

Scottish skates and rays

Skates and rays are flat cartilaginous fishes related to sharks. There are over 500 species worldwide, of which about 11 occur in Scottish coastal waters. They occur over a variety of sea-floor habitats and are valued by both commercial and recreational anglers. In the UK, species with long snouts are usually known as skates, while those with shorter snouts are called rays. Most have spines and thorns on the upper surface and tail. The mouth, nostrils and five pairs of gill slits are on the underside of the fish, and the eyes and a pair of spiracles on the upper side. It is easy to distinguish between males and females because the males have a pair of claspers associated with the pelvic fins.



Blonde Ray
Raja brachyura

Description: Light brown with numerous dark spots that extend to very outer edge of disc. A central row of 40-45 small thorns run along tail in adult females and young, this row is interrupted in males.

Maximum length: 125 cm

Distribution: found inshore on sand and sandy-rocky bottoms off all Scottish coasts.



Cuckoo Ray
Leucoraja naevus

Description: Very distinctive ray. Yellowish to drab brown with distinct black eye spot on each wing containing irregular yellowish blotches.

Maximum length: 71 cm

Distribution: all around the Scottish coasts.



Common (Blue) Skate
Dipturus batis

Description: Grey or brown with variable pattern of spots and blotches. The underside in both sexes is slate grey/blue. The front margin of the wings are strongly concave, and the snout elongate. A central row of 12-20 large spines run along the tail, other rows may also be present.

Teeth rows: 40-56

Maximum length: 285 cm

Distribution: in shelf waters (less than 200 m) around Scotland.

Red List Status: Endangered



Electric Ray
Torpedo nobiliana

Description: Rounded body with shiny, black to dark grey, smooth skin. Underside white. Paddle-shaped caudal fin on the end of a thick, short tail. No snout.

Maximum length: 180 cm

Distribution: found on soft bottoms from 10 –150m off all Scottish coasts.

Long-nosed skate
Raja oxyrinchus

Description: Brownish, underside is

Maximum length: 150 cm

Distribution: mostly occurs offshore (900 m) off western Scotland, Orkney and Shetland

Round ray
Rajella fyllae

Description: Grey to dark brown with blotches. Underside is pale grey or light fawn colour. Upper surface of tail is rough with large thorns in irregular rows. Snout is short and obtuse

Maximum length: 60 cm

Distribution: occurs offshore (to depths of 2000 m) off western Scotland and around Shetland.



Sandy Ray
Leucoraja circularis

Description: Reddish brown with a conspicuous pattern of 4-6 small creamy spots with black edging that is symmetrical on each wing. Approximately 8 thorns along the inner margin of eye. A triangle of thorns occurs on nape. There are 4 rows of thorns along tail, however, only one central row is present in juveniles.

Maximum length: 120 cm

Distribution: found in offshore shelf waters and upper slope, at 100 m, off the north and west Scottish coast.

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 <p>Shagreen Ray <i>Leucoraja fullonica</i></p>	<p>Description: Uniform ash grey to brown with tiny dark spots. Two rows of approximately 50 thorns along tail to first dorsal fin. Approx. 8 thorns along inner margin of eye. Juveniles have dark stripes running across the back from side to side.</p> <p>Maximum length: 120 cm</p> <p>Distribution: found in coastal shelf waters, mainly around 200 m, around west, north and north east Scotland.</p>
 <p>Spotted Ray <i>Raja montagui</i></p>	<p>Description: Brown with numerous black spots that do not extend to edge of wings. Occasionally there is a pale blotch encircled by black spots on either wing. A central row of thorns run from behind the eyes to first dorsal fin, and occasionally occur between first and second dorsal fin as well. Irregular spines on sides of tail. Males may also have thorns on wings.</p> <p>Maximum length: 80 cm</p> <p>Distribution: all around Scottish coasts.</p>
 <p>Starry Skate <i>Amblyraja radiata</i></p>	<p>Description: Brownish grey with scattered irregular black blotches and a few faint pale cream spots on upper surface. Underside white, and smooth except under the snout. A central row of 12-19 broad-based, large thorns run down the back and the tail, with an additional row of thorns on either side of the tail midline.</p> <p>Maximum length: 100 cm</p> <p>Distribution: all around Scottish coasts at depths of 50 -100 m (sometimes to 1000 m).</p>
 <p>Thornback Ray <i>Raja clavata</i></p>	<p>Description: Highly variable colouration: shades of brown to grey, dark and light blotches and lines on upper surface. Some individuals may resemble Blonde and Spotted Rays. Approx. 30-50 large thorns with swollen bases run centrally from the nape to first dorsal fin, and are also scattered about the wings. A series of dark and light bands alternate down the tail.</p> <p>Teeth rows: Less than 60</p> <p>Maximum length: 120 cm</p> <p>Distribution: found inshore on sand and sandy-rocky bottoms to uppermost shelf off all Scottish coasts.</p>

References

<http://www.fishbase.org>

Miller P. J. & Loates M. J., 1997. *Fish of Britain and Europe – Collins pocket guide.*

Images:

Line drawings: Marc Dando.

Photos: (shagreen & sandy rays) Jim Ellis.