

The Guitarfish (*Rhinobatus productus*)

Ranger Jim Serpa

The Guitarfish, Shovelnose Guitarfish or Shovelnose Shark are all names for a fish that is not really a shark at all, but a member of the Skate family. The Latin Genus name *Rhinobatus* is actually a combination of two Greek words meaning "Shark skate." Sharks, rays, skates and Chimeras all belong to a group of fishes scientists classify as Chondrichthyes.



Simply put, these fish have a cartilaginous skeleton and this sets them apart from all other fish that possess bony skeletons.

Guitarfish can be found in abundance off our beaches here at Doheny. Baby Guitarfish have been seen in as little as a foot of water or less. Most adults live in water ranging from the intertidal zone to water 40 feet deep, although they have been spotted in water 75 feet deep on occasion.

This odd looking fish is usually light brown on its dorsal side and a creamy white underneath. The head is a flattened spade shape resembling a ray, only the Guitarfish has a long thin tail with two dorsal fins. Unlike true sharks the Shovelnose has gill slits on its ventral side. Like rays and skates they also possess an opening just behind their eyes called the spiracle. This allows the fish to take in water to breathe while still lying flat on the sandy bottom.

According to scientists they can reach a length of 5-1/2 feet but average more in the 4-foot range. Shovelnoses live to the ripe old age of 10, if they are lucky, with females giving live birth to as many as 28 six-inch pups. Small fish, shrimp, squid eggs, and crabs (especially sand crabs) make up the bulk of their diets.

In the past Guitarfish caught inadvertently were thrown away by fishermen, but in the last few years anglers have discovered these fish are actually quite good eating. The Shovelnose poses no threat to man, other than a major league start if you happen to step on one in the surfline.

Here at the Visitor Center we have a small guitarfish on display in our tide pool exhibit. It was touch and go for awhile, but after gentle coaxing day

after day by Jim and Elaine they finally got it to accept diced squid and now it's feeding well.

Come on by the Visitor Center and see this interesting creature and feel free to check out all the other tanks as well, especially the new and improved Moray tank