

Learn about: Lamprey

As Gaeilge: Loimpre



What is it?

Weird and wonderful, a lamprey is a type of primitive fish. It has a long body like an eel and a sucker mouth which some species use to stick on to fish and suck their blood!

There are three species of lamprey in Ireland, the Brook lamprey (*Lampetra planeri*), River lamprey (*Lampetra fluviatilis*) and Sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*).



What does it look like?

Lampreys are often mistaken for eels because of their long eel-like body; but once you get a closer look at their head it's easy to tell the difference!

Lampreys have a flat, circular, sucker mouth with lots of tiny teeth. They have large eyes and a row of seven small gill holes along the side of the neck. Adults are usually silvery yellow in colour and can grow up to 1m in length (sea lamprey).



Where does it live?

Lampreys have several different stages to their life cycle. The young, juvenile lamprey are called ammocoetes (AM-mo-seets), they live in the fine sediment in slow-flowing rivers, where they grow for several years before transforming into adults.

Adult river and sea lamprey swim downstream and spend part of their adulthood in the sea, before returning to freshwater to breed in early summer. The breeding adults build nests called “redds” where they will lay their eggs. Redds are large shallow pools that the lamprey makes by moving pebbles and gravel out of the riverbed. Once they have spawned the adults die. Brook lamprey spend their whole lifecycle in freshwater.



What does it eat?

Young lamprey ammocoetes filter feed, filtering algae and microscopic food from river water.

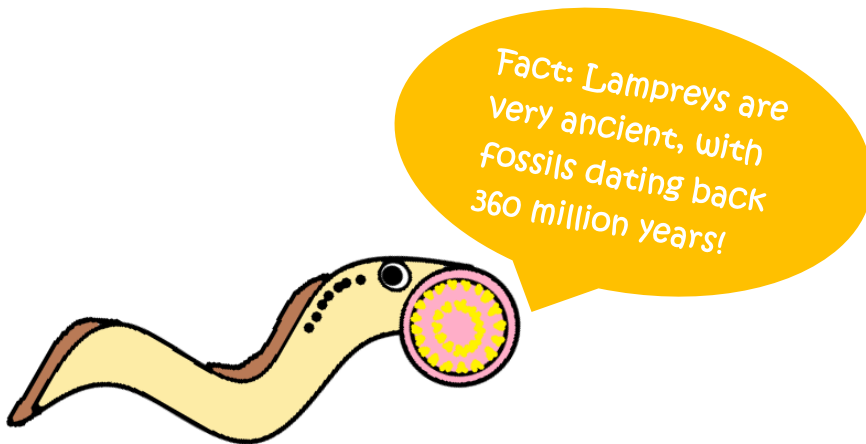
As adults, many species of lamprey are parasitic. This means that they have a relationship with another animal which they benefit from, but which has a negative impact on the other “host” animal. In the case of lamprey, they use their sucker mouths to latch on to passing fish, like salmon, they hang on to the salmon and feed on



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its blood while it's still alive. Brook lamprey don't feed at all as adults.

Lamprey themselves are important food for otters and are considered a delicacy in many countries, including Portugal, Spain, Finland and Latvia!



Threats:

Threats to lamprey include disturbance to rivers where the ammocoetes are developing; obstacles like weirs and dams which prevent lamprey from migrating, and water pollution.

Links:

River barriers such as dams and weirs cause huge problems for lampreys when they are migrating from the sea up-river to spawn. In this video by Inland Fisheries Ireland, you can find out more about this and about the lifecycle of the Sea Lamprey in the Mulkear River, Co. Limerick.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ7sGSJzLR8>

Check out this video which tells the story of the importance of Pacific lamprey in the U.S.A for native American people. Conservationists are trying to help these native lamprey populations recover, by moving lamprey upstream of barriers like dams, which prevent them from reaching their spawning ground:

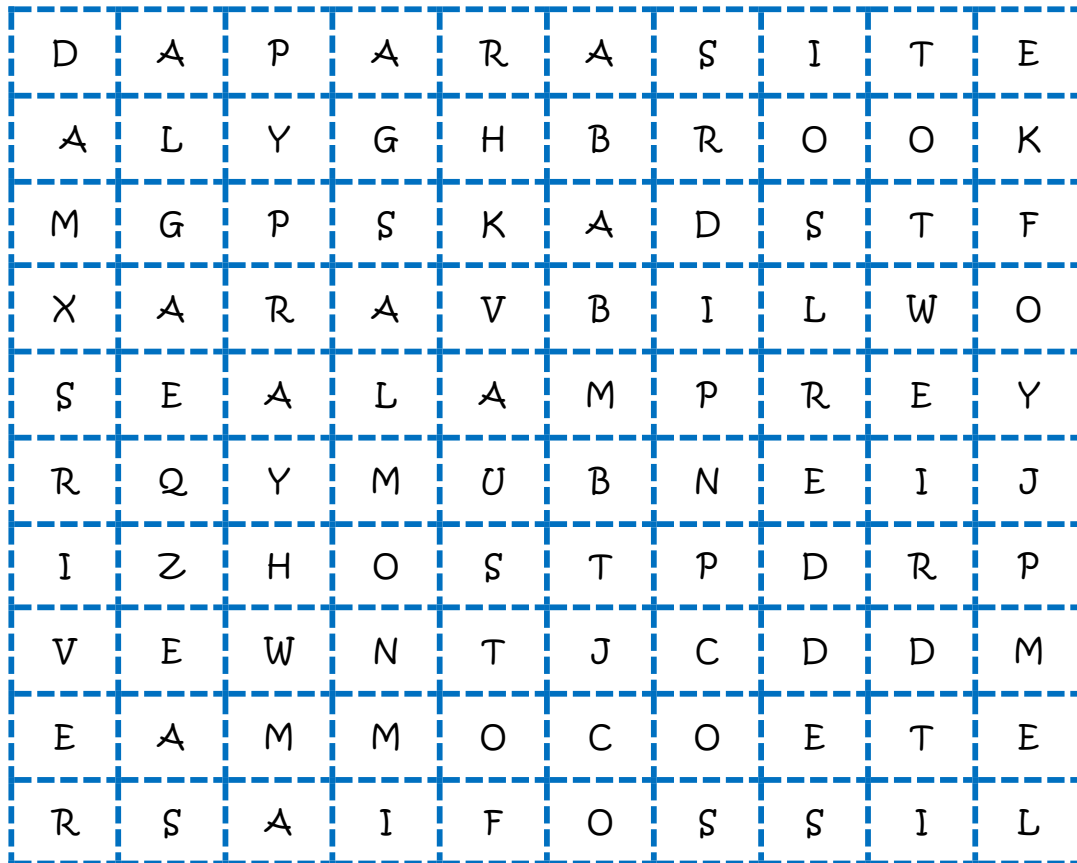
Lamprey – the Forgotten Fish; Hakai Magazine:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTaWJdOPzk>

Your Turn: Try our Wordsearch!

Find these 12 words hidden down and across in the wordsearch:

Sea Lamprey Salmon Brook Host Redd Parasite
Ammocoete River Dam Weir Fossil Algae



Quick Quiz:

- Name the three species of lamprey found in Ireland?
- Can you remember the name for young juvenile lamprey?
- What do you call a lamprey's nest?
- How many gill holes does a lamprey have?
- Barriers like dams and weirs are a threat to lamprey populations. Can you explain why?



If you're stuck for an answer, read back over the fact sheet!