

Name _____

Date _____

Reproductive Strategies

Animal Profile:

LEAFY SEA DRAGON (*Phycodurus eques*)

Dragons lurk in the cool waters off the southwestern Australian coast, but they aren't the mythical beasts that devour huge ships before slipping away into the deep. Instead, these dragons are calm, gorgeous fish known as leafy sea dragons (*Phycodurus eques*). Though not as large as mythical dragons, leafy sea dragons can be pretty big. They grow up to 51 cm (1.7 feet) in length and have long leaf-like

appendages sprouting from their bodies. This leafiness helps them blend in with their seaweed habitat, protecting them from predators and giving them an advantage while hunting for food. Like their cousins the seahorses, leafy sea dragons have long tubular snouts they use to suck up tiny shrimp. To hunt, they drift around camouflaged as a piece of seaweed and ambush their small crunchy prey.

Leafy sea dragons and their relatives reproduce in a way that's rare in the fish world: the males carry and hatch the young instead of the females. When sea dragons mate, the female finds a potential dad and deposits her eggs underneath his tail where his sperm fertilize them. Pregnant dads can have as many as 200 incubating eggs tucked tightly beneath their tails. It pays to have a dad that looks like seaweed, because the eggs are protected from predators there. The eggs cling for 4-5 weeks before they hatch. The young are less than 2.5 cm (1 inch) long when they finally hatch. Many of them, sadly, will become little fishy snacks for larger fish, but the lucky ones who survive will grow up to be beautiful adults. Getting protection from dad when they were developing likely gave them one fin up in the vast ocean world.



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Eggs attached under a male sea dragon's tail.