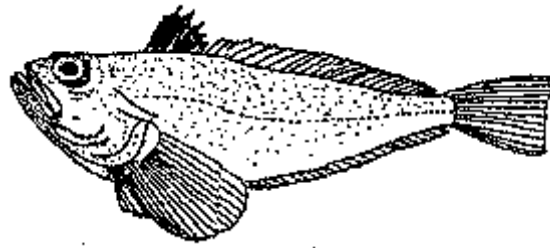


Beware of the Weeverfish!



Echiichthys vipera

Beware of a little (> 10 cm) sandy coloured fish that lives in the English Channel. It spends most of the time actually buried under the sea bed with just its venomous dorsal fin showing above the sandy bottom. On the rare occasions when it is plentiful, rows of erect black triangles decorate the sandy floor of the sea bed.

Woe betide a bather who steps upon a buried fish. The pain is usually described as excruciating as the spines embed into the human flesh and discharge their venom. The pain is at its most intense for the first two hours when the foot goes red and swells up and is then it feels numb until the following day with irritation and pain that may last for up to two weeks. Sometimes, the spine breaks off in the foot and it will cause discomfort until it is removed.



The venom is a type of protein and is heat labile. This means that the only treatment is to put the effected limb in water as hot as the victim can stand without causing scalding. (In tests, the protein denatured above 40°C.) This is meant to bring about rapid and permanent relief, but I have fortunately not needed to put this treatment to the test. Most reports of stings occur during the month of August. This does not mean that this

fish are particularly prevalent inshore during this month but merely reflects the greater numbers of bathers as the sea temperature reaches the highest of the year. The fish is also encountered by shrimpers pushing their net along the sandy shallows in the first half of the year. The front beam of the net dislodges the fish that may be completely buried under the sand. They are also caught by anglers. Many of these rod and line fishermen do not know what they have caught and may be in for an unpleasant surprise. The only death I have on record after someone being stung by a Weever occurred as long ago as 1927, (this could be 1933, the original file has been mislaid) when an angler suffered multiple stings whilst fishing off Dungeness. (As this is the only death recorded, the suspicions are that the victim may have died of other medical causes exacerbated by the multiple stings. Another report of a death, I have been unable to confirm.)

Weevers in your Wellies



Weevers have occasionally been found at toddler bathing depth ([a few reports](#) have been received) but swimmers usually do not need to worry unless they put their foot down. The Weever is a naff swimmer: it sort of wobbles about as it leaves its sandy hiding place. It spends most of its life buried waiting for a passing small fish before suddenly emerging from the sand to engulf its prey in its large mouth. The Weever has to be quick to catch its prey though, and for

half a metre it has a fair turn of speed, before sinking to the sea floor. It then dives straight down to the sand gain burying itself with its rear end first. If it cannot hide in this way it will panic and it is conceivable that in the unlikely event it jumped into your wellies it would thrash around stinging the occupant on multiple occasions. This fish does not have a swim bladder, the device used by most bony fish to keep buoyant.

The fish's mouth itself is in an unusual position on its head, oblique and almost vertical and contains some of the most sharp and vicious looking teeth in the undersea world. Luckily it only reaches about 15 cm long.



The species found in shallow waters is called the **Lesser Weever** with the scientific name of *Echiichthys vipera*. There is a larger (>25 cm) species called the **Greater Weever**, *Trachinus draco*, found in deeper water and occasionally seen on the fishmongers slab. The word 'weever' was first found used in the English language during the 17th century and comes from the Old northern French word 'wivre'. The venomous fin spines are a defensive armament and the Weever does use them to capture prey.