

The call of the grunion

School's in for summer as Southern California's most celebrated fish splashes ashore

By Matthew Jaffe

Considering that they are bony, 6-inch-long schooling fish unlikely to appear sesame-crusted, tartared, or seared on the plates of Hollywood's assorted sharks and bottom-feeders, grunion have historically played an oversize role in the entertainment world.

Thanks to their annual cameos on the Southern California shoreline, where the fish briefly beach themselves in order to spawn in the wet sands, grunion have long captured the public's imagination, including a disparate collection of show-biz types.

Consider this: Grunion provide the only direct links among Groucho Marx, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Frank Zappa, and National Public Radio commentator Sandra Tsing Loh.

To be specific, in the 1949 film *Love Happy*, Groucho played a detective named Sam Grunion who is looking for some stolen diamonds (later found, appropriately enough, in a sardine can). Zappa, while playing in a band called the Hollywood Persuaders, recorded a surf instrumental called "Grunion Run."

The Hillbillies, meanwhile, hear

Seeking the wily grunion

Grunion can come ashore on virtually any sandy Southern California beach below Point Concepcion; in El Niño years, the fish were spotted as far north as Monterey County. The runs coincide with high tides from March through August, two to six nights after new and full moons. The fish prefer gently sloping beaches with mild wave breaks and may retreat offshore if there is too much noise and activity on a beach. Be sure to bring a flashlight and blankets.

Fishing for grunion is prohibited during April and May. A fishing license is required for anyone 16 or older, and the fish may be taken by hand only.

A schedule of grunion runs is available from Grunion, Department of Fish and Game, 330 Golden Shore Blvd., Suite 50, Long Beach, CA 90802; enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Organized grunion outings are offered by the following institutions.

Cabrillo Marine Aquarium. Twice-monthly programs through July include an orientation program and video before everyone heads out to the beach. No reservations are required, but the program is wildly popular and can draw 2,000 people, so arrive early (the museum opens at 8 and the program begins at 9; runs can begin as late as 11:15 and continue for two hours). Upcoming dates are June 4 and 17, and July 2 and 18. \$2, \$1 seniors and ages 11 and under. 3720 Stephen White Dr., San Pedro; (310) 548-7562.

Stephen Birch Aquarium. The La Jolla institution's two-hour program includes a film and introduction to grunion before the beach outing begins. Reservations are required. \$9, \$5 ages 7-13. 2300 Expedition Way, La Jolla; (858) 534-7336.



about grunion runs, and, thinking that grunion are space invaders, Jed and all his kin proceed to take surfers captive (don't ask). Finally, Tsing Loh performed "Night of the Grunion," during which she set up her piano on a beach and serenaded the arriving fish, no doubt helping the male grunion score big points for romance.

"The original surfers"

So why the fascination? Is it the name *grunion*, a more endearing moniker than the alternative *anchovy*? Is it that grunion are Southern California natives (they range from the central coast into Baja)? Or is it that going to see them has been a spring and summer rite for generations of Southern Californians?

The experts agree on one point.

"Fish do not come out of the water. Period," says Larry Fukuhara, programs director at San Pedro's Cabrillo Marine Aquarium. "Think about it. They're supposed to be in the water."

"Grunion come out to you instead of you having to go in to see them. And they do it in lovely settings," says Karen Martin, associate professor of biology at Pepperdine University. "They're the original surfers coming in on the waves."

Like surfers, grunion are particular about waves. Martin says they like waves that break gently on the beach.

In addition, grunion don't want waves that push them too far up the beach because they need to catch the outgoing flow to return to the sea. Otherwise, it's from here to eternity for these surfside sweethearts.

With such hazards, it would seem that there's no point dying over spilt milt. But there is method to this moonlight madness. Grunion come ashore to give the best chance of survival to the 3,000 or so eggs the females lay every time on up to six spring and summer liaisons. Buried in the wet sand, the eggs are less vulnerable to predators and can survive for a month or more as long as they stay moist. Then again, on land the eggs are exposed to a new set of predators, from shorebirds to feral cats.

For all of our fascination with grunion, people also prey upon the fish. After a moratorium during the peak spring runs, starting in June beachgoers can catch the fish, although no tools, nets, or baskets are permitted. Many people dip them in flour, fry them up, and then eat them, bones and all.

Still, most grunion aficionados just like to go out and see them. Sometimes only a few grunion show up. At other times they arrive in spectacular numbers, putting on a memorable show that proves you don't have to be a starfish to be a star fish. ♦

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