Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FLYING FISH Z49

There are about 50 species of flying fish in the world's oceans. They belong to the *Exocoetidae* family. This name is from the Greek εξω-κοιτος, which means 'lying down outside' or 'sleeping under the stars'. It refers to the common occurrence of flying fish finding themselves stranded on the decks of boats (left). It is not known what species the example in this box is from.





Flying fish are mainly found in warmer waters. All the species have two large fins (below left) that allow them to take gliding flights through the air. Some species also have a second pair of large fins, so that they appear to have four wings (below right).



Flying fish live close to the water surface. This region is known as the epipelagic zone and has enough light for photosynthesis. There are lots of plankton in this zone - tiny living organisms that provide food for larger animals. Some fish feed on the plankton, but others gather in this area to feed on their fellow fish. It is believed that flying fish have evolved the ability to glide in order to escape from predators such as swordfish, tunas and other larger fish.

To prepare for a glide, the fish swim rapidly close to the surface of the water, with their fins close to the body. As they leave the water, they spread their fins. Eventually, even the tail leaves the water and the fish are airborne. They can even flap their 'wings'. Their eyes are relatively larger and flatter than those of other fish, which improves ability to see in the air.



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When gliding, flying fish can almost double their speed, reaching speeds up to 60 km/h. The glides are usually up to 30-50 metres in length, but some have been observed soaring for hundreds of metres using the updraft on the leading edges of waves. The flying fish found in the Mediterranean tends to make smaller flights, usually just a few metres.

Flying fish are a delicacy in some areas of the world. The Japanese flying fish (*Cheilopogon agoo*), is used to make some types of sushi. Another area in which they are popular is Barbados, which was nicknamed as 'The land of the Flying fish.' A flying fish even appears on the coat of arms of Barbados (right).



Piles of filleted flying fish (left) were once a common sight on the quays of Barbados and the island's main national dish is known as Cou Cou and Flying Fish (below). Unfortunately, overfishing has led to a decline in flying fish numbers. Today the flying fish only annually migrate as far north as the island of Tobago, around 120 nautical miles southwest of Barbados. In 2006 the council of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea had to settle a dispute between Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago over flying fish that had raised inter-island tensions.

