

New sunfish species sighted in the Galapagos

Feb 3 2008

A strange new underwater visitor has arrived in the Galapagos Islands. On Feb 3rd, during a National Geographic/Lindblad Expedition, the eagle-eyed crew from the *National Geographic Polaris* spotted something bizarre in the waters off Espanola--the southernmost island of the famed archipelago. Zodiac driver, Giovanni Chero, edged closer for a better look while Naturalist Antonio Gallardo quickly entered the water--video camera in hand. As they drew nearer, the duo witnessed something neither they nor anyone else, to the best of our knowledge, has ever witnessed in Galapagos--a sharp-tailed giant ocean sunfish, *Masturus*. Close relatives of the giant ocean sunfish *Mola mola*, *Masturus* can reach similarly gargantuan sizes, with the record holder weighing in at more than 1800 kg (4000 pounds). First described in 1840 by Lienard on the island of Mauritius, these fish live on a diet mainly of jellies and have been encountered by submersibles in the Atlantic at depths greater than 600 m (2000 feet).



Masturus sp. swimming
with pilot fish off
Espanola Island,
Galapagos

Photo credit: [Cindy Manning](#) National
Geographic/Lindblad
Expeditions

Expedition Leader Cindy Manning consulted via email renowned Naturalist Carlos Romero, who was on the *National Geographic Islander*. Romero first identified the fish as *Masturus*. Both Manning and Romero then confirmed their suspicion with ocean sunfish expert Tierney Thys via email later that week. During this same week, Thys received additional reports of *Masturus* sightings off the Mexican coast between Ensenada and San Diego. While *Masturus* has been recorded in the Eastern Pacific off California and Mexico, sightings of it are extremely rare so to have two sightings in one week from both Mexico and Ecuador is intriguing to say the least. It would appear something is going on with this genus and we're going to find out. Fishes of Galapagos, by Jack Grove has no record of *Masturus* in these islands and as far as our preliminary reference search goes, this Espanola sighting may very well be the southernmost sighting for the genus in the Eastern Pacific. The team is now busily writing up a report for the published literature. So stay tuned.

This sighting took place thanks to the close partnership between Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic. As pioneers of global exploration, the organizations work in tandem to produce innovative marine expedition programs and to promote conservation

and sustainable tourism around the world. For more information on National Geographic Lindblad expeditions see: <http://www.expeditions.com/>