

# Seahorses

## PUPIL FACTSHEET

A head like a chess piece, a tail like a monkey, a scientific name like a hippo ... and a father who becomes pregnant. Seahorses are fish, but they are very, very unusual fish!

### These lovely little animals have a very unusual lifestyle:

- Seahorses do not have scales. Instead their bodies are covered in small, bony plates
- The male seahorse looks after the eggs – but then goes one step further by ‘giving birth’ to them, releasing up to 200 baby seahorses from his pouch
- Seahorses swim in an upright position

There are 35 different kinds of seahorse. Two of them - the long-snouted *Hippocampus hippocampus* and the short-snouted *Hippocampus gutturalis* - live in the English Channel. *Hippocampus* is a Greek word meaning "bent horse." Depending on the species, seahorses reach lengths from about 5 to 36 cm (2-14 in.).

Their colour ranges from brown, dark red to yellow, usually with many bluish-white spots. Many seahorses can change colour in minutes, from black or grey to bright yellow or red.

Seahorses are related to the pipe fish, a long, bootlace-like fish that is quite common in rock pools.

Seahorses live between two and seven years.

The seahorse hunts mainly by sight, sucking tiny water creatures such as plankton, baby fishes and shellfish into its small mouth, located at the end of a narrow tube-like snout. Its eyes can turn independently to view two scenes at once - one eye searching for food, perhaps, while the other watches out for predators.

The seahorse can remain still for very long periods, secured by its prehensile (it means good for gripping hold of something) tail and well camouflaged among weeds, eelgrasses and corals. Only those swivelling eyes may give it away!

Seahorses swim upright. Pectoral fins on the sides and a small dorsal fin on the back of a seahorse's body wave rapidly to move the seahorse through the water.

The seahorse is under threat from loss of habitat, pollution and harvesting - especially for use as a component of some Chinese medicines. Twenty tonnes of seahorses - about six million - were fished in 1992. As many as ten million a year are probably taken now.

### Daddy Day Care

Seahorses breed from April to October.

Female seahorses compete for males. Especially the ones with big, useful bellies! Here is how it works ...

The female deposits 100 or more of her 2mm eggs in the male's breeding pouch. She is then free to make more eggs. In this way, more seahorses can be produced each season.

The male fertilises and carries the eggs for the three weeks or more they take to develop.

During this time, the male ensures that the eggs are well cared for.

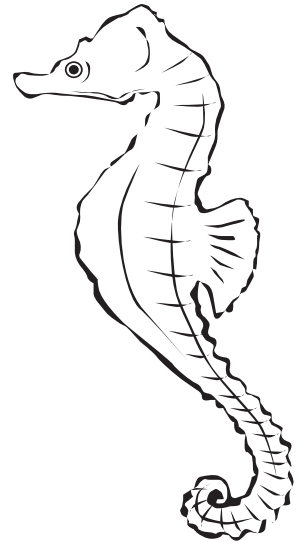
The female visits the pregnant male every day, curling her tail round his while both change colour.

Eventually the young are ready to live an independent life and they are ‘born’ from dad's breeding pouch - some as small as 1 cm (0.4 inches).

They may cling to their father for a while, then swim away.

Meanwhile, the female has more eggs waiting, ready to put in the empty pouch.

In one season, the male may be pregnant several times.



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## PUPIL WORKSHEET

### **The strangest thing about seahorses is that the females lay their eggs “inside” the males.**

As the breeding season approaches, the male seahorse’s pocket-like pouch, in the front of his lower abdomen (belly), becomes swollen and ready to receive eggs. The female lays up to 200 eggs in the pouch, through her long egg-laying tube. About two to six weeks later the eggs have developed into baby seahorses ready to be born.

Here is a description of the four main stages of the actual birth. Draw a picture to match each stage. When you have finished, compare your drawings to the ones done by a Sea Life professional.

Do not be afraid to look in the dictionary for any new words.

1. The male seahorse grabs hold of a seaweed stem with his curly tail. The opening to the pouch has enlarged slightly, and the babies are moving inside.
2. He bends his body backwards and forwards. The pouch opening widens and a baby seahorse shoots out. It rises to the surface and takes a gulp of air to fill its swim bladder.
3. As the father continues to bend and stretch, more baby seahorses are born in groups of five or so. Each is less than half an inch long, and soon starts feeding on tiny water creatures.
4. The father is very tired by the end of the birth session, which can last two days.