

This Month

Clamworm

Colloquial Nickname: Sandworm, ragworm

Scientific name: *Nereis succinea*



Field Markings: Iridescent green-blue or gray-brown, usually with fine red, gold or white spots

Size: 2 to 36 inches long

Habitat: Rocky intertidal zone, mud and sand flats; often found under rocks

Seasonal Appearance: Year-round

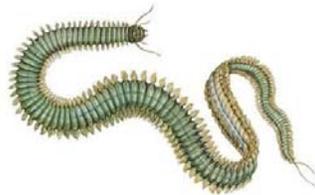
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

Segmented, or annelid, worms are among the most unique and diverse worm species. This group includes the terrestrial earthworm and aquatic leech, as well as many marine worms - both sessile and free swimming - including bloodworms.

The clamworm belongs to the free-swimming group of segmented worms. The body of the clamworm consists of many segmented sections, each with a pair of bristly, red, paddlelike appendages. These paddles have gills used for respiration; they also allow the clamworm to swim or crawl along the sea floor.

Clamworms form transparent, mucus-lined sand burrows where they hide during daylight hours and come out at night to feed. A wandering, nocturnal hunter and a swift, voracious predator, the clamworm's keen sense of smell enables it to find prey.

The head of the clamworm houses sense organs, including four black eyes, which register changes in water chemistry and react to light and touch. The clamworm's proboscis is equipped with a set of jaws that open and shut through quick body movements. As soon as food is detected, the clamworm will



thrust its mouth out and grab the prey with its powerful jaws. The clamworm feeds on other worms as large as or larger than itself. It also eats algae, small crustaceans, invertebrates and mollusks, including clams. Clamworms, in turn, are a significant food source for bottom-feeding Bay creatures and are preyed upon by horseshoe crabs, winter flounder, tautog and scup.

During mating season, the clamworm releases a segment of its body that contains gametes, or sex cells. These cast-off appendages can often be seen swarming in groups at the surface of near-shore waters during the spring and summer months. The adult worms remain on the bottom and die after spawning. These spawning aggregations attract schools of fish - striped bass in particular - which prey upon the worms.

RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

The clamworm is the most common and largest of the marine annelids living in the subtidal zone of Narragansett Bay. Some fishermen say that clamworms are the best bait for certain types of fish like winter flounder. These worms should be handled carefully since they can deliver a painful bite.

Most of the clamworms purchased in local tackle shops these days are brought in from Maine where clamworms are much more plentiful.

HOW TO GET YOUR OWN COPY

RISAA members can purchase their own copy of *The Uncommon Guide To Common Life on Narragansett Bay* for \$15 from the RISAA Merchandise Committee. Stop by the committee table at any monthly RISAA meeting.



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