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Re-occurrence of oilfish in the landings of the south-west coast of India

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On 29.08.2008, 13 specimens of the oilfish, *Ruvettus pretiosus* Cocco, 1833 were recorded in the trawl landings along with a heavy catch of around 200 t of *Coryphaena* sp. at the Cochin fisheries harbour. The biggest specimen was 360 mm in TL with a weight of 260 g. The available literature indicates that a single specimen of *R. pretiosus* measuring 310 mm in TL and weighing 220 g collected from the continental slope off the Quilon Bank (09004'N lat. 75031'E long.) area during November 1968 is so far the only record from the south-west coast of India, besides the two specimens from Laccadives kept in the repository of the museum of Fisheries department at Kavarathi Island. The flesh of *R. pretiosus* contains more oil and hence the name oilfish. The only other gempylids recorded from the Cochin area earlier were *Neoepinnula orientalis* and *Rexea prometheoides*.

The diagnostic features of *R. pretiosus* delineate the skin as very rough, scales small and cycloid interspersed with rows of spinous bony tubercles. Ventral keel rigid and scaly on the belly between pelvic

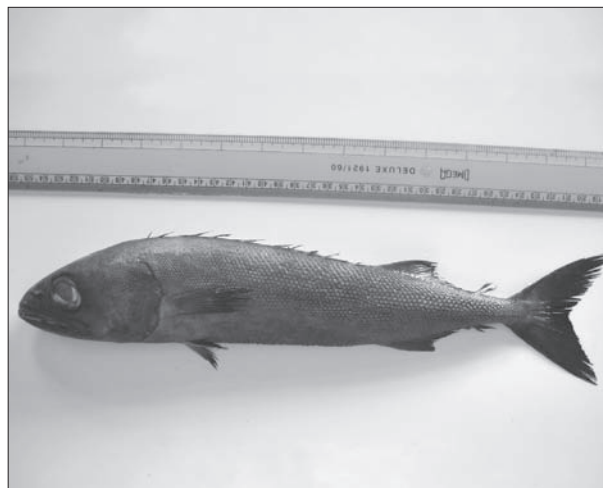


Fig. 1. *Ruvettus pretiosus* Cocco 1833

and anal fins. Body elongate and uniformly dark brown, tips of the pectoral and pelvic fins black. Lateral line single and obscure. Fang like teeth in front of upper jaw. Vertebrae 32.

Meristic counts

D₁. XV, D₂. 15 + 2; A. 17 + 2; P. 14; V. I, 5; C. 26.

Morphometric characters	(mm)
Total length (TL)	360
Standard length (SL)	310
Depth of body at origin of first dorsal fin	56.91
Depth of body at origin of anal fin	53.91
Caudal peduncle depth	16.76
Caudal peduncle length	30.34
Head length	96.45
Eye diameter	21.83
Inter-orbital width	25.29
Pre-orbital distance	32.10
Post-orbital distance	45.87
Upper jaw length	48.46
Lower jaw length	47.11
Tip of snout to origin of first dorsal	90.36
Tip of snout to origin of second dorsal	205.63
Tip of snout to origin of pectoral fin	91.11
Tip of snout to origin of pelvic fin	97.90
Tip of snout to origin of anal fin	207.95
Length of first dorsal fin base	124.56
Length of second dorsal fin base	56.28
Length of pectoral fin base	8.28
Length of pelvic fin base	2.86
Length of anal fin base	58.08
First dorsal fin length	23.24
Second dorsal fin length	37.90
Pectoral fin length	50.86

Pelvic fin length	30.62
Anal fin length	24.50
Caudal fin length	67.66
Distance between pelvic fin and anal fin bases	110.05

The oilfish grows to a large size and the maximum weight recorded is 63.5 kg and the length 200 cm TL. *R. pretiosus* is oceanodromous and bathypelagic; found in the depth range of 100 - 800 m but usually occurs in 200-500 m along the upper continental slope of Indian seas and is known to migrate to surface at night. It is widely distributed in the tropical and temperate seas of the world. The fish is rated under the category of very high vulnerability.

The species is stated to form a minor commercial fishery especially along the coast off Tuticorin in the Gulf of Mannar contributing to nearly 2% of the gempylidae family during November-December and is caught by trawls and large meshed gillnet (*Paruvai*). The other two species of importance reported along the Tuticorin coast are *Lepidocybium flavobrunneum* and *Neoepinnula orientalis* though *Thyrsitoides marleyi* is also available sporadically in small numbers along with tuna landings. Previously *R. pretiosus* has appeared in the collections only during the post-monsoon season but recently the time of occurrence has been advanced to the monsoon season signifying its availability in deeper waters relatively more in numbers.