



# RED BREAM RETURNS

Josh Pickett explores the exciting return of red bream to the shores of the UK and investigates how they got here and if they're here to stay

**T**he behaviour and migration of British sea fishes in 2024 was quite unusual, to say the least! We had plenty of Atlantic bonito being caught on our eastern coasts, more comber here than have ever been reported before, by a jump of tenfold, stringers of grey triggerfish, ringneck blenny spawning when sea temperatures are supposed to be at their coldest and, most notably, an invasion of red bream in our southern estuaries! Now, these fishes are generally all present here either year-round or seasonally, so sightings and captures of them are not new, but this year was markedly different.

If you hail from the UK and are born in the 1990s or later, red bream, also known as blackspot bream (*Pagellus bogaraveo*), is a species which, until this year, you had probably never saw or heard of, let alone caught. They are a medium-sized, shoaling, saltwater bream species which has a bold black spot on the anterior (front) side of their lateral line, and sometimes a red hue on the dorsal (top) side of their body.

The adults have large eyes in proportion to their body on their compressed head. These allow them to see better in the deep water they prefer to inhabit. Like a lot of fish species, the juveniles all start off female and seek the safety and easy food found sheltered inshore. They have a more silvery body with hints of a red tint when the light hits their scales at a certain angle, and they lack that distinct black spot, which makes identification difficult. Axillary bream (*Pagellus acarne*) look almost identical to

juvenile red bream, bar some subtle physical differences, and it doesn't help that they often have overlapping ranges! Luckily for identification purposes Axillary bream has a low probability of extending into British waters, whereas red bream, while still a rare catch, are still sporadically found here.

This all changed in summer 2024, for reasons we'll come to, but how did these events play out? The first confirmed sighting of red bream for the year appeared to have been in very early August in Plymouth. Juvenile specimens some 7–9cm had been shoaling close in against the harbour, when anglers caught several on artificial baits before they pushed out with the tide. I very nearly joined them, but feeling spent from a couple of late night fishing outings, I had a rest day. When I found out what they had caught, I wished I had gone!

I ended up going to Plymouth a couple of weeks later, but I only had 15 minutes to fish before I was needed elsewhere. I quickly get into a few red bream on a slow sinking splitshot rig with some soft pink Isome on at size 18 hook – mission success! The following month it became apparent that they were widespread along the south-west coast of England. I have seen them come out of Penzance, Falmouth, ►

**Mature red bream are now regularly being caught off the Cornish coast**

