

Hole fishing for Sunda swamp-eel

Subject: Sunda swamp-eel, *Monopterus javanensis* (Teleostei: Synbranchiformes: Synbranchidae).

Subject identified by: Kelvin K. P. Lim.

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Woodlands, scrub area behind Mandai mangroves; 20 March 2016; around 1200 hrs.

Habitat: Open grassy area behind scrub and mangrove (Fig. 1).

Observers: Contributor & Stephen Beng.

Observation: An example of about 40 cm total length (see accompanying photographs) was fished out of a hole in the ground by a Thai worker (Fig. 2). The worker had exposed the burrow in an open grassy area near a stream by clearing the grass and enlarged the opening by excavating some of the earth. The burrow was flooded by turbid and apparently stale water (Fig. 3). Into the hole, the worker threw in a hook tied to a piece of styrofoam and baited with an earthworm. The eel took the bait and was caught (Fig. 4). According to the Thai worker, swamp-eels can be found in these burrows after rains.

Remarks: Sunda swamp eels are air-breathing fishes that are able to live out of water for extended periods of time, and can even survive drought if buried in moist holes in the ground. Because swamp eels shelter in burrows during the day, and only emerge at night to hunt for prey that includes fish and frogs, they are rarely seen (Munro, 1990: 109 as *Monopterus albus*). In Singapore, the swamp-eel is widespread and inhabits most types of freshwater and even brackish water bodies, from forest streams to monsoon canals in urban areas. It is also tolerant of some amount of pollution in its habitat (Lim & Ng, 1990: 84; Baker & Lim, 2012: 42; as *Monopterus albus*).

The swamp-eel is sought after as a food fish in Malaysia and Singapore. It is regarded as a very tasty fish with supposed medicinal value particularly by the Chinese and Thai people (Mohsin & Ambak, 1983: 178; Lim & Ng, 1990: 84; as *Monopterus albus*).

References:

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- Munro, A. D., 1990. Singapore freshwater fishes. In: Chou L. M. & P. K. L. Ng (eds.). *Essays in Zoology*. Department of Zoology, National University of Singapore. pp. 97-125.

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Fig. 1. General area where the eel was caught.



Fig. 2. Thai man preparing to fish for eel.



Fig. 3. The entrance of the burrow inhabited by the eel.



Fig. 4. The swamp eel from the burrow.

Photographs by Ng Bee Choo