



Look for tompot blennies around the southern and western coasts of the UK and Ireland. *Parablennius gattorugine* grows up to 20cm in length, and has a distinctive branched tentacle above each eye.

Glam rocks

You don't have to visit tropical climes to see dazzling reef fish. Meet Britain's tompot blenny – the small fish with an enormous personality.

Words and photos by **Paul Naylor**

A small fish with a punk hairdo peers out from his crevice on the reef, taking in the view of sponges and sea anemones. Bright red tentacles on his head sway gently in the swell and these, together with large, high-set eyes and thick lips, give him quite a comical appearance from our perspective.

Yet his looks belie his feisty nature. For this little tompot blenny – the species is usually under 20cm long – has defended his territory against intruders for three years now. The battles have left him scarred around the mouth, but that doesn't seem to deter the females that enter his home to lay their eggs, which he then tends with devotion until they hatch.

From his home the blenny can see other species of fish on the reef build imposing nests of pink seaweed, change colour to greet their partners or lurk with the intention of stealing his conscientiously guarded eggs. Where is this vibrant underwater world? The Mediterranean, the Caribbean or the Great Barrier Reef, perhaps? No, it's Devon in south-west England, within a stone's throw of the beach. In fact the top of a reef like this almost breaks the surface on the lowest tides, so snorkellers as well as divers can enjoy its wonderfully rich marine life.

The charismatic tompot blenny is a common species around most British and continental European coasts, mainly in water 1–12m deep, where it eats a variety of seabed invertebrates – including the anemones avoided by most predators – and grazes seaweed too. Ever since I started to dive and snorkel over the shallow rocky reefs ▶



near my home just outside Plymouth in 1980, I've been intrigued by the assertiveness and antics of the tompots.

Whenever I encountered a tompot on repeat visits to a particular rocky crevice, I had a hunch that it was the very same fish. Then I discovered that I could reliably identify individuals from close-up photographs showing the unique markings around their heads. It meant I could go back through my photo library to track the occupancy of individual fish in different parts of a reef over several years.

This research showed that male tompots guard the same crevice for up to three years, and can also stay in the area of reef even longer, though with moves and 'swaps' of territory during that time. The appearance of wounds around the mouth or on the fins of males coincides with these swaps, clearly a result of territorial fights. It was heartening to see one of our longest-standing reef residents – nicknamed 'Benny the Blenny' – recover well from his injuries.

Stand-offs between rival males are frequently observed, though actual attacks with the mouth are seen much more rarely. One September I was astonished to spot juvenile tompot blennies, just 2cm long and recently settled from their planktonic larval stage, battling with each other like seasoned adults.

A CREVICE FIT FOR A QUEEN

Once a male tompot has won ownership of a rocky crevice, he cleans it and – probably with the help of pheromone secretions – invites in a female. He encourages her to attach her eggs, often to the crevice ceiling as well as its floor. Female visits are quite brief so often go unwitnessed, but, sure enough, a single layer of beautiful dark purple eggs invariably appears in a male's home each April.

However, from then until June, the egg raft expands as more females visit, producing distinct patches of eggs at different stages of development. Since female

Clockwise from above: velvet swimming crabs prey on tompot blennies' eggs; the species shares its habitat with ballan wrasse and snakelocks anemones; a young tompot blenny; an adult male keeps both eyes on the eggs in his crevice.



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tompot blennies are more mobile they are harder to track, but further study of my photographic records has shown that a female will visit several males to lay eggs in a given breeding season, and that a male will also host several females. Such polygamy is well known in members of the blenny family, but what is surprising is that a male tompot will sometimes host more than one female simultaneously – in fact I recently watched three females together with a single suitor.

Over the several weeks that the eggs take to develop, the male tompot's paternal duties include wiping them with cauliflower-like glands on his underside by wriggling across the egg raft. In other blenny species, the secretions of these glands have been found to contain antimicrobial compounds. Male tompots also have to be fierce guardians, because there are plenty of egg thieves about. ▶

TOMPOT BLENNY



I have seen a Connemara clingfish, which commonly live in the same crevices as tompots, sneak in to eat some eggs while the owner was distracted. Quickly realising the threat, the tompot drove the clingfish away. But the invader installed itself in a narrow part of the crevice inaccessible to the larger tompot, and waited for further chances of a snack.

Intruding crabs are also unwelcome and dealt with sharply. Though the red-eyed velvet swimming crab is notoriously aggressive, a tompot will force one from his territory by targeting its legs or rear for a rapid biting attack while keeping away from its fearsome claws.

HUNTER AND PREY

Unless a tompot blenny is unlucky enough to be caught out in the open by seals, birds, bass or cuttlefish, its other main enemies are ones shaped to enter rocky crevices. At the top of this page you can see a photo I once took of a small conger eel with a tompot blenny in its jaws; several hours later, there was just a very full-looking conger.

Some of the many fascinating interactions between tompot blennies can be tricky to interpret. In August and October, outside the breeding season, individuals (of uncertain gender) will adopt what appears to be a submissive 'belly display' posture outside the crevice of a territorial male, which usually emerges to chase them off. And I once observed a large male moving an empty whelk shell around the seabed with his head under Swanage Pier in Dorset – perhaps showing off to smaller tompots?

We still have so much to learn about this feisty species, and indeed about so many other amazing animals in British waters. This is why Marine Protected Areas, promoted by The Wildlife Trusts, Marine Conservation Society and others, are so vital. Without them we risk fatally damaging our undersea ecosystems before we have even begun to understand them. 🐠

PAUL NAYLOR is a marine biologist and photographer. Visit www.marinephoto.co.uk to see more of his pictures.

This tompot blenny, with red head tentacles just showing, has been unfortunate to encounter a conger eel small enough to enter its crevice home, but large enough to eat it.

FIND OUT MORE

Read Paul's book *Great British Marine Animals* (Sound Diving Publications, 3rd edn, £15.99).

FABULOUS FISH SIX OF THE TOMPOT'S NEIGHBOURS

1 CORKWING WRASSE

The male has flashy breeding colours and builds a large nest from carefully selected pieces of seaweed. Some nests are so shallow that they are exposed at low tide.

2 BLACK-FACED BLENNY

When he is actively courting, the male's yellow becomes especially vibrant. But outside the breeding season he has cryptic coloration similar to the female's (visible at bottom right).

3 TOPKNOT

This is an unusual flatfish in that it lives among rocks rather than in open sandy areas. Able to enter narrow crevices, the species may be a significant predator of young fish such as blennies.

4 LONG-SPINED SEA SCORPION

To help it ambush prey, this member of the sculpin family matches the colour of its surroundings, which can include bright pink and orange among encrusting algae and sponges.

5 GOLDSINNY WRASSE

This little wrasse nibbles parasites off other fish – the black spot on its tail stem is thought to advertise its cleaning service.

6 CONNEMARA CLINGFISH

Long and slim, this fish is superbly adapted for life in narrow crevices. Its pelvic fins are fused to form a powerful sucker with which it clings to the rocky floor or ceiling.

