



## Native Spiny Seahorse

We have two native seahorses in the UK, the Short Snouted Seahorse (*Hippocampus Hippocampus*) and the Spiny or Long Snouted Seahorse (*Hippocampus Guttalatus*). The image here is of a Spiny Seahorse, with clearly visible, extra-long spines on the head.

They are a rare sighting, but are fairly widespread in shallow, inshore waters all around our coast, right up to the Shetland Isles. Although they resemble horses and swim in an upright, vertical position, they are tiny fish. But they are surprisingly poor swimmers, relying only on their small dorsal fin to propel them forward. It beats at up to 70 times a second, which seems a lot, but they only move slowly through their favoured calm, warm waters, mainly on the southern coasts.

Their most extraordinary, unique fact is one we all know- it is the male who carries the developing young - the only male creature on earth to have a true pregnancy. And we still don't know why this is!

The males vie with each other for a female, and they mate for life. They maintain strong bonds with each other by a daily dance, where they spiral around each other for up to an hour every morning. When mating, the female transfers her eggs to him by her ovipositor, and he then self-fertilises them within his body with his sperm. He can carry hundreds of fertilized eggs in his pouch for up to a month, and then gives birth to tiny, live young seahorses. They need the cover of good amounts of seagrass to help them survive when very young.

Once they are born, the seahorses, known as fry, have to fend for themselves, and are very vulnerable to predation, so their numbers are quickly reduced. Luckily, seahorses are able to change colour, so they can camouflage themselves, and disappear as much as possible within their surroundings, often almost invisible in the seagrass and eelgrass beds they are hiding within.

Seahorses also have a prehensile tail, which they can wrap around underwater foliage, to stop them being swept away in stronger currents and rough seas. They also have unusual vision, as their eyes act independently of each other. This means they can't judge distance, but they can see to the front and back at the same time, keeping both eyes on the lookout for predators.

**So, although tiny, they have some excellent adaptations to help them survive to adulthood, to mate for life and continue that unique and intriguing fact of male pregnancy and birth!**