

Humming Toadfish Are the Buzz of Sausalito

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Description

In 1986, houseboat dwellers in Sausalito, California report hearing a droning hum from underwater. Marine biologists identify it as the mating call of the plainfin midshipman, aka the toadfish.

Keywords

Fish, Toadfish, Plainfin Midshipman, Humming Fish, Hum, Sound, Noise, Drone, Mate, Search, Attract, Mating, Mating Season, Gas Bladder, Vibration, Sand, Burrow, Recording, Audio Spectrum, Houseboat, Barge, Dock, Underwater, Soviet Submarine, Nuclear Submarine, Steinhardt Aquarium, California Academy of Sciences, Swallows, Capistrano, Bohemians, Yuppies, Sausalito, San Francisco, Marin County, California, Marine Biology

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CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

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Transcript

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BRYANT GUMBEL, anchor:

Today science correspondent Bob Bazell has traveled around the country and the world to report on the efforts of science to solve the great mysteries. Well this morning he's just back from Sausalito in Northern California with the secret of the hum in San Francisco Bay.

ROBERT BAZELL, reporting:

You didn't even, you couldn't even say it without laughing.

GUMBEL: I tried, I really did.

BAZELL: It's the humming, the humming fish. This was a tough assignment, but Sausalito as you know is a beautiful community in Marin County, it's just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. One of its features is a large community of houseboats, and the people who live on the water there have long been aware of some strange noises. At one time, the houseboats of Sausalito were the refuge of Bohemians, but now with prices in the 200,000 dollar range, this is a community of yuppies on the bay. Interiors are elegant, the docks are well maintained, so when the residents heard the strange new noise, there was conjecture.

Unknown 1: It sounded like somebody left a batch of electric razors on in the next room.

Unknown 2: It's not something you can avoid; it's kind of like a fistfight in a peace march.

BAZELL: There was more than a little concern.

Unknown 3: First we were worried because we thought it was some Soviet activity outside the gate.

Unknown 4: We heard this hum for days and days, and everybody just kind of thought it was some kind of a mystery.

Unknown 5: Naturally we thought of nuclear submarines prowling off our back porches.

BAZELL: And as the noise, which came mostly at night persisted, it caused a considerable disruption of

normal social life.

Unknown 2: I know, heard of people who had to sleep upstairs, couldn't stay down their barge, dinner parties were disrupted, relatives had to leave town.

BAZELL: The mystery remained until Dr. John McCosker, director of the Steinheart Aquarium of the California Academy of Sciences heard of it.

DR. JOHN MCCOSKER (Steinheart Aquarium of the California Academy of Sciences Director): Oh I immediately knew it was a fish when it was described to me, they said what is this awful sound, and just a hmmm, this droning sound, oh it's a humming fish, everybody knows that, or at least I thought everybody knew that.

BAZELL: McCosker knew that the male plainfinned midshipman, or toadfish, makes a humming noise during mating season when it tries to attract a female.

DR. MCCOSKER: Right there in the center of its body, the center of its chest region, is the gas bladder, the organ that it uses to make that humming sound.

BAZELL: These fish spend most of the time burrowing in sand, except during the summer mating season when the males appear in droves, searching noisily for mates. To prove it was a fish, McCosker got audio specialist Frank Uback, to analyze sounds recorded on the boats, and sounds recorded in fish tanks. When the scientist compared the spectra, he had his proof.

DR. MOCCOSKER: The boat hole sound and then you look at the toadfish sound and the peaks are identical.

BAZELL: The common fish as been around for a long time. The aquarium's collection has specimens captured more than a hundred years ago, and even in those days scientists knew the fish hum.

DR. MOCCOSKER: They're no different then they are today.

BAZELL: But back on the houseboats, there is still some skepticism, and perhaps some disappointment.

Unknown 6: Well I still have a heard time really believing it, that that's, that's the cause.

Unknown 1: It's the plainfinned midshipman, as I understand, with the phosphorescent genitals that vibrates, okay.

Unknown 7: Didn't do a thing for me. Not a sexy sound at all.

BAZELL: The summer mating season of the fish is now beginning again. The humming fish may become for Sausalito what the swallows are for Capistrano