alaska’s Bering Sea to feed,” the NOAA Fisheries website states. “Since 1982, our groundfish surveys have found 2 in the Gulf of Alaska, 4 near the Aleutian Islands, and 10 in the Eastern Bering Sea.

Fish history

Lancetfish are hermaphrodites, possessing both male and female sex organs simultaneously. NOAA Fisheries said very little is known about lancetfish reproduction and development, but scientists have found that Lancetfish flesh is watery and gelatinous and generally not appetizing to humans. However, other large predators like sharks, tuna, and fur seals — and other lancetfish — don't mind.

Gelatinous muscles are not built for long chases. Because of this, scientists suspect lancetfish are ambush predators. This means they hunt by floating quietly camouflaged in the water until unsuspecting prey swims near enough to strike.

In 2018, NOAA scientists examined the stomach contents of lancetfish.

“This helped us understand the midwater food web and impacts of marine debris extend through the water column,” the NOAA website states. “Food in lancetfish stomachs is often found in a nearly pristine state. Based on the lack of digestion, scientists speculate that lancetfish may bulk feed. This means they eat as much as they can whenever they find food, then digest it later when they need it.”

According to NOAA, lancetfish are notorious cannibals. They also feed voraciously on many other fish and invertebrates. Many new species descriptions of fish, squids, and octopuses are based on specimens from lancetfish stomachs.

The cold, dark midwater depths where lancetfish hunt are known as the twilight zone or mesopelagic zone.

OPRD is seeking photos of the lancetfish that are washing onshore. If you see one, take a photo and post with the tags Oregon State Parks NOAA Fisheries West Coast