

# CLINGING ON

Josh Pickett looks at one of the rarest and most sought-after fish by LRF species hunters. It won't win prizes for beauty or fighting strength. It might, however, win you a species comp. All hail the bizarre *Connemara clingfish*!

**C**lashed upside-down on the roof of a submerged cave is a creature which seemingly defies gravity. It has a built-in suction cup adapted from specialised pelvic fins, which are so powerful, you'd think they were chemically bonded to the rock. Its red iris and luminescent orange cheeks are glowing from the few streaks of sun rays which reach through the crags, lighting up its counterfeit zebra-striped flanks, and banded lips which break up their outline.

This piscine peculiarity is not alone, some of its specie are dark bronze in colour, others green and unmarked, and several are covered in small, white backwards facing dashes along their back, which appear to look like folded down spines, reminiscent of some pufferfish, deterring predators – a great example of aposematic cheating when a non-toxic animal mimics the warning signals of a toxic one. Their head sizes alone are just under half their body mass, with duckbill-like mouths that can engulf anything foolish enough to wedge their way into the hollow, and quite frankly, they all

With eyes like that, I can't entirely rule out that clingfish are Sith Lords

produce more slime than is necessary. Meet one of Britain's weirdest micro-predators, a gregarious gobiesocid; and no, it's not a goby, it's the *Connemara clingfish* (*Lepadogaster candolii*).

Gobiesocidae are a colourful and diverse family comprising nearly 200 species of clingfish ranging from the tropical zone to the southern reaches of the temperate zone. We have three other verified species of clingfish in Britain: the Cornish sucker (*Lepadogaster purpurea*), with its sapphire ocelli on the dorsal side of its head; the tiniest of our clingfish, the golden small-headed clingfish (*Apletodon dentatus*), adorning a dark suborbital stripe and pale cheeks; and the rarer, ornate two-spotted clingfish (*Diplecogaster bimaculata*) which comes in a variety of colours and markings, most

typically adorned with a single, large eyespot on both of its flanks, and a white broken or unbroken stripe along its back. Virtually every catch report (and most sightings) of these three clingfish species have been in rockpools or the intertidal zone, which makes the *Connemara clingfish* rather unusual for British gobiesocids.

All reports of shore clingfish (*Lepadogaster lepadogaster*) in Britain have thus far been misidentified as Cornish sucker (*Lepadogaster purpurea*). This likely arose due to the similarity between the two species, and that their common names have been mistakenly used interchangeably in British literature.

## WHERE DO YOU FIND THEM?

Unfortunately, they're not widespread along our coasts, so the budding species hunter might have to travel to find them. They are, however, found inshore throughout the south-west, and sporadic populations exist along the west coast of Britain too. They absolutely love structure, so spend time searching for harbours, breakwaters and rugged coastlines; anywhere which is sheltered that might attract small fishes and invertebrates. While they're less often found in rockpools, compared to the three other species of clingfish we have in Britain, it's a promising sign if pools are nearby, as many would be in amongst the rocks or rocky ground, just

A perfect example of an *L. candolii* with full markings



Another *Connemara Clingfish* falling to a scented ragworm imitation lure, on a size 18 hook, 7g snooded dropshot



below the intertidal zone. Closer in, it appears they have a preference to locations which aren't completely emptied on a low tide, as these fish aren't exactly on the move very much – they tend to remain in the same area – so may be vulnerable to angling pressure. It's even more important to use barbless hooks for this reason; some may be caught more than once; let's not add further stress or mouth damage to them.

When you've narrowed it down to your first general stretch of coastline or harbour, look for small chokepoints and places they can hide. It helps going on a low tide with clear water, so more of the structure is visible. Drainages in the harbour wall, depressed ladders, gaps in a slipway, grates, established living seawalls, holes between boulders, overhanging rocks, all of this they will happily reside in. For the kayak anglers who want to try ultra-light fishing, surveys have even found them in amongst seagrass beds, so catches in over 12ft of depth are very much possible.

*Connemara Clingfish* can be caught year-round, even into the depths of winter where they relatively frequently come out during competitions, and they are a little more obliging during the summer and autumn months too. Now, I'm by no means an expert in catching clingfish, but I've certainly caught enough of them to recognise what their bite feels like, how and when to strike and, more importantly, how to target them in the first place. 'Why on earth would you want to catch a clingfish?' I hear you ask. If you're entering a species hunting competition, it could very well be the rarity which gives you the needed advantage, or perhaps you just want to tick one off for your personal tally? There's always a chance of a British record too, the largest landed was a lump of 15.8g (beating the previous record by 5g), though it was not ratified by the BRFC. Regardless, this ocean oddity will always make you grin like the Cheshire Cat when you swing one in, especially after catching a lot of the usual suspects.

