



MARINE LIFE PROFILE: BIRD WRASSE

Hawaiian name: hinālea -'i'iwi
Scientific name: *Gomphosus varius*
Distribution: Hawai'i, Indo-Pacific
Size: to 10 inches (25 cm)
Diet: reef invertebrates

The bird wrasse is common on surge-swept reefs, especially where the branched cauliflower coral is dominant. Named for its bird-like snout, this wrasse feeds by plucking small crustaceans from between coral branches. Like other members of the wrasse family, it can be recognized from a distance by its characteristic swimming pattern, the pectoral (side) fins beat up and down in a “flying” motion

Juvenile and female bird wrasses are white and gray in color with a reddish upper snout. Later in life, females undergo a sex change, becoming functional males and the color pattern changes to solid blue-green. Before the life cycle was understood, the two color forms were regarded as separate wrasse species. This female to male sex reversal is seen in most members of the wrasse family.

The wrasses (Family Labridae) are among the most common and diverse of reef fishes in Hawaiian waters. There are 43 different wrasse species reported and 13 of them are endemic, found only in Hawai'i. Although they are a varied group, they all share an elongated, body tapered at head and tail. Their soft, continuous dorsal and anal fins are often held close to the body, accentuating their spindle shape. The caudal fin (tail) is soft and broom-like, it is often folded to a squared-off shape. Wrasses are alert, the eyes constantly moving, scanning the reef and surroundings. They are seen alone, in pairs, or small groups close to the reef where they forage for small reef invertebrates like crustaceans, molluscs, worms, urchins, and brittlestars. Their prominent lips hide canine teeth in upper and lower jaws that are used to pluck their invertebrate prey from the reef. Pharyngeal bones in the gill area help crush the shells of their prey. Larger wrasses can also take small fishes. Wrasses are active predators by day, they shelter in reef crevices or bury in sand patches at night.

As a family, wrasses are well known for a life history that includes sex change. Sexes can be identified by color pattern. Smaller individuals are usually female, the larger, more colorful individuals are males. Color and behavior changes, as well as changes in the reproductive organs take place as elements of the sex reversal.

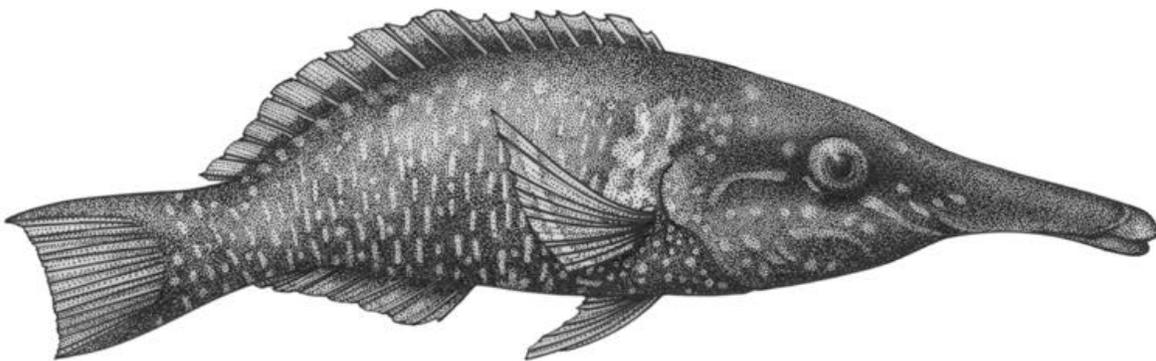
Classification:

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata, Subphylum Vertebrata
Class Osteichthyes
Order Perciformes
Family Labridae
Genus Gomphosus
Species varius

Suggested Reading:

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- Michael, S. 1998. Reef Fishes, Vol. 1: A Guide to Their Identification, Behavior & Captive Care. Microcosm, Ltd., Shelburne, VT.
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- Russo, R. 1994. Hawaiian Reefs, A Natural History Guide. Wavecrest Publications, San Leandro, CA.
- Scott, S. 1993. Exploring Hanauma Bay. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, HI.

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