

from the **California Academy of Sciences**

Live

The King of Camouflage.
Meet the leafy seadragon (no, it's not a piece of seaweed).

Look Inside:

A reef is growing

Ants are marching

Urchins are "stalking"

Opening Day approaches





Where in the World

Native to waters off the southern and eastern coasts of Australia, leafy seadragons are most frequently found in calm, cold water at depths of up to 80 feet. They favor seaweed beds and seagrass meadows, where they blend most seamlessly into their surroundings.



Buoyancy Control

Like SCUBA divers, seadragons control their vertical movement by adjusting the amount of air in their swim bladders. These organs are very fragile, so the animals cannot cope with sudden changes in water pressure or depth. Water turbulence during heavy storms can prove fatal, causing the swim bladder to rupture.

Life Cycle

Leafy seadragons can live for seven to ten years in the wild and grow to lengths of up to 14 inches. At about two years of age, they reach sexual maturity and find a mate for the first time. Females delegate pregnancy duties to the males, who carry the fertilized eggs on a spongy patch beneath their tails. After six to eight weeks, the tiny offspring begin to hatch, emerging tail-first. They begin swimming just a few hours after birth.

Body Armor

Rather than scales like most fish, seadragons are protected by a series of bony plates. Long, sharp spines protrude from each plate, providing an additional layer of defense.



Leafy Seadragon

You need especially good eyes to spot this spectacular creature in the wild. Sporting leaf-like appendages all over its body, the aptly-named leafy seadragon (*Phycodurus eques*) is virtually indistinguishable from the kelp beds in which it hides. A remarkable product of natural selection, it goes undetected by predators and prey alike as it drifts back and forth with the currents, looking for all the world like a piece of floating seaweed. The flutter of tiny fins and the occasional swivel of an eye are the only clues to its true identity.

Closely related to seahorses, seadragons have long, tubular snouts, which they use like straws to suck up unsuspecting prey. Only the smallest crustaceans can fit through their slender, toothless mouths, so they make up for size with quantity. A single seadragon can slurp down thousands of tiny shrimp each day.

Usually solitary, seadragons congregate each winter to find a mate. Like seahorse males, dragon dads bear the brunt of the parenting responsibilities. However, while seahorse fathers carry fertilized eggs in a pouch on their bellies, male seadragons use a spongy patch underneath their tails, incubating up to 300 eggs at a time.

Because of habitat destruction, pollution, and poaching, seadragon numbers are declining in the wild. They are now fully protected under Australia's state and federal laws. The government allows just one pregnant male to be collected each year—the captive-bred hatchlings are then sent overseas for education and research programs. See a few of these hatchlings for yourself when the new Academy opens on September 27. They'll be on display in the aquarium's Water Planet exhibit.