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'Amazing' scene along Calif. coastline as rare animal ritual begins

It's officially grunion run season in Southern California



California Department of Fish and Wildlife

By **Erin Rode**

April 12, 2024



Seeing thousands of animals, collected together in the wild, is always a striking scene. But seeing thousands upon thousands of creatures in a place where they don't belong — such as live fish covering the sand on a Southern California beach — is even more reason for awe.

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That's exactly what happens during a grunion run, a rare only-in-Southern California (and Baja California) scene where thousands of the tiny silver fish wash up on the beaches late at night. They writhe and splash under the moonlight, with one goal in mind: to have as much sex as possible.

Grunion runs only happen on certain nights in the spring and summer, depending on the moon and the tides, and are among the only fish species to leave the water to mate.



A close-up of a grunion at a beach in Southern California.

Photo courtesy of Cabrillo Marine Aquarium

“Nobody quite does it the same way the grunion does,” said [Karen Martin](#), a distinguished professor emeritus of biology at Pepperdine University who has studied the grunion for over three decades. “They’re the best.”

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The stunning scene — entire stretches of shoreline covered in slapping fish that roll around in heaps — has drawn onlookers and fish-grabbers for over a century. But the “amazing grunion” and their iconic fish sex party face threats from years of overfishing and climate change.

The California grunion’s typical range extends from Point Conception, north of Santa Barbara, to Punta Abreojos in Baja California. The fish “are famous for their remarkable spawning behavior, which evokes an ‘I don’t believe it!’ response from people seeing or hearing about it for the first time,” according to the [California Department of Fish and Wildlife](#).

“It’s a really beautiful, watchable wildlife phenomenon,” Martin says. “Under the moonlight, you can see that flash of silver, and you know that a run is going to begin, and if you get a big run, you see many, many grunion lining the shoreline, just moving around in the whitewash. It’s really quite amazing.”



Individuals observe the grunion at a beach in Southern California.
Photo courtesy of Cabrillo Marine Aquarium

During the spring and summer months, grunion leave the water on certain nights following the new and full moons. The fish wash up as waves break on the shore, and during the run's peak, each wave seems to bring seemingly unthinkable piles of more and more silvery fish. From afar, the fish look like a wriggling, glinting silvery mass along the shoreline, and from several feet away, the scene is even starker. Thousands of fish hop and flop in the sand, wriggling along the shoreline in a way that seems more snake-like than fish-like.

Here's what's actually happening: The female fish arch and twist their bodies to dig a little hole and then position themselves in their new nests tail-first, so only their tiny fish heads are sticking out of the sand. They deposit their eggs in the nests, and male grunion then wrap their bodies around the female grunion — sometimes

several all at once — and release their “milt,” which flows down into the hole and fertilizes the eggs. Up to eight males can fertilize the eggs in one female grunion’s nest, and each female lays between 1,600 and 3,6000 eggs during one spawn. Females can spawn up to six times each season.



A close-up of a grunion at a beach in Southern California.

Photo courtesy of Cabrillo Marine Aquarium

Grunion runs mostly occur from March through August, during consecutive four-day periods starting with the night of a full or new moon. The runs occur over specific two-hour periods that vary each day but are often quite late at night, anywhere from 9:30 p.m. to 2 a.m.

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During “closed season” dates, which run April through June, observers can only watch the grunions and ooh and aah at the grunion sex party. But during “open season,” which is in March, July and August, people 16 and older with a California fishing license are allowed to “take” grunion — with their bare hands.

Licensed fishers can scoop up 30 grunion per night and are not allowed any type of net or other capture device. That gives the slippery grunion some chance of escape, since otherwise, the piles of thousands of stranded small fish would make for easy taking.



The grunions mate at a beach in Southern California.
Photo courtesy of Cabrillo Marine Aquarium

Overfishing (if picking up fish from the beach with your bare hands counts as fishing) has caused problems for the local grunion population in the past. While there seems to be a large number of local grunion when you're looking at thousands

of them on the beach, in reality, "grunion are not abundant," according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

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The fish population first started showing signs of depletion by the 1920s, and a 1927 regulation established a closed season from April through June to help repopulation efforts. But after fishery conditions improved, the closure was shortened to just April and May in 1947. Two years ago, officials brought back the longer closed season from April through June and also added the limit of only 30 fish per night.

Climate change and rising ocean temperatures also appear to be extending the grunion's range north. Grunion were first spotted in San Francisco Bay about 20 years ago, and in the years since, they've also been spotted as far north as Tomales Bay. So far, those northern grunion have been smaller in size and produced fewer eggs than those in the traditional range.

"Even though they've kind of solved the problem of moving north to shift their habitat, it's still not a complete solution because they're not quite as robust up there," Martin said.

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The grunions mate at a beach in Southern California.

Photo courtesy of Cabrillo Marine Aquarium

If you want to catch a grunion run in Southern California this season, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife maintains a calendar of expected runs. The best times are normally on the second and third nights of any four-night grunion run window. As for where to find these writhing piles, grunion runs could potentially happen on any “open, gently-sloping, sandy, wave-swept beach in Southern California,” but the department doesn’t recommend any specific beaches due to changing local curfews and safety conditions up and down the coastline at any given time.

Instead, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife recommends calling state and county beach lifeguards to see if a spawning recently happened at their particular beach.

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And if you're looking for a more guided experience, the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium hosts several ["Meet the Grunion" events](#) each season that include guided grunion observation at the beach.

Like any major Southern California event, there's also merch, like [this T-shirt](#) featuring two grunion getting it on, with the phrase "Sex on the Beach."

April 12, 2024

By **Erin Rode**

Erin Rode is SFGATE's Contributing Los Angeles Outdoors Editor. Erin grew up in Los Angeles County and has hiked area trails for over a decade. She previously covered the environment for The Desert Sun in Palm Springs.

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